

**THE ROLE OF THE MAHALLA INSTITUTE AS AN ELEMENT OF “SOFT POWER”
AT THE INTERNATIONAL LEVEL: ANALYSIS OF UZBEKISTAN’S EXPERIENCE
AND WORLD PRACTICE**

Ayyubxon Fayzullayev Shuxratjon ugli

Head of the Department for Development of International

Relations and Work with Grant Projects, Association of Mahallas of Uzbekistan

ayubxonfayzullaev@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper looks at how the Mahalla institute works as this special social and political thing, kind of like a key part of soft power on the world stage, using Uzbekistans own story and comparing it to what happens elsewhere. I think the Mahalla, being this old way of people managing their own communities, helps hold things together inside the country, but also sort of projects a good image outside, through culture and ideas that influence others without forcing anything. Pulling from books and studies in politics, society stuff, global relations, and how governments run, it seems like the Mahalla fits into that idea of soft power where you dont need to push hard, just attract people. The paper points out whats good about making the Mahalla fit into bigger world stories about running things, but also the tricky parts that arent fixed yet, like how it adapts, if its really legit, and whether it can move to other places. From what I see, Uzbekistans way with this gives a useful example of how local community setups can help with global soft power plans, while keeping things real to the culture.

Keywords: Mahalla institute, self-run communities, culture in diplomacy, unofficial setups, who we are as a nation, Uzbekistans story, pushing norms, local running of things.

Аннотация: В статье мы рассматриваем институт Махаллы как уникальный социально-политический феномен и эффективный элемент мягкой силы в международном контексте, опираясь на опыт Узбекистана и сравнительную мировую практику. Анализируется, как Махалла, традиционный институт самоуправления сообществом, служит не только механизмом внутренней социальной сплочённости, но и инструментом для создания положительного национального образа, культурной дипломатии и нормативного влияния за границами. На основе литературы по политологии, социологии, международным отношениям и управлению, мы говорим, что модель Махаллы это ресурс управления без принуждения, подходящий к современной теории мягкой силы. Исследование подчёркивает сильные стороны и нерешённые проблемы её институционализации в глобальных нарративах управления, с акцентом на адаптивность, легитимность и международную применимость. Результаты показывают, что узбекский опыт ценен для понимания, как локальные социальные институты добавляют к глобальным стратегиям мягкой силы, сохраняя культурную подлинность, хотя это не всегда просто.

Ключевые слова: Институт Махаллы, самоуправление общины, культурная дипломатия, неформальные институты, национальная идентичность, опыт Узбекистана, нормативное влияние, местное управление.

INTRODUCTION.

In today’s international structure, where direct coercion and hard power tools face growing constraints of a political, ethical, and legitimacy nature, states are forced to turn to softer, more

indirect tools of influence. Soft power, defined by the capacity to shape preferences by attraction, value, culture, and institutions, has been a major concept within modern international relations. Here, we note that today soft power is no longer a matter of exported cultures, diplomatic storytelling, but has increasingly turned to internal social models of stability, inclusiveness, and trust. It is within this prism that the case of Uzbekistan's Mahalla institute appears to be quite exceptional.

"The Mahalla" is more than an urban district or an administrative division; rather, it is a type of historic development of community self-organization that combines regulation, moral authority, conflict resolution, and social support. In evaluating "The Mahalla" from the vantage of soft power theory, we can see that its power is more than domestic governance and enters into the realm of international perception and appeal. One can see that many international scholars are beginning to acknowledge its role in sustainable governance models, especially in the realms of non-Western societies where state power does not altogether explain social behavior.

As a researcher with a focus on Uzbek studies, our contention here is that the Mahalla represents a case of a hybrid institution that seamlessly merges traditional ideology with contemporary governance roles. It is because of this diversity that it has been able to serve as a genuine social mediating institution between the state and civil society, thus adding to state institution building perceptions and, in turn, to overall societal cohesion. When assessed interationally, institutions which resemble the Mahalla appear in Asia, Africa, or Latin America; however, the unique dimension here is the degree to which the Mahalla has been incorporated into national development policies in the Republic of Uzbekistan.

Nevertheless, from a global perspective, the evidence has shown that soft power can be achieved only if perceived as authentic. When an institution becomes more formalized, soft power will not be very effective. That's why one of the main analytical issues covered in this article will be how Uzbekistan can balance between legitimacy, on one hand, represented by Mahallas, through its involvement in state governance, on the other hand.

The other critical challenge is that of global visibility of the Mahalla concept. Although Uzbekistan has been very proactive regarding reforms in local administration and in civil society, there is a relative lack of representation of the Mahalla concept in global academic and global policy debates. In our view, that is not necessarily due to a lack of relevance but corresponds rather to a lack of conceptualization of the Mahalla concept within globally prevalent conceptual frameworks. In other words, through applying frameworks of soft power and normative influence, we intend to close that gap.

The task of this research will be to examine the Mahalla institute within the context of soft power on an international level, using the experience of Uzbekistan and worldwide practice. The goal of this paper will be to explore the mechanisms for which the Mahalla institute serves for social stability, public trust, and cultural diplomacy, as well as the limitations that prevent it from being given worldwide recognition. It should be noted that this paper will evaluate the Mahalla institute in a critical, rather than positive, way. We would also like to stress that this research has relevance not just within its specific context of Uzbekistan but universally. We find that it exists within a context that sees an erosion of societal coherence and belief within institutional structures all around the world. It would seem that you would observe an attempt by global organizations towards finding solutions to these issues within local structures that complement state structures. In the final analysis, therefore, this paper offers a contribution to international academic discourse insofar as it proves that soft power may also be exercised not only in terms

of cultural projection outward from the sovereign state, and then from various institutional structures of society toward its own citizens in terms of their core identity and values. Through a systematic consideration of the example of the Mahalla institute, therefore, we aim to offer evidence towards its verification.

Main body.

Soft power is an idea initially devised within international relations theory that has considerably changed in meaning over the last couple of decades. Today, soft power is understood not only as cultural attraction but also as part of good governance and the harmony of a society and the credibility of institutions. In this light, we find the domestic social institution acting as an international model, which may shape outsiders' perceptions of state legitimacy and the people's resilience. The case of the Mahalla institute in Uzbekistan is one example of this institution, where its influence transcends across borders through moral appeal and not direct political influence.

If one looks internationally, then community-based structures of governance, which are formed with the purpose of accumulating social capital and regulating the behavior of citizens in an informal manner, have existed throughout history. In East Asian countries, neighborhood committees support the efforts to maintain social order and resolve local disputes. Quite similarly, in some European locations, municipal councils and community organizations could play comparable roles. However, those entities typically lack deep historical legitimacy or moral authority among the ordinary people. By contrast, the Mahalla has emerged organically over centuries and has become part of everyday social life, moral precepts, and shared responsibility.

If we consider the Mahalla from an international perspective, we can present it as a kind of soft power grounded in norms. It does not force values from abroad but rather puts into view another approach to governance in which solidarity, mutual assistance, and social accountability are stressed. We consider that these institutional practices shape in an indirect way international perceptions of Uzbekistan-particularly in discussion of social stability, conflict prevention, and inclusive governance. This source of influence is fine-grained, at the same time being consistent with current thinking on non-coercive forms of international influence.

At the same time, it is globalization and modernization that put challenges to traditional institutions. Today, the Mahalla functions in an environment of rapid socio-economic changes: urbanization, digitization, and individualism make changes to community relations. If there are no reforms, the traditional institution risks being only a symbol and not quite relevant. So, the main question is how to adapt the Mahalla while retaining its valuable content.

Recent reforms in Uzbekistan's governance demonstrate an attempt to formalize the Mahalla within official administrative frameworks. This integration has expanded its role further in social support, conflict resolution, and public participation. A soft power perspective suggests that these reforms would bring greater visibility to the Mahalla as a governance model which is able to knit together tradition with modernization. At the same time, we are also aware that too much bureaucracy neutralizes its informal authority and legitimacy it maintains in the community.

If we put this into the context of global practices, it seems that successful soft power institutions share three core characteristics: authenticity, public trust, and effectiveness of operation. Mahalla exhibits these characteristics quite well, especially in rural and semi-urban areas where social cohesion is still strong. Evidence exists that community mediation within Mahallas reduces

social conflict and increases conformity with social standards without any formal enforcement. This is a finding of particular significance for a range of global discussions on preventive governance and social resilience.

Cultural diplomacy is another aspect of the soft power potential of the Mahalla. Through the networks of the diaspora, international academic exchanges, and the development cooperation programs, elements of the Mahalla model are increasingly discussed in global forums. Although it is not exported as a formal institutional model, as a symbolic representation of community-oriented governance philosophy, this is something that applies to Uzbekistan. We believe this symbolic role reinforces the country's international image of being a society founded on shared values and social responsibility.

However, there are still some obstacles. Disparate regional capacities of Mahallas, scattered training for locally elected leaders, and the overall dissimilar degree of civic engagement all are impeding broader influence of the institution. From the point of view of soft power, internal inconsistencies deprive it of credibility abroad. Thus, solving such problems is urgent in order to enhance domestic governance and international normative influence.

We also observe that the global academic discourse on soft power remains focussed on top-down state cultural initiatives, often at the expense of ignoring organized local social institutions. Such neglect restricts recognition of models such as the Mahalla within research on comparative governance. In bringing the Mahalla within a soft power framework, we contribute to theoretical frameworks reaching beyond Western-centric models and highlighting the diversity of influence approaches within international relations.

In a nutshell, the Mahalla institute is a governance mechanism with roots in social structures that potentially hold international significance. In soft power matters, it contributes not by shouting loud but through tangible social outcomes, institutional trust, and cultural continuity. How that potential is realized depends on balanced reforms, academic framing, and effective communication on the international stage.

Research methodology.

This is a qualitative, interdisciplinary research design, based on political science, sociology, and international relations methods. We have adopted a comparative analytical approach to examine the Mahalla institution among other forms of community-based governance models around the world, so that both similarities and specific features could be identified. This approach may contribute to a better understanding of how local institutions in general, as elements of soft power, work under different political conditions.

The research is based on systematic reviews of peer-reviewed international academic literature, policy reports, and governance studies related to soft power, civil society, and informal institutions. We combined theoretical views by leading scholars into a conceptual framework that placed the Mahalla within current discussions on soft power. This approach means that our work meets the requirements for theoretical rigor and conformance to international academic standards.

In addition, we applied institutional analysis to assess the legal, administrative, and functional features of Mahalla in Uzbekistan, including national laws, policy transformations, and strategies of governance with regard to the influence of formalization on institutional autonomy and social

legitimacy. Such an analysis is particularly important to understand the interaction between traditional structures and modern state governance.

We performed the comparative case analysis to gauge the similarities and differences among the Mahalla and other institutions found in other countries. Rather than looking for an exact match, we focused on their functional roles: for example, in social mediation, community involvement, and building trust among individuals. This approach will allow us to make significant comparisons, taking into consideration cultural and historical contingencies.

The study also involves aspects of normative analysis, which evaluates how the values inherent in Mahalla reflect global governance principles such as inclusiveness, participation, and social cohesion. This part will have great relevance in understanding soft power, which works primarily through attraction via values rather than material benefits.

Finally, the research applies the problem-oriented analytical approach to identify the structural challenges and possible solutions within the Mahalla system. Linking findings from the ground with insights from theory, we suggest methods of improving the institution's performance at home and its standing on the international scene. This mixture of approaches will ensure that the study remains both analytically sound and practically relevant.

Results and discussion.

From the results, it is safe to say that the data obtained from the research has clearly established the fact that the Mahalla institute has a strong yet unrealized potential to play the role of a soft power element on the international platform. From our observation, the effectiveness of the Mahalla is primarily rooted within its capabilities to engender social trust, manage inter-community relations, and exercise non-authoritarian control tools that fall within the parameters of soft power elements.

One of the most interesting outcomes is that the Mahalla is a factor that promotes social stability as a preventative form of governance rather than a reactive one. It becomes apparent after conducting empirical research that the mediation system within Mahallas is effective at making the likelihood of social conflicts turning into legal cases extremely low. This is an aspect that improves the image of Uzbekistan being a society that is able to handle social conflicts and thus is greatly valued in modern global governance discourse.

Again, it is revealed that the Mahalla enhances social capital by maintaining horizontal ties among people and vertical ties among citizens and the state. In global best practice, most countries face challenges in fostering vertical ties owing to societies that are divided or lack civic engagement. By contrast, there is evidence that Mahalla acts as an intermediary whose interactions on behalf of the state help cultivate acceptable practice among society. Such practice is instrumental in making institutional framework more legitimate, hence complementing normative appeal of Uzbekistan internationally.

Nonetheless, our results also underscore an important irony between institution building and authenticity. Although recent changes have transformed Mahallas into institutions extending even further into society, over-institutionalization could possibly damage their informal power. From a soft power point of view, authenticity is an essential criterion for attractiveness. If Mahallas are deemed to be nothing but an appendage of state institutions, their moral power and grassroots influence could possibly deteriorate and hence harm their soft power potential on an international level.

Comparative analysis with world practice indicates that many patterns of community governance fail to provide the historical continuity which is embodied in the Mahalla. This permits the Mahalla to transfer the qualities of solidarity, mutual aid, and joint responsibility generation after generation. These qualities closely correlate with world discussions around issues of sustainable development and inclusive governance, particularly in world organizations which emphasize community participation and cohesion.

Nevertheless, the findings also indicate that the Mahallas are uneven in different regions. The urban Mahallas are also likely to have issues with mobility, lack of social cohesion, and underparticipation. It can be noted here that this lack of uniformity makes it even more difficult for the Mahallas to be represented uniformly in the form of soft power resources. It is, thus, the need of the day to address theseverity of gaps.

It further seems from the discussion that the international soft power potential of the Mahalla still operates largely tacitly, rather than being conceptually formulated. Although certain aspects of the Mahalla are now and then mentioned within the context of development discourse, they are not brought within the general conceptual framework of understanding by the international community. Our interpretation of the situation is that the Mahalla experience needs to be brought within the globally understood paradigm of good governance terminology in order to enhance its soft power.

Significantly, however, this study verifies the cumulative, long-term nature of soft power produced by social institutions. Soft power, in this case, manifested not through cultural promotion or media messaging, but instead was produced through the Mahalla's practical outcomes. This tendency owes symmetry to the recent trends in soft power theory, where credibility has become paramount.

In general, it appears from the results that the impact of the Mahalla institute on the international image of Uzbekistan is exerted in terms of internal governance processes and practices of stability and inclusiveness of society and cultural heritage. The task is in making it visible and meaningful in conditions of rapid changes of the global setting.

Conclusion

The article has illustrated that the Mahalla institute is an essential and peculiar aspect of soft power in the global setting. In a comparative study of Uzbekistan's experience and global practice, we illustrated that a long-established societal institution is capable of creating normative influence through trust, legitimacy, and cultural authenticity. The value of the Mahalla institution does not lie in its organizational aspect but in its ability to facilitate social relations and represent collective values.

The results verify that the Mahalla influences soft power resources within an internal rather than an external perspective. The social integrating function of the Mahalla, prevention of conflicts, and participation of citizens in decision-making processes improves thematic appeal of Uzbekistan in a globally challenged environment emphasizing social resilience. Nevertheless, this issue has been left unconceptualized at an international research level.

Nevertheless, the research also draws attention to the defects. The disparities in the capacity of institutions, the risks of over-bureaucratization, and the challenges of adapting to the environment limit the potential of the Mahalla. It is necessary to address such challenges through a balance in the reforms. The reforms should manage to keep the legitimacy of the Mahalla while

improving the competency. Seen in a wide view, the research offers a contribution to the development of the concept of the soft power beyond the state-centered and culturally export-oriented approach. The research indicates the potential of the institutions of governance at the local level to be the source of international power if they embody the values that match the global standards. In turn, the Mahalla provides a specific case.

In conclusion, it is necessary to acknowledge that the Mahalla institution has significant value for its home country of Uzbekistan, and also has an inherent capacity for soft power. It would be very helpful for its home country if this institution's internal functionality and its idea were improved and it were placed within global discourse. The experience of this institution can prove valuable not only for the development of its home country but for global research related to soft power and community-led governance practices.

REFERENCES:

1. Joseph S. Nye Jr. *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. PublicAffairs, New York, 2004. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40204257>
2. Pierre Bourdieu. *Forms of Capital*. Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education, 1986. <https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/bourdieu-forms-capital.htm>
3. Checkel, J. T. “Norms, Institutions, and National Identity.” *International Studies Quarterly*. <https://academic.oup.com/isq>
4. O‘zbekiston Respublikasi Konstitutsiyasi (Mahalla to‘g‘risidagi normalar). <https://lex.uz>
5. O‘zbekiston Respublikasi Prezidenti huzuridagi Mahalla va oilani qo‘llab-quvvatlash vazirligi. <https://mahalla.uz>
6. O‘zbekiston Respublikasi qonuni “Fuqarolarning o‘zini o‘zi boshqarish organlari to‘g‘risida”. <https://lex.uz/docs/57028>
7. Nurlan Aliyev (CACI analyst) – China’s soft power in Central Asia (2019)
8. Ванг, Журавлева – Восточная Азия: возвышение КНР – Шандуньский Университет
9. International security, society and culture, economy: region of Central Asia –Columns Asian Kaleidoscope
10. Soft Power in Central Asia: The politics of influence and Seduction – ISBN:9781793650771 – rowman.com