Chapter Title: Hobbesian Neopatrimonialism

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EPIGRAPH:

*He is Judge of what is necessary for Peace; and Judge of Doctrines: He is Sole Legislator; and Supreme Judge of Controversies; and of the Times, and Occasions of Warre, and Peace: to him it belongeth to choose Magistrates, Counsellours, Commanders, and all other Officers, and Ministers; and to determine the Rewards, and Punishments, Honour, and Order.*

-- Thomas Hobbes, 1651. Leviathan. Part 2, Chapter XX

MAIN TEXT

In May 2016, a referendum approved 41 changes to Tajikistan’s constitution. Voter turnout was reported to be 94.5 percent. Ninety two percent of voters supported the referendum. Misunderstanding the intent of the alterations is impossible: to make a single family the focal point of political power and legally institutionalize a cult of personality around Emomali Rahmon. Rahmon was ceremonially declared “founder of peace” and “leader of the nation.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Though the constitution had already been altered once to allow Rahmon to continue ruling until 2020, new changes allow the 64- year - old to serve as president indefinitely. The age limit for running for president was also altered, presumably so that if Rahmon were to perish unexpectedly, the mantle of the presidency could pass smoothly to his son, in imitation of the kind of traditional legitimacy associated with monarchy. Since these changes were passed via an institutionalized, formal, and participatory process, the new measures to centralize personalist power can be said to represent the popular will of the citizens of Tajikistan. On the other hand, perhaps many people turned out because they knew they were expected to watch each other vote. It is difficult to interpret high levels of participation in voting exercises in authoritarian settings.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Samuel Huntington, writing in the 1960s, would have immediately recognized the political equilibrium in Tajikistan as a *contained society*: a highly institutionalized polity with very low levels of social mobilization and limited popular participation in government.[[3]](#endnote-3) Political order is provided by a kind of hybridization of institutions, blending traditional authority (loyalty to a monarch, “father figure,” or *khan*) with the bureaucratic authority of a modern state. Contemporary political scientists might code Tajikistan as a “single party” or “hegemonic party” system, one of many polities where formal processes of contestation exist, but where politics are dominated by “safe districts” so that formally democratic processes predictably reproduce the interests of an incumbent party. Rather than flog Tajiks for failing to live up to an idealized democratic standard, this chapter attempts to locate the basis of Rahmon’s political legitimacy in the lived experience of Tajiks.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The thesis of this chapter is that the most important variable that distinguishes Tajikistan from other post-Soviet Central Asian republics is the Tajik Civil War. Living in the shadow of endemic violence, Tajikistan is one of the best examples in Central Asia of what North, Wallis, and Weingast call a “closed access society” or “the natural state”[[5]](#endnote-5):

The natural state reduces the problem of endemic violence through the formation of a dominant coalition whose members possess special privileges. The logic of the natural state follows from how it solves the problem of violence. Elites— members of the dominant coalition—agree to respect each other’s privileges, including property rights and access to resources and activities. By limiting access to these privileges to members of the dominant coalition, elites create credible incentives to cooperate rather than fight among themselves. Because elites know that violence will reduce their own rents, they have incentives not to fight.

North, Wallis, and Weingast employ an analytic approach that essentially bifurcates the world into “open access order” and “closed access order” societies. Open access orders are fully-consolidated democracies that extend elite privileges to all citizens in the form of protected citizen rights, and they are historically very rare. Closed access orders have been the dominant form of human social organization for most of recorded history. The authors emphasize that transition to an open access order is highly contingent and difficult to predict, but identify what they call three “doorstep conditions”: social characteristics that have historically been present when a country transitioned from closed access to open access. They are: 1) rule of law for elites; 2) perpetually lived organizations in the public and private spheres; and 3) consolidated control of the military.[[6]](#endnote-6)

This chapter is organized around analyzing these three doorstep conditions in Tajikistan. I conclude that conditions are unfavorable for Tajikistan to transmogrify into an open access society. State legitimacy in Tajikistan rests on the very old argument that a relatively benign personalist authoritarianism centered on a focal leader is preferable to a violent anarchic alternative. The logic—which has an element of explicit extortion—is that even were there broad consensus among Tajiks that an open access order was achievable and desirable, which there emphatically is not, the risk of extreme violence in the transition away from the closed order arrangement is too great at this time. To the extent that this is correct, Tajiks themselves may intuitively understand that authoritarian social order in Tajikistan is over-determined. Accepting authoritarianism as the natural order of things is internally coherent and, viewed from the rural periphery of Tajikistan, makes a certain kind of normative sense. *Hobbesian Neopatrimonialism* is the best way to understand the roots of the broad-based social legitimacy that Rahmon enjoys.

What is meant by *Hobbesian Neopatrimonialism*? The component parts of the term should be defined sequentially. The reference to *Hobbesian* denotes a widespread social perception by citizens that violent anarchy is a real possibility. Tajiks are not permitted to forget that their national history includes a war of unusual brutality with terrible human costs. Patrimonialism, as originally conceptualized by Max Weber, is a traditional form of government with a single “big man” (almost always male) figure acting as the universal patron at the top of the power pyramid. It is a model of a nation state as a kind of tribe, with a single elevated figurehead the terminal enforcer of property rights, the final judge above which there can be no appeal.[[7]](#endnote-7) Hale defines *patronal politics* as:

politics in societies where individuals organize their political and economic pursuits primarily around personalized exchange of concrete rewards and punishments through chains of actual acquaintance, and not primarily around abstract, impersonal principles such as ideological belief or categorization like economic class that include many people one has not actually met in person.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The prefix “*neo*,” (“new”) is here meant to indicate that patrimonial government systems in the modern world system (post-World War II, post-decolonization) are constrained by a set of global norms that locate sovereignty with the people of a state and define legitimacy as the consent of the governed. A defining feature of today’s neopatrimonialist regimes is that while all of the property on a sovereign state’s territory is, de facto, the property of the political sovereign, his family, and a small circle of elites, a variety of de jureinstitutions give the impression that political power is checked by institutions. Neopatrimonial practices do not mean that there is not a constitution, elections, a parliament, or lip service given to the rule of law.[[9]](#endnote-9)

This chapter proceeds in sections loosely organized around analysis of the doorstep conditions laid out in North, Wallis, and Weingast. The first summarizes the state of the literature on the causes of Tajikistan’s civil war. The war, rooted in structural inequalities inherited from the Soviet period, was at its root a struggle for control over the only perpetually-lived organization—the state apparatus itself. The second section argues that the processes of civil war settlement were effective because of, not in spite of, the absence of the rule of law. The third section argues that there are hardly any perpetually-lived corporate organizations that operate independently of the state. Distributional politics are organized around *avlod* blood ties, which are occasionally cemented by strategic marriages, but almost always in a way that reinforces the dominance of Rahmon’s family. The main exceptions to this rule are foreign-seeded groups funded by foreign charities, which even in the best of all possible worlds cannot really substitute for an indigenous middle class. Since Tajikistan’s per capita GDP is one of the lowest in the region, it is difficult to imagine autonomous social institutions developing in the future. The fourth section argues that consolidated control of Tajikistan’s small military should be acknowledged as the centerpiece of Rahmon’s political legacy—it is a stunning achievement, and the awe he enjoys stems from social awareness of this fact. A close examination of the personalist mechanisms of centralization suggests that they depend heavily on leveraging foreign aid and a benign interstate threat environment, however. It is fairly clear that Rahmon has coup-proofed his regime. It is less clear that centralized control of Tajikistan’s military has yielded the kind of professional military capable of conducting high-quality counterinsurgency if faced with a sustained domestic challenge. Absent such a challenge, the current order will likely hold.

Why Was There a Civil War in Tajikistan after Independence?

Emomali Rahmonov, as he was called at the time, was not installed from the top. He was elevated from below by indigenous Tajik social forces. He gained control of the state apparatus of newly-independent Tajikistan during a brutal civil war. He was not himself a field commander, but he ascended with the assistance of a variety of Tajik field commanders. In other words, Rahmon was hand-picked for the job by a coalition of warlords.

Why did Tajikistan fall prey to civil war? The permissive cause was the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which created a sudden window of state weakness.[[10]](#endnote-10) The new government inherited a discredited, bankrupt, and very weak security apparatus. State agents could not credibly commit to enforcing political bargains in the future.[[11]](#endnote-11) As the tide of Russian power receded, Tajikistan was suddenly cast adrift in a very difficult neighborhood. Some, though not all, of the overlapping formal and informal institutional layers that organized politics in Central Asia were clearly going to be overturned. No one really knew which institutions would survive and which would be discarded, and what the relative distribution of social benefits between social forces would be. With the fundamental rules of the political game up for grabs, many high-stakes questions remained.[[12]](#endnote-12) Agendas for radical redistribution of property rights and the geopolitical realignment of the region were openly discussed for the first time in living memory.

Since the same is true of neighboring Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, all of which managed the transition to independence peacefully, reliance on this kind of macro-structural analysis is ultimately unsatisfying. What was the proximate cause of the war? What was threatening about the new actors and ideas that entered Tajik politics? What were the specific social demands articulated by new entrants into politics that pitted conservatives against new social forces? Consensus on these details is much more difficult to achieve, and these issues will likely remain controversial long into the future.[[13]](#endnote-13) Writing at the height of the violence, however, Akiner provided an outstanding summary that will probably stand the test of time:

Ultimately, the turmoil in Tajikistan hinged on two essential issues. One was the attempt to end the monopoly of political power by the cliques which had been favored by the Soviet system. How accepted or participatory any challengers to that system might have become was never tested, nor was the challengers’ competence in wielding political power. Their only chance was a limited one, as part of a coalition government that ruled for a few months in 1992 amidst the widening chaos of a civil war. The other essential issue was the role Islam would play in this predominantly Muslim country. The call simply for freedom to practice religion after decades of Soviet repression was widespread but beyond that there was much disagreement. However, the stereotype which equated interest in Islam with extremism, intolerance, and violence was a powerful weapon in the politics of independent Tajikistan. This provided the rationale for the suppression of the opposition as a whole.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Most accounts of the war’s outbreak emphasize three processes: deeply-embedded regional divisions within Tajik society; the relatively sudden mobilization of Tajiks around high-stakes political questions (such as the role of Islam, the artificiality of borders inherited from the Soviet era, and the plasticity of property rights in the Soviet-constructed authoritarian institutions); and broad awareness that the post-independence state lacked the repressive capacity to either coerce or discipline unruly populations. It is perhaps not surprising that local face-to-face institutions—kolkhozand *avlod* structures, which provided a convenient heuristic for whom one could trust in the future—contributed the social capital for various political factions to contest these matters forcefully. Once radical members realized that no one would make arrests, mass rallies in Dushanbe attempted to push various social agendas via street politics.

The speed of social change terrified conservatives. Collins presents a range of data demonstrating that cadres from Khojand (then Leninobod) had monopolized state positions and reported directly to either Tashkent or Moscow for decades.[[15]](#endnote-15) A few prominent families had grown especially wealthy by monopolizing political connections and possibilities for advancement within the Party, but the entire region was heavily subsidized by transfers from the Union. In the less well-off parts of the country, as Markowitz documents, embattled cotton-producing elites joined forces with rural criminal networks and local strongmen as the state fragmented.[[16]](#endnote-16) Voluntary village defense forces quickly assembled into loose armies. The Popular Front for Tajikistan (PFT) emerged as a coalition of social conservatives from the Khojandi rust belt, Uzbek-backed militias, and southern agricultural interests from Kulob. A counter coalition, eventually known as the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), had representation among Pamiris in Gorno-Badahkshon and Gharmis, as well as significant support among the non-Khojandi intelligentsia. Throughout 1992, 1993, and much of 1994, militias targeted civilian populations with the goal of destroying the civilian base of the other side’s fighting force.

Emomali Rahmonov came to power in 1992 against the backdrop of this violence.[[17]](#endnote-17) He became the face of the franchise as PFT militias recaptured Dushanbe in the months that followed. A few months later, an election was organized to legitimate his authority. Social participation was reportedly high, even in the eastern parts of the country, which had de facto seceded. The day after the dubious election, in which 99.5 percent of the inhabitants of Khatlon were reported to have voted for Rahmonov, the Yeltsin government supported the results with a statement declaring Tajikistan’s elections “free and fair.” Moscow sent fifteen billion rubles to Dushanbe to pay government salaries for the first time since independence. Popular Front forces, now in control of the state, followed decisive military victories with the annihilation of civilian networks that had backed the opposition coalition. The brutality of the final phase of the war prompted an observer to note: “Neither side distinguished itself by humanitarian conduct in the war; ultimately, the side that won committed more atrocities.”[[18]](#endnote-18)

The final phase was largely concluded by December 1994. Russia, acting through the Commonwealth of Independent States, was authorized under Resolution 968 of the United Nations Security Council to oversee a security framework allowing for the resolution of the conflict. Russian President Yeltsin, having already declared that the Tajik-Afghan border was, “in effect, Russia’s,” extended a security umbrella over the region and cauterized the violence. Grinding counterinsurgency continued for years. There is consensus in the official records of most states that Tajikistan’s Civil War ended with the 1997 Russian-led peace process.

Why did Russia, which was experiencing its own kind of state failure at the time, spend resources and political capital securing Tajikistan (and, by extension, shoring up Rahmonov’s regime)? The short answer is that involvement in this civil war settlement was deemed necessary to secure Russia’s new southern frontier. Since Western security analysts cannot escape their own geographic point of view, there is a tendency to forget not only how far east the Soviet Union went, but also how far *south* it went—sharing land borders with Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan. The risk was that a long-running Islamicized or ethnicized civil war in Tajikistan may have had no natural borders. The potential for irregular infantry units to filter north across the Panj River and infect other Central Asian states with toxic ideologies was terrifying.[[19]](#endnote-19) Another escalation scenario—without the bogeyman of radical Islam—was that secular nationalist Tajiks living in Bukhara and Samarkand might “awaken” to a national identity and be ready to serve as fifth-columnists pushing for secession from Uzbekistan. At some point, the Uzbek government might opt to unilaterally redraw the map of Central Asia by incorporating the Tajik region of Khojand—or perhaps the entire Ferghana Valley. Revisiting borders in this way would have had unpredictable domino effects: Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan noted that their abundant oil and gas reserves could be targeted. In any case, if millions of refugees tried to board trains and head West all at once, it would be very destabilizing. Russia asserted leadership over Tajikistan’s peace process to prevent Uzbekistan or the United Nations Security Council from doing so. With the security of the entire region potentially at stake, Russia took action, and as a result Tajikistan was not permitted to slide completely into Somalia-style state failure.

Russia did not try to do much in the way of social engineering, however, and with the benefit of hindsight, certain aspects of the civil war settlement in Tajikistan have become clearer than they would have been to analysts at the time.

For one thing, Russia never paid much more than lip service to the idea of post-war democratization. The “order-first” framework that was established with Russia’s assistance at the United Nations made most European embassies, and all members of the Tajik elite, de facto junior partners in an absolutist government centered on Rahmonov. The result was a Tajik state apparatus that was, for a very long time, saturated with former war criminals and unsavory characters. Russian policy tolerated the consolidation of a personalist authoritarian order because it seemed the best of the unsavory options. The worst outcome, of course, would have been ongoing civil war. Some Tajiks knew that they had the Russians over a barrel in some important respects, creating an extortion dynamic that will be revisited later in this chapter.

For another, Russian military interventions were never actually intended to provide a framework for secure disarmament. Informally, rebel militia commanders and pro-regime paramilitary commanders were treated in largely the same way: invited to merge members of their militias into the state without so much as the pretense of disarmament; provided with amnesty and an ability to use their position to loot the state from within with impunity; and given a probabilistic chance that, over time, they would either be quietly killed or asked to take their wealth and leave the country. Few informed observers were all thatsurprised when the formal security guarantees in the 1997 Peace Accords—such as the promise that one of the three “power ministries” (defense, interior, or state security) would be headed by a representative of the United Tajik Opposition—were never implemented.

Why No Rule of Law for Tajik Elites?

Returning to North, Wallis, and Weingast, their first doorstep condition for an open access order is rule of law for elites. One important legacy of the Tajik civil war is that it guaranteed that most members of the non-Tajik Soviet middle class fled, never to return. Their exodus removed the members of the polity who would have probably been the most likely to support the rule of law.[[20]](#endnote-20)

In the wake of this exodus, the great powers wanted to contain the chaos but needed a local partner capable of providing order. They got it in the form of Rahmonov, who offered them a local conservative client and “face of the franchise” so long as they were willing to be realistic and allow some liberal charity to fall into unsavory pockets. The great powers were more or less indifferent to the distributional particulars of the arrangement, and could not really follow the money anyway.[[21]](#endnote-21) Rahmonov was bolstered by unambiguous and largely unconditional support from patrons in Moscow. Conditional support from the European capitals, the United States, the OSCE, and associated regional actors was forthcoming as well. He gradually trimmed the inner circle of the ruling coalition. The first to go were Hissori warlords and members of the security services seen as being too close to Uzbekistan, then the various Khojandi clan networks associated with Abdulmalik Abdullojonov. After that, one at a time, anyone else who demonstrated excessive ambition was removed. This process of whittling down representatives of the various social forces that might have served as a check on Rahmonov did not happen all at once. Gradual maneuvering within the shifting bounds of coalition politics, walking a tightrope to avoid a coup, took years. More than once, the fragile coalition seemed on the verge of violent fragmentation. There was also a great deal of intra-coalitionalviolence, often centered on the downtown of the capital city, as a brutally violent tournament played out between different social groups over the right to be a violence sub-contractor for the state and enforce the law.[[22]](#endnote-22) Importantly, what kept Tajikistan politically stable though this process was not respect for the rule of law, but shared appreciation of the fact that Rahmonov’s promises to warlords were credible because they knew that if he reneged, they could remove him in a coup. A number of high-profile appointments of war criminals made it clear that warlords were using Rahmon as a kind of “front man” or hostage in the mid-1990s. But gradually, by playing one warlord off against another, the insecure and coup-prone Rahmonov dropped the Russified suffix on his family name and transformed himself into the purer Persian “Rahmon.”

How did this happen, as a practical matter? Broadly speaking, the arrangement was that the president served as the face of the franchise and oversaw a process by which criminal warlords were transformed into agents of the state. The “favor economy” centered on the capital city, Dushanbe, which was the largest city in the country, the home of government, and the obvious logistical “choke point” for aid and investment. Though most of the population of Tajikistan resides in rural areas, most of the political elites reside in the capital. Control of this city was obviously the prize to be won in the civil war. Some elites in Gorno-Badakhshan pushed for independence from Tajikistan during the civil war, and there were rumblings from Khojand and the Ferghana Valley. Without external patronage, these secessionist movements essentially disappeared.

Part of the process of yoking these regions to the capital city was bribery and autonomy: allowing local strongmen to shave their beards and don uniforms, as well as maintain control of the rents from a territory, so long as they made formal nods to the capital’s authority and ensured that their districts delivered votes when necessary (more on this below). There were many would-be warlords who wanted in on this game; deciding who would ascend into the government and who would return to rural areas required what amounted to an extremely violent urban gang war. Many warlords died in intra-coalitional squabbles withinthe faction that won the civil war; the winners of this violent tournament went on to participate in a shadowy competition for Rahmon’s favor. In the end, there emerged a faction of warlords capable of using violence to limit entry into the arena of real political power. In exchange for supporting the president, they are permitted to draw a salary and a pension, make a bit of money on the side, and wear uniforms.[[23]](#endnote-23) Thus, another important legacy of the disintegration of the Tajik state was the introduction of new elites into Tajik politics. Many were field commanders, whom I elsewhere call warlords: celebrity social actors defined by a demonstrated ability to shape and control large-scale violence.

In the process of settling the war, the inherited Soviet state apparatus was cannibalized, with considerable assistance from outside actors. In this bargain, ministries were turned over to warlords, who colluded with one another to guarantee social order while keeping the violence off-camera and out of sight. Tajik warlords from different social backgrounds understood that the breakdown of the state created the possibility for them to rise above their station. Many warlords did rise far above their station. Gradually yoking these warlords to the state required that Rahmonov maneuver carefully, exploiting frictions that emerged as warlords competed against each other in a complex game of coalition formation akin to musical chairs. The manipulation of personal networks and a variety of opaque deals were all, in the end, only as good as the word of one person: Emomali Rahmonov. As memories of the war fade unevenly, the personalist power of the president—not the office of the executive so much as the networks of loyalty and favoritism centered on a particular human being—is functionally unconstrained.

From the perspective of most Russians, one Tajik warlord was interchangeable with another. As long as warlord politics were intra-ethnic, related to distributional politics and the selective enforcement of property rights, and contained within the space on the map that had been designated for their nation, keeping track of complex details was just too much trouble. This is not to say that the warlords were interchangeable *to each other,* of course—the regional divisions cemented by blood and marriage had calcified into a highly-striated social system—but many of these striations were invisible to non-Tajiks. What emerged in Tajikistan, then, is an object lesson in “R before D”: the reintegration of armed groups into society with only very cosmetic disarmament.[[24]](#endnote-24) Over the next decade, the processes that played out were analogous to a costly lottery (with costs of entry paid in the lives of young men) that occurred alongside a coalition formation game (played by potential lottery winners). Terminal payoffs for lucky warlords took the form of jobs for their followers, non-prosecution for past war crimes for themselves, and downtown real estate from which they could draw rents as the capital recovered (buoyed by the salaries of foreign aid workers). All of these payoffs were ultimately guaranteed by a single human being, Rahmonov, who was constrained by the threat of an organized coup by inside-coalition warlords. Behind the = continued to maim and kill each other for the privilege of looting the state apparatus with impunity. Some lucky warlords managed to do this for years, or even decades before being selectively purged or “disappeared.” Others remain in the state apparatus to this day. Unlucky or incapable warlords, meanwhile, exited the game much more quickly.

The popular perception in Moscow was—and remains—that all the leaders in this part of the world are basically gangsters: small-time criminals, bandits, war criminals, or terrorists. The notion that some of these unsavory characters might reinvent themselves as agents of the regime could be tolerated as a matter of brokering peace, but only because Tajiks rank at (or near) the bottom of an ethnic hierarchy with Slavs at the top. Distance in social status and casual racism should not be discounted as causal factors in Russian policy. Warlords kept their guns so that they could threaten to remove Rahmon in a coup if he did not allow them to loot the state. For the most part, the violence of the war cowed Rahmon’s political competitors, as did the nature of the post-war order. Politics was—and continues to be—a dangerous profession in Tajikistan. The most naked political violence took place around the 1998 parliamentary and the 1999 presidential elections. In the latter case, so many potential candidates were assassinated that Rahmonov’s was nearly the only name listed on the ballot.

If criminals became too ambitious, Rahmon could renege on promises of amnesty and non-prosecution. Rahmonov gradually transformed himself from a puppet of Russia and various warlords to an unchecked executive. Rahmon’s political strategy was guided by three broad principles: he went after warlords one at a time; he transferred losing warlords’ wealth to other warlords as side-payments for their loyalty rather than centralizing power in his own hands; and he established a reputation as a man of his word. Consider this observation about his governance style by a then-member of the United Nations Tajikistan Observation Mission (UNTOP), from an interview conducted in 2007: “Rahmonov always gave a warning before he went after you. He’d warn once, twice…he’d wait for months or years, giving people a chance to remove themselves from politics once they were becoming too threatening. He always gave everyone opportunities to get away.”[[25]](#endnote-25)

The processes of civil war settlement brought personal benefits to Rahmon. For one thing, selective integration of former combatants allowed Rahmon to assemble a military apparatus that could police the interior hinterlands of Tajikistan relatively quickly and at a modest cost (compared to assembling a military from scratch). When Mahmud Khudoiberdiyev unilaterally declared the establishment of an autonomous region in 1998 and called for foreign support from Uzbekistan, the state military that drove him from the country included a quickly-assembled coalition of rehabilitated rebel field commanders and their battle-hardened troops, including some individuals who had been “Islamic terrorists” and “criminal insurgents” just weeks earlier. What the soldiers were offered in exchange for their service was often modest: a promise of amnesty; an opportunity to demonstrate competence and loyalty (and thus increase the probability of promotion in the future); a job; and perhaps a small one-time payment.

The fact that bribes of this kind were so efficacious revealed that much of the warlords’ ideologically pure anti-statist rhetoric was what economists call “cheap talk”—they were rhetorically powerful speeches based on powerful ideas, and they were (empirically) well-calibrated to entice young men to fight and die, but they were often just empty words. Despite endless rhetoric about solidarity across the *Umma* to build a pan-Islamic state, or about never compromising with one’s enemies, it turned out that almost no one actually wanted to see the disintegration of the Tajik state. Indeed, almost everyone wanted a small fiefdom within it. Even in one of the poorest republics in the former Soviet Union, the inherited state security infrastructure was sufficiently vast for a variety of people, many of whom had no great ability, to establish patchwork fiefdoms in what amounted to a giant racketeering operation. Shared social expectations of the permanence of Tajik state institutions were important: the permanence created a futures market, giving Rahmon something material and tangible with which to cement transactions. Warlords could gradually see for themselves that what their competitors *really* wanted was access to material rents, not rewards in paradise after death or heroic “all-or-nothing last stands.” The process of gradually buying peace dulled the power of ideology. The banality of violence cheapened the stakes of the violent political theater. Civilians came to see politics as dangerous and dirty, but from the perspective of warlords bargaining with each other, deals that involved subordination to Rahmon’s hierarchy gradually made all parties better off.

A third advantage to Rahmon of integrating the warlords—one that the warlords did not initially foresee—was that Rahmon gradually gained social legitimacy among Tajik civilians as he purged warlords from the state. For all the violence and horror of war, and despite the flight of the Russian-speaking middle class, Dushanbe remained a city of basically civilized people who believed it was morally unnatural for rapists and murderers to hold positions of social power. For sociopaths to enjoy respect, legal immunity, and institutionalized protection was an inversion of the natural moral order. Once the worst periods of violence had passed and normalcy returned, thinly-veiled but very popular political purges occurred. First, the perceived Uzbek clients were liquidated, followed by the worst offenders with portfolios tied to discredited Soviet patronage structures. Then the obvious sociopaths found themselves out on the street or “disappeared.” Along the way, almost anyone who tried to challenge Rahmon directly was purged. As president, Rahmon could control the timing of cabinet reshuffles and criminal prosecutions to take advantage of shifts in the public mood. He rode successive waves of popular opinion and doled out punishment in humiliating show trials. Based on dozens of conversations in a variety of contexts over the course of my research, many Tajiks thought the show trials delivered justice and that these terrible men were getting exactly what they deserved.

A fourth advantage to buying off warlords—often men of modest means—was that it was a relatively cheap way of gaining allegiance. Purchasing the loyalty of entire regionally-backed family networks of the old Khojandi elites had required negotiating in currencies involving educational curricula, language quotas, and positions of real power (such as governorships or control of industrial bottlenecks), which came with hundreds of guaranteed jobs as side-payments. Once the gun overtly entered politics and the primary actors were often warlords from urban slums or rural areas, loyalty could sometimes be purchased with one-time payments along with some promise of autonomy allowing them to do as well as they had managed to do in the war, which often amounted to a few tens of thousands of dollars a year. The price of peace required brokering with people whose idea of “the good life” was running a neighborhood racketeering operation, numbing the days with lots of street drugs, and keeping three girlfriends in gaudy jewelry. As foreign charity trickled into the Tajik economy, the value of downtown real estate was inflated by Western salaries pegged to the standard of living in Western capitals, which provided a pool of rents more than sufficient for this purpose.[[26]](#endnote-26)

From the perspective of international law and jurisprudence, Tajik sovereignty resides with the Tajik people in the impersonal organization of the Tajik state. Inside the borders of Tajikistan, in both a formal (legal) and real (practical) sense, Emomali Rahmon is seen as the source of all law. The transcripts of Rahmon’s public speeches are littered with references to *huquqi* (legal) and *consitutoni* (constitutional) norms, but these concepts have been invoked primarily to justify anti-corruption prosecutions meant to punish Rahmon’s political enemies.[[27]](#endnote-27) There is no social expectation that the law will constrain his family or his power in any way; indeed, it changes more or less according to his whim. In many respects, Emomali Rahmon is just the kind of sovereign so familiar to Thomas Hobbes. He is the law.

Why Are There So Few Perpetually-Lived Tajik Organizations?

North, Wallis, and Weingast identify impersonal perpetually-lived organizations as a second doorstep condition.[[28]](#endnote-28) These entities provide a theoretical platform for elite bargaining. Perpetually-lived organizations that are external from, and thus potentially competitive with, the ruler highlight the potential for the grasping hand of the executive to be checked. Perpetually-lived organizations also create space for symbolic performances of opposition to state power. The authors define a perpetually-lived organization as one that has a legal existence independent of the identity of any specific individual members, such as trade unions, religious institutions, or modern corporations.[[29]](#endnote-29) Without these independent institutions, states can—and do—manipulate individual people, even powerful people, either with positive incentives e.g., “buying them off” with prestigious jobs and social recognition, or with negative incentives, e.g., deterring them from entering the political arena by threats of violence against family members.

Tajikistan is notable for the near-total absence of indigenously funded, perpetually-lived, autonomous civil society groups capable of mobilizing large financial resources and incentivizing long-term behaviors. Most social spheres are touched by the state. Few indigenous civil society organizations are capable of challenging the state and winning, even symbolically, and those few that might have been able to do so have been co-opted. Mosque networks are organized around charismatic imams, but sooner or later they have to deal with the state. There are family and *avlod* networks, which provided the social capital for militia formation and warlordism in the 1990s and pool resources to send promising children to school in the hopes of them joining the *nomenklatura* bureaucracy. Business networks, both legitimate or clandestine, are also almost always based around families. But in all of these cases, the principals are just men of different ages, easily coopted or coerced in the absence of a perpetually-lived institution backing them.

What is observed instead? The institutional inheritance of Tajikistan is hard-wired for what Hale observes across Eurasia as “patronal politics,” patronage-based authoritarianism organized around loyalty to a patriarchal father figure who acts as the sole focal point for political order, with a variety of bureaucratized hierarchies of sub-patrons (and sub-sub-patrons, and so on) to organize political life in the polity.[[30]](#endnote-30) Levels of personalism vary, but at the extreme ends of the spectrum, like Tajikistan, we find leaders empowered to dole out life opportunities on a whim.[[31]](#endnote-31) Political success in this setting often requires that an entrepreneur make himself (for it is usually a man) noticed and then get himself co-opted by the president’s machine. There is very little room at the top. It is a steep and usually irreversible fall for those who lose favor. Various social forces—even armed actors who could in principle organize a military coup—come to calculate that they cannot reasonably do better for themselves or their families than by playing by the rules.[[32]](#endnote-32) In this social order, what Weber would call “traditional authority” and “bureaucratic authority” sit comfortably nested atop one another.[[33]](#endnote-33) As the previous section argues, this machinery has been successful at coopting or eliminating competitors, and it is hard to separate the creation of this personalist network from processes of civil war settlement.

Since these practices are observed elsewhere in the region, including neighboring countries that did not experience civil war upon independence, the war cannot be the whole story.[[34]](#endnote-34) A deeper cultural logic and a common response to mutually-perceived strategic problems are probably at work. Arguments from historical path-dependence tend to either emphasize ancient subordination to authority (the Khan) or the fact that most Central Asian citizens were cowed by the Soviet experience and internalized, in the words of Jones Luong, “a social contract in which society offered the state political quiescence in exchange for cradle-to-grave welfare.”[[35]](#endnote-35) These cultural habits seem to have persisted, despite the manifest absence of social services in post-independence Tajikistan.

Quiescence has always been easiest to observe in rural areas, where 70 percent of Tajikistan’s population resides. The caricature of a tightly-controlled Tajik-language media environment, in which the state monitors and shapes the content of all Tajik-language news and television programming, is largely a holdover from the worst periods of civil war violence. It would be more accurate to say that today, especially in rural parts of the country, many Tajiks are either illiterate or a-literate and simply “do not dirty themselves” with politics.[[36]](#endnote-36) To the extent that rural people engage with national news stories, they do so via television, usually either Russian satellite television or the state-controlled television channels that broadcast nationwide. I recall being in the rural village of Kalikhum in 2008 when the lights were turned on for the first time in months, in celebration of the springtime *Navruz* holiday. The television had just one channel, which played patriotic songs and songs of peace. Rahmon’s face kept appearing on the screen. I remember knowing with certainty that if it were not for Rahmon, the lights would still be off. I am certain that the family I was living with understood this fact in the same way.

Every few years, popular voting exercises—with very limited competition—reinforce the legitimacy of the order-producing party in a manner that could hardly be better designed to demonstrate quiescence. The spectacle has been described as a “ritual of consent.”[[37]](#endnote-37) Elections have never served to keep Rahmon accountable. Since the mid-1990s, everyone has been well aware that no challenger will be allowed to remove him from power. Many suspect that results are entirely fabricated. Still, evidence of compliant rural voting on a massive scale allows Rahmon to plausibly claim to be the choice of his people.[[38]](#endnote-38) Political power outside the state is atomized.

From whence, then, might perpetually-lived non-state institutions emerge that might eventually be capable of competing with Rahmon and his single-party regime? It is discouragingly difficult to speculate an answer to this question.

New indigenous economic elites are unlikely to form perpetually-lived corporations to challenge the state from below in the foreseeable future. Long term development prospects are bleak. Except for a small border with China, Tajikistan is landlocked by other landlocked countries. Half of its domestic agricultural labor force is seasonally employed in cotton, and it is likely that these Tajiks will be poorer a generation from now than they are today.[[39]](#endnote-39) At the time of this writing, Tajikistan’s per capita GDP is approximately equal to that of Yemen. The most predictable sources of wealth require political protection, and extracting rents from cotton mono-cropping is probably the best game in town. Cotton is central to the political economy of repression in Central Eurasian repressive regimes.[[40]](#endnote-40) Since kolkhoz structures are the central social unit of Tajik rural life in Khatlon, and since a few buyers control the sale of cotton—a cash crop too labor-intensive to cultivate without mass mobilization of the rural poor and too bulky to hide or smuggle—on the global market, the cultivation of patrons within the state apparatus is the only viable pathway to economic security, even for the most well-off. A centralized economy, with a logistics and distribution network that has bottlenecks at a few railroad stations, has co-evolved with single-party rule. Personal connections with an authority somewhere within the state bureaucracy—a cotton sales broker or a political “roof” to make sure that gray-market transactions are not prosecuted according to poorly-written laws—is a practical necessity in the absence of rule of law. As such, an indigenous middle class capable of forming corporations that could make demands on the state is very distant.

Foreign charity and remittances are probably more vital to the Tajik economy than they are to any other post-Soviet state. The Tajik diaspora provides an important social safety-valve. Given the lack of economic freedom and the overall dearth of social opportunities in Tajikistan, as well as the fact that high-prestige educational attainment requires leaving the country, brain drain of the most privileged children of the most privileged families will continue. Young Tajik men who might otherwise be hanging around Dushanbe, marginally employed and potentially susceptible to thoughts of revolution, are absent from the social milieu. The diaspora seems unlikely to spawn perpetually-lived organizations to challenge Rahmon, however. The notion of an organized “opposition in exile” seems more fanciful with each passing year. Russia, Kazakhstan and, to a lesser extent, Uzbekistan are the most popular destinations for working-class Tajik males seeking economic migration. All three have shown a willingness to extradite criminals, dissidents, and terrorists back to Tajikistan. There is no reason to imagine that intellectuals would be spared this treatment if they were thought to be party organizers.[[41]](#endnote-41) Since much of this immigration is illegal, the Uzbek or Russian state can credibly threaten to legally deport troublemakers—or their friends and girlfriends—back to Tajikistan. So long as the most productive members of the Tajik economy are working “off the books” (e.g., driving taxis in the suburbs of St. Petersburg or working for untaxed daily wages on construction sites), it is difficult to picture the kinds of social value transformations occurring that are the drivers of modernization theory, though only time will tell.[[42]](#endnote-42)

One potential check on Rahmon’s power might be factionalism within the Tajik state. However absolutist a figurehead leader like Rahmon might appear, he is ultimately accountable to men with guns and forced to operate in the shadow of a coup.[[43]](#endnote-43) The various security ministries of the Tajik state operate with greater autonomy than other ministries, such as education or foreign affairs. The notion that the ministries with guns would enjoy a relatively high level of autonomy, allowing for private enrichment by agents in the bowels of the bureaucracy, is common to many countries where politics operate in the shadow of a coup. Outside of the armed forces, various semi-private banking and brokerage companies that manage the virtual state monopoly on cotton production cooperate with, but exist independently of, the party apparatus.

In a sense, all of these are good examples of perpetually-lived organizations. It is possible, in theory, for them to function autonomously of each other.[[44]](#endnote-44) Hale, while employing the master-metaphor of a pyramid, emphasizes the possibility of states with multiple pyramids.[[45]](#endnote-45) Different cadres sometimes control functionally autonomous ministries, supported by different social groups with different agendas, which serve as a check on each other’s ambitions. In the post-Soviet republics that have evolved toward open access orders, the process of getting there is very messy and has involved years of government gridlock, dominated by bureaucratic turf wars and inter-service rivalry. These are not the autonomous civil society groups that North, Wallis, and Weingast had in mind, though in a very weak personalist state like Tajikistan they may be the closest available (partial) substitute.[[46]](#endnote-46) The obvious limitation is that Rahmon could selectively dismiss anyone from his post at any time, probably leaving no mechanism for the aggrieved party to redress the harm.

Another potential source of opposition to the state could be a mass political party with deep social roots and ties to religious institutions. The Islamic Revival Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) has tried to serve as this kind of focal point for opposition to Rahmon. It has not succeeded, as Epkenhans documents.[[47]](#endnote-47) Since the 1997 General Peace Accord, the party has strategically subordinated its religious message to a broader focus on socioeconomic development and adherence to democratic principles, but has nevertheless been unable to shed its association with the civil war (and so-called “Wahhabism”). As such, the IRPT has been marginalized in contemporary Tajik politics. It is not unreasonable to suggest that a future party could succeed where the IRPT failed, mobilizing support from a broad constituency outside Rahmon’s patronage network. This kind of institution is frankly much more in line with the historical processes that inform North, Wallis, and Weingast’s analysis.[[48]](#endnote-48) In Tajikistan, a great deal of missionary work is conducted by Christian and Islamic groups. A variety of practitioners dedicated to shaping the ground “beneath” and “around” the state (through, for example, the social provision of literacy) will continue to ply their trade. In the best-case scenario, this charity

will contribute to processes of development and democratization. In the worst case, sermonizing could generate disruptive behaviors that threaten Tajik social order. This threat is taken seriously by military representatives of Russia and NATO member countries. [[49]](#endnote-49) Technical assistance for various tasks associated with threat assessment—such as scrutinizing the writings of roving transnational clerics using sophisticated computer-enabled tools—will probably continue.[[50]](#endnote-50)

What about NGOs and other familiar faces of civil society? Many in the West imagine themselves to be allies of Tajik civil society. They — we? —earnestly hope to chart a path to peaceful social change. The structural constraints that are likely to inhibit democratic movements within Tajikistan are daunting, to be sure, and it is easy to be cynical. Still, a potential check on Rahmon’s power could emerge from the social milieu of Tajiks who work in concert with the Western development community. Western charitable assistance has grown exponentially since the mid-1990s, when the United Nations Mission first opened its doors. As an empirical matter, subcontractors drawing European salaries create much of the demand for the high-end services in Dushanbe’s economy.[[51]](#endnote-51) Many important kinds of social work are conducted only with generous charity by non-Tajiks, administered through groups such as the Aga Khan Development Foundation. Their offices employ much of what passes for the Tajik middle class.

At the time of this writing, the few thousand English-speaking Tajiks who have managed to engage in this economy are much better-off than most of their counterparts who have not. As a sociological phenomenon, there is no question that a self-funded part of Tajik society is in practice independent of the state. The constant turnover of personnel in the NGO community, in combination with the consistent messaging and programmingof a liberal agenda by Western embassies, suggests that this community is, in fact, a seed-bed of perpetually-lived organizations. Tajiks have been relatively marginal actors within the community thus far, but when one counts all the embassy drivers, the fixers, the people who have drifted from one project to another, a substantial portion of the indigenous Dushanbe economy is sustained by a source of wealth largely external to the government.[[52]](#endnote-52)

The main problem is that the Tajik state still has a clear comparative advantage in terms of its ability to engage in violence against this group. There is no mechanism of constraint or redress for Tajik citizens accused of espionage, and that is a risk inherent in hitching one’s future to a foreign-funded community.[[53]](#endnote-53) Power, and especially the use of violence, are effectively monopolized in the hands of agents of the Tajik state.[[54]](#endnote-54)

Is Tajik Military Centralization Real or Illusory?

The Soviet Union was an exceptional example of a “natural state” that achieved full control over its professional military.[[55]](#endnote-55) It bequeathed to its successor states, including Tajikistan, a respected military hierarchy and many other institutions that could be resuscitated. Though the previous section documents a number of ways in which Tajikistan’s Soviet inheritance may impede the country from transitioning toward open access, there is no denying that the Soviet Union built a hierarchically-organized “segment state” in pre-independence Tajikistan.[[56]](#endnote-56) Tajiks are a self-regarding political community, and that community was “born strong” in important respects: it was institutionalized with maps, censuses, museums, elementary school curricula, ministries of interior and defense, and so on. Even if the state in Tajikistan today does not enjoy a full monopoly of violence (which. following Weber, would imply that only uniformed agents of the state would be permitted to be violence specialists), Tajikistan is closer to this doorstep condition than it is to the other two.[[57]](#endnote-57)

This is remarkable. The utter disintegration of the Tajik state in the early 1990s, and the fact that so many armed groups integrated into the Tajik state without first disarming in the late 1990s, did not augur well for a consolidated military apparatus twenty-five years after independence. If the constitution of Tajikistan is understood not as words on a piece of paper, but more as a set of well-understood “rules of Rahmon’s game,” then violence within the borders of Tajikistan is as monopolized as anyone could reasonably hope for a low-capacity, mountainous state in such a destitute neighborhood.[[58]](#endnote-58) As policy professionals have come to understand the term in the first two decades of the 21st century, state strength as a variable meant to capture a state’s demonstrated ability to achieve efficacious counterinsurgency outcomes (measured as a high probability of killing terrorists or deterring terrorist attacks without collateral civilian damage) per unit of foreign aid invested in the country. This has something to do with military professionalism and something to do with an ability to extract granular targeting information from compromised civilian populations. By this measure, Tajikistan has a great deal more state capacity than other countries facing Muslim insurgencies with the same per-capita level of GDP. Other than historical inheritance, where did Tajik state capacity come from?

The answer to this question, asked in this way, has already been alluded to: much of what passes for post-independence state capacity in Tajikistan was probably initially *surrogate* state capacity. Russian, Uzbek, and American special forces sit behind the throne, albeit at some distance and with plenty of plausible deniability. The Tajik state’s comparative advantage in domestic intelligence collection over places like Yemen and Somalia comes from the fact that Tajikistan, unlike many post-colonial states that experienced civil war, was never permitted to fully fail by the great powers. Having observed the Popular Front for Tajikistan’s capacity to impose its military will on the country, Moscow intervened after domestic processes gave the Kremlin a local agent that shielded Moscow from terminal liability. But once they had such an agent, intervene they did. Propping up the state apparatus provided a kind of carcass that the warlords could feed upon and the gradual introduction of humanitarian assistance from the West put more meat on that carcass. But selective assassinations and training for border patrols kept the Panj river as a symbolic border between the CIS security community and the belt of state failure that stretches from Afghanistan to Somalia. Russia did not try to do very much more, but what they did do provided an anchor for political order. A personalist military apparatus calcified around the geopolitical certainty provided by great power collusion.

Though the civil war has been formally settled for two decades at the time of this writing, Tajikistan’s military continues to receive a great deal of security assistance to deal with potential internal uprisings. Virtually all of the residual violence that has taken place since the early 1990s —Khudoiberdiyev’s multiple attempts to destabilize the polity in the mid-late 1990s, the abortive Rasht Valley insurgency, the Nazarzoda uprising—have had domestic origins. The military must be strong enough to put these rebellions down. The most dangerous kind of rebellion would probably come from within the military itself. Like other personalist rulers, Rahmon is probably far more concerned about the possibility of a Tajik military that is too strong and confident, with the capacity and confidence to execute a military coup, than he is about a weak Tajik military incapable of securing its own borders.[[59]](#endnote-59) Rahmon has proven himself to be an adept survivor, with sophisticated instincts for managing divide-and-rule strategies, keeping different coalitions balanced against one another. With the burden of conscription quotas and the prestige of military ascendency distributed around the different regions of the country, this is surely a simpler coup-proofing task than managing the chaos of the 1990s.

The state security apparatus also needs to be capable of tagging and tracking members of the Tajik underclass who are young or crazy enough to consider revolution viable and/or flirt with confrontational forms of violent activism. This task is not very expensive, and it can be accomplished by personalist machinery. It is also something that Tajikistan will continue to have the support of outside powers to achieve, especially if there is credible evidence of an Islamic ideological backbone to the oppositional activist projects. ISIL, al-Qaeda, Iran: these are all “power words” when it comes to attracting the attention of foreign security bureaucracy and a certain kind of international aid. Indeed, under such circumstances, “state weakness” may not even be a bad thing from the perspective of the small circle of elites that surround Rahmon, *even if* it engenders social distress that provides a core of grievance that feeds insurgency (which can, perversely, bring more Salafists to social prominence, creating more evidence of the need for foreign aid, etc.). Rahmon’s family and inner circle are well-positioned to take a first cut of foreign aid as it flows in and best-positioned to profit from foreign-assisted processes of economic liberalization.[[60]](#endnote-60)

With this in mind, it is worth taking seriously the possibility that military centralization is somewhat theatrical.[[61]](#endnote-61) The Tajik military is no more a bastion of professionalism than any other state military in the region, and this is not exactly a neighborhood distinguished by janissary competence. It may be a mistake to pretend that foreign analysts have more knowledge of Tajikistan’s state security services than they actually do, and to overstate the efficacy of “capacity building assistance” aimed at linking donor constituencies in Western embassies to members of the Tajik state security services.[[62]](#endnote-62) As long as the great powers worry about Tajik terrorists or refugees, aid flows to Tajikistan in large quantities. When they see Tajikistan as a man-made humanitarian disaster and drug trafficking route, aid slows to a trickle.

With those caveats clearly stated, this doorstep condition appears to be much closer to practical fulfillment than the other two. One out of three is better than zero out of three. The possibility of militarized political fragmentation in Tajikistan will not be discounted by the great powers, especially Russia, since Tajikistan’s history suggests social order could unravel with great speed. If foreign support is critical to propping up Tajik military centralization, and there is ashared understanding that state disintegration would impose real costs on the great powers (in the form of refugee flows, Salafi terrorist pockets threatening to Russia, and the like), it can create an extortion dynamic. Tajik leaders can play games of chicken, constantly claiming to be hovering on the brink of political disintegration and then begging for assistance to put down rebellion. This may be the reason that many Russian security service personnel, when talking about the Tajik military, become visibly disgusted and spontaneously describe them as “thieves.”

Hobbesian Neopatrimonialism

Thomas Hobbes was a naturalist. Though he is traditionally claimed by the disciplines of political science and philosophy, even a casual reading of *Leviathan* reveals a keen observer of human psychology. The central empirical claim in *Leviathan* is that the state of nature—violent anarchy in which death is a real and ever-present possibility—is not only frightening, but that it *ought* to be *more* frightening than life in an orderly state, even if that state is authoritarian and arbitrary in its exercise of power. [[63]](#endnote-63)

The thesis of this chapter is that Hobbes’ observations are relevant to understanding the roots of political legitimacy in contemporary Tajikistan. The legitimacy of Rahmon’s personalist regime is difficult to untangle from his role in settling the war. All Tajik citizens are expected to feel grateful to him, personally, that the war is over. And perhaps—just perhaps—a plurality of Tajiks *are* authentically grateful. Perhaps Hobbes accurately described a typical psychological response to violent civil war. A variety of internal mechanisms could explain why exposure to violence could keep populations politically docile for decades after the guns go quiet.

More than any other country in the region, the legitimacy of Tajikistan’s regime rests quite explicitly on the claim that the alternative to Rahmon’s personalist rule is violent civil war. Viewpoints are coalescing around a particular hegemonic interpretation of Tajik social history: the war was a failed attempt by radicals from traditionally under-represented groups to seize the state, and this attempt was defeated militarily by Russian-backed conservatives, who have since used the war as cover to kill their political enemies by branding them as Islamic terrorists. Most people living in Tajikistan cannot help but be aware that Emomali Rahmon—the “founder of peace”—was personally involved in the violent processes of war termination.[[64]](#endnote-64) Today, a handful of families dominate senior posts in government and control state-owned enterprises; all owe their positions to Rahmon personally. Little effort is made to deny or whitewash this fact. Indeed, it is not clear that it would be safe for a member of Tajikistan’s Academy of Sciences to articulate a counter-hegemonic interpretation of the Tajik Civil War, since the version that reinforces the Hobbesian legitimacy of the regime is so politically useful.

There is also not really an offshore constituency within the academic or policy communities of the great powers that might attempt to “re-imagine” the Tajik Civil War as a violent power-grab by Kulobis at the expense of other social groups. Indeed, to the extent that it undermines “order first” policies, this kind of critical approach is recognized to be counterproductive. It is difficult, by extension, to credibly threaten to make foreign aid conditional—and certainly not conditional on “good governance” reforms that might democratize politics, empower opposition voices to call for redistribution and accountability, or the like. Russian and American policy professionals cannot agree on very much, but when it comes to Tajikistan there is a great deal of interest convergence: *“Better the devil we know…”*

Hobbes’ insights may provide the most parsimonious answer to the puzzle of why so many of these powerless subjects seem willing to tolerate what amounts to a kind of emergent monarchism: *Hobbesian Neopatrimonialism*. It is a kind of authority that rests on the claim that life without a sovereign is horrible beyond imagination, a claim that has face validity for many Tajiks. This provides an anchor of legitimacy which is subsequently buttressed by the post-Soviet institutional inheritance. For those citizens of Tajikistan old enough to have had direct experience of the violence of the war, the Hobbesian vision of the state of nature is surely credible. Those who are too young to have experienced it are bombarded with reminders of the violence in schools and on state media. It does not take much, then, for the creation of a sovereign to make the situation much better. Moreover, the worse citizens expect the state of nature to be, the less likely they are to consider rebellion. And the less a sovereign fears rebellion, the more he will feel empowered to enrich himself at the expense of his citizens.[[65]](#endnote-65) In principle, as Wagner notes, the sovereign has as much to fear from rebellion as the citizens, since he would be plunged into the state of nature along with everyone else.[[66]](#endnote-66) This is the basis for Hobbes’ persistent insistence that “the passions that incline men to peace” are as binding on a reasoning sovereign as they are on his subjects. In practice, with conquest by foreign armies hard to imagine in contemporary Central Asia, there are few discernable disadvantages to rigging the electoral game in favor of Rahmon’s personal network, looting the state, and selectively distributing money and life opportunities to buy off potential opponents.

And this is indeed what we observe. Rahmon has learned that he can survive politically by weakening the state and centralizing power around himself. To the great frustration of foreign intelligence analysts, academics, and World Bank auditors, he has learned that the best way to avoid a coup is to make himself indispensable, and a good way to do this is to keep important details in his head rather than in institutions. It is easy to blame the face of the franchise when things do not go well. But it is not clear that a different leader would have been able to create rule of law by fiat, nor that a change in the overall system or the personality at the top would lift more Tajiks out of poverty faster. Daily life in Tajikistan is relatively orderly and institutionalized in a way that might be familiar to citizens of Kazakstan – power over daily life is vested in bureaucracies, but social mobilization that might challenge the power pyramid is not tolerated. Rakhmon has wrapped himself in the blanket of nationalism: whatever his flaws of character, Tajiks understand that he is fundamentally one of them, not an agent of the Uzbeks or the Russians or anyone else. His particular management style is not good for the rule of law, nor is it likely to produce perpetually-lived opposition organizations that might challenge the state. There is scant evidence that Rahmon weighs any of this against his core value: social order.

The reason that closed access orders are such an enduring form of government is that the fundamentals do not change very much, which allows everyone to go about their daily lives in a predictable way. So long as Rahmon’s health holds, I would be surprised if the observations in this chapter became obsolete anytime soon. Things do not change much in Tajikistan.

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1. In November, the parliament also approved changes to the penal code that made it a crime punishable by 5 years in prison to insult the “Leader of the Nation.” [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) did not monitor the May 2016 referendum. Though various observers have reported widespread fraud and manipulation of voter tallies in Tajik elections since independence, I am not aware of any study that convincingly quantifies the extent to which Tajiks themselves believethe vote totals in Tajik electoral exercises. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1965), 408-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. John Heathershaw, “Post-Conflict Tajikistan: The Politics of Peacebuilding and the Emergence of Legitimate Order,” *Central Asian Studies* 1 (May 2009). This exercise inevitably involves making psychological suppositions about others based on extended personal observation. A self-assessment of the kinds of biases that permeated my observations can be found in Jesse Driscoll, *Warlords and Coalition Politics in Post-Soviet States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 15-23. For useful discussions of how ethnographic methods contribute to the study of political legitimacy and democratic practices in semi-authoritarian settings, see Katherine Cramer Walsh, “Scholars as Citizens: Studying Public Opinion through Ethnography,” in *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power,* ed. Edward Schatz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), especially 177-80, and Lisa Wedeen, “Ethnography as Interpretive Enterprise,” in *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power,* ed. Edward Schatz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 87-90. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 13. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511575839. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. North, Wallis, and Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders*, 151. Note that the transition to an open access order is not guaranteed, even if all three conditions obtain; many closed access orders persevere for long periods of time on the doorstep. There is no teleology. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Henry E. Hale, *Patronal Politics: Eurasian Regime Dynamics in Comparative Perspective*, Problems of International Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 9-10. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Alisher Ilkhamov, “Neopatrimonialism, Interest Groups and Patronage Networks: The Impasses of the Governance System in Uzbekistan,” *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 1 (March 2006): 65-84. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Fearon and Laitin note: “The political and military technology of insurgency will be favored, and thus civil war made more likely, when potential rebels face…[a] newly independent state, which suddenly loses the coercive backing of the former imperial power and whose military capabilities are new and untested.” James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 81. doi:10.1017/S0003055403000534. See also 79-82 generally. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. A formalization of this logic can be found in James D. Fearon, “Why Do Some Civil Wars Last So Much Longer than Others?” *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no. 3 (May 2004): 275-301. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. At least 40 percent of Tajikistan’s state budget (often more) had been filled by subsidies from Moscow—so how would the country adjust? Would Tajikistan continue to be ruled by cadres from Leninobod or would southerners or mountain elites be permitted to rotate into positions of real power? What would become of the complex borders of the Ferghana Valley, which were obviously never meant to be interstate chokepoints? Would Bukhara and Samarkand resume their traditional role as Tajik cultural poles? Might borders be redrawn (perhaps peacefully, as in Czechoslovakia) to make it so? [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Epkenhans presents what is probably the most rigorously researched micro-study of the processes that produced the war, adding vital individuated empirical data to complement previous sweeping macro-analyses of ideology and institutions provided by Dudoignon (1997) and Roy (2000). See Tim Epkenhans, *The Origins of the Civil War in Tajikistan: Nationalism, Islamism, and Violent Conflict in Post-Soviet Space* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016); Stéphane Dudoignon, “Political Parties and Forces in Tajikistan, 1989-1993,” in *Tajikistan: The Trials of Independence* (New York: Routledge, 1997),52-85; Roy, Olivier. *The New Central Asia: Geopolitics and the Birth of Nations*. New York: New York University Press, 2000. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Shirin Akiner, Mohammad-Reza Djalili, and Frédéric Gare, *Tajikistan: The Trials of Independence* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 622. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Kathleen Collins, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Lawrence Markowitz, *State Erosion: Unlootable Resources and Unruly Elites in Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. In mid-November 1992, through a process that self-consciously re-appropriated the institutional and electoral machinery that Tajiks inherited from Soviet times, Rahmonov was hand-picked by fellow Kulobi “Baba” Sangak Safarov, a prominent member of the PFT, to represent their home district of Dangara. After three different national rulers had been forced to flee the capital city amidst state collapse, the 16th session of the Supreme Soviet convened in the unusual location of Arbob Kolkhoz, a collective farm on the outskirts of Leninobod. Security at the meeting was guaranteed by Safarov. Socially conservative deputies from the northern region of Khojand and the southern region of Kulob were over-represented at the meeting, but there was a quorum. On November 18, 1992, 186 of the 193 deputies present elected Emomali Rahmonov as Chairman of the Supreme Soviet. See Epkenhans, *Origins of the Civil War*, 342. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Quoted in Driscoll, *Warlords and Coalition Politics,* 76 (footnote 84). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. In the mid-1990s, the Afghan warlord Shah Massoud was probably the most famous and popular Tajik alive, and the risk that he could bring the Afghan civil war to Tajikistan by relocating his soldiers to the city of Dushanbe and declaring himself president was real. If Iranian or Afghan-backed guerillas had been able to use the impenetrable Pamiri Mountains as a base to spread war into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, perhaps by stirring ethnic hatred in the Ferghana Valley, the human costs might have been massive. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. According to Nakaya, World Bank and IMF professionals estimate that the per capita gross domestic product of Tajikistan today is a small fraction—perhaps as low as one-tenth—of what it was in the late Soviet period. Sumie Nakaya, “Aid and Transition from a War Economy to an Oligarchy in Post-War Tajikistan,” *Central Asian Survey* 28, no. 3 (December 2009): 259-73. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. If one asked whether warlords with Islamic sympathies should be allowed to manage the Ministry of Defense, the answer from Moscow or Washington would probably be “absolutely not.” If one asked which warlord should be allowed to be the “silent partner” in a certain hotel-casino investment, provide bazaar security, or control rural drug transit rents through Eastern Badakshon, the answer from even extremely-well educated elites in Moscow or Washington in the mid-1990s would probably have been “Who cares—and where is this ‘Eastern Badakshon,’ anyway?” [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Statistical analysis of warlord biographies suggests that the winners in this tournament were not all Kulobis, nor were they commanders with hundreds of men under arms, nor were they more likely to be PFT representatives than incorporated rebel commanders that had merged their forces with security services. Having a background in Soviet security services was one of the most statistically-robust predictors of the length of time a warlord “survived” in the Tajik state. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. The phrase “used violence to limit entry into the area of real political power” is perhaps too antiseptic for the processes being described, which, in plain speech, often involved the murder and/or mutilation of the innocent family members of political aspirants. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. See Stina Torjensen and S. Neil MacFarlane, “R Before D: The Case of Post Conflict Reintegration in Tajikistan,” *Conflict, Security & Development* 7, no. 2 (May 2007): 311-32. In Driscoll, *Warlords and Coalition Politics*, the process these authors describe is modeled formally as a two-stage game. In the first stage, warlords fought one another for the right to install a president. In the second stage, once a figurehead president had been installed, a Russian-led peace process concentrated all the fragmented violent social capital in the state security forces, without really disarming anyone. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Then-member of the United Nations Tajikistan Observation Mission (UNTOP), interview by Jesse Driscoll, Tajikistan, July 22, 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. After Ghaffor Mirzoyev fell out of favor in 2005 and his assets were seized, it was revealed that he was the owner of over 30 apartments and buildings in downtown neighborhoods, a bank, a casino, and more. He was a rich man compared to most Tajiks, to be sure. That being said, his total assets—which his family has not retained, since they were expropriated—pale next to the hundreds of millions of dollars, all liquid and hard to trace, documented by Cooley and Heathershaw in what they call Rahmon’s “slush fund.” Alexander Cooley and John Heathershaw, *Dictators Without Borders: Power and Money in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 101. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Collins traces the punitive use of anti-corruption drives back through Soviet history, emphasizing that Tajikistan was largely spared the Brezhnev-era purges in the early 1980s (Collins, *Clan Politics*). The first and most prominent political prosecution for corruption was that of Abdulmalik Abdullojonov after he was defeated by Rahmon at the ballot box in the 1994 election. More recently, Zaid Saidov, a former minister of industry who attempted to establish a political party, was arrested and sentenced to 51 years in prison. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. North, Wallis, and Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders*. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Partnerships between businessmen, whether the partnership is based on spot contracts or long-term investments, are not perpetually lived in the same way, nor are non-institutionalized religious ministries organized around the charismatic authority of an individual person. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Hale, *Patronal Politics*. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. See, for instance, the ethnographic observations of behaviors consistent with “father knows best” beliefs documented by Liu. The states of post-Soviet Eurasia cluster at the bottom of cross-national indices of democratic quality. Morgan Y. Liu, “Recognizing the Khan: Authority, Space, and Political Imagination Among Uzbek Men in Post-Soviet Osh, Kyrgyzstan” (PhD diss. from the University of Michigan, 2002), ch. 4, 147-202; Morgan Y. Liu, *Under Solomon's Throne* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), ch. 6, 159-65 and 190-96. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. This was described informally in the previous chapter. For a more in-depth formal treatment see Driscoll, *Warlords and Coalition Politics*, Chapter 2, especially 36-7, as well as the formal propositions in Appendix 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Weber, *From Max Weber*. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. None of the states of Central Asia are consolidated democracies. Exposure to large-scale Hobbesian anarchy was not part of the formative experience of post-independence Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, or Turkmen in the same way that it has been for Tajiks. Episodic violence such as the Osh riots, the Tulip Revolution, or the Andizjan events do not remotely compare in scope or scale to Tajikistan’s civil war. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Pauline Jones Luong, “Institutional Change and Political Continuity in Post-Soviet Central Asia: Power, Perceptions and Pacts,” Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. The Tajik government seems to have ambitions to do more when it comes to media control but lacks capacity. Broad ambitions to curtail the freedom of information have been articulated. As state capacity grows and “best practices” evolve in its authoritarian neighbors, especially China and Uzbekistan, Tajikistan will likely model those practices. Since it is a crime to “slander” the President or insult officials, self-censorship is required by journalists. The Nations in Transit 2016 report includes mention of a law requiring all internet providers to “provide their services to clients via the government-controlled Single Communications Nexus…[allowing] the government to monitor all communications.” Freedom House, “Nations in Transit 2016,” https://freedomhouse.org/report/nations-transit/nations-transit-2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. John Heathershaw, “Peacebuilding as Practice: Discourses from Post-Conflict Tajikistan,” *International Peacekeeping* 14, no. 2 (2007): 219-36. Elections are a kind of competitive tournament for the benefit of Rahmon and other regime elites, observing which local party officials are most capable of turning out the vote. For non-elites, they are a kind of national festival of participating in the will of the ruler. Everyone sees everyone else voting. Votes may not be counted, but a lot of people vote, which may somehow substitute for authentically contested democracy in terms of providing social order. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. The voting numbers from the first paragraph of this essay are meant to impress *you*, dear reader. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Markowitz, *State Erosion*. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Since the political economy of cotton in the Uzbek and Tajik states function in much the same way, Markowitz uses the comparison cases to hold many structural variables constant. Uzbekistan has sufficient concentrations of wealth to lubricate the system such that rent-seeking has a more “open” feel, with co-optation of rural elites by the center. A nearly identical system in relatively resource-poor post-independence Tajikistan led to unstable competition for scarce state resources and, ultimately, war. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. See Edward Lemon’s chapter in this volume. While there are diaspora opposition groups such as G24, Vatandor, and the IRPT, they are rotating dissident personality platforms and tend to be divided. None of them articulate clear alternatives to Rahmon, since a challenge would require a focal figurehead spearheading opposition within the territory of Tajikistan—a dangerous proposition. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. On the transformation of social values, see, for instance, Carles Boix, “Democracy, Development, and the International System,” *American Political Science Review* 105, no. 4 (November 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Driscoll, *Warlords and Coalition Politics,* ch. 2 and 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. I base this speculation on the following thought experiment: If Rahmon were to die unexpectedly and suddenly in his sleep, would these organizations disintegrate? Surely not. Despite the very tight centralization of power in the office of the executive and the obvious importance of blood ties to managing real politics, the peaceful experiences of both Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan after the deaths of the head of state suggest that the metaphor of monarchy is just a metaphor. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Hale, *Patronal Politics*. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. North, Wallis, and Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders*. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Epkenhans, *Origins of the Civil War.* [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. North, Wallis, and Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders.* [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. There is a crude complementarity between Russian and American interests when it comes to Tajikistan, since the great powers want, above all, for Salafi Jihadists not to gain a foothold anywhere in the region. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. The decision in 2016 to require all mosques in Dushanbe to install surveillance cameras is just one of many reminders to Tajik citizens that the state takes an active interest in controlling the content of religious ideology. My speculation is that in the medium to long term, the extent to which the spread of “opposition Islam” in Tajikistan is seen by Western analysts as an existential threat will depend a great deal on diplomatic relations between Iran and the West. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Between roughly 1996 and 2004, the amount of foreign assistance that flowed into Tajikistan was larger—often much larger—than the operating budget of the Tajik state. At the time of this writing, foreign aid flows have diminished relative to the state budget, such that the ratio is closer to 1:4. This is still a lot of money relative to indigenous sources of wealth. In addition to the embassies themselves, there are dozens of NGO grant subcontractors and literally hundreds of full-time Western staff—mostly drawing Western salaries on two to three year “soft money” contracts—who occupy a high social position in Dushanbe. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. The rhetoric that comes from this community hews to the idea that peaceful social change must come from the next generation of Tajik civil society. But is it likely that these kinds of institutions will “seed” social change? It is difficult to say. Optimists can recite well-rehearsed scripts drawing on the experience of the Rose Revolution in Georgia. Pessimists can recite equally well-rehearsed scripts based on the discouraging experience of neighboring Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, or Tajikistan itself. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. The Law on Public Associations was amended in 2015 to require all NGOs receiving any foreign funding to document the amount and source to the Ministry of Justice in order to “prevent foreign grants from supporting terrorists and extremists.” Freedom House, “Nations in Transition, 7 (footnote 17). [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. One might caricature the liberal attitudes of Western development professionals as utopian, but my experience suggests most are conservative realists who understand this. Violent social change is not the mission. Democracy may be a good long-term outcome, but no one wants to be responsible for encouraging their Tajik employees or subcontractors to engage in behaviors that might risk their safety. There is a deep appreciation that their Tajik friends are like hostages. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. North, Wallis, and Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders*, 153. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Philip G. Roeder, *Where Nation-States Come From: Institutional Change in the Age of Nationalism* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Weber, *From Max Weber*. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Weber’s monopoly is an ideal unattainable in reality. Even in very well-governed OECD countries, this ideal is violated by the existence of criminal fraternities, martial arts academies, and veterans associations. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. This has been a common pattern since the Second World War, as documented in James Quinlivan, “Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East,” *International Security* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 131-65. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. For evidence consistent with this theory, see Cooley and Heathershaw, *Dictators Without Borders*, especially p.11 and Chapter 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. I am not sure that anyone can credibly claim to know what incentives drive decision - making by regional authorities in the Pamiri mountains—not Rahmon, not the Russian Embassy, and certainly not British or American academics, even if they make time to visit Dushanbe once or twice a year. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to review all the kinds of security assistancefrom Russian, European, and American sources. Suffice it to say that the war on terror is unlikely to be a passing phase. There is an ever-evolving frontier of best practices associated with the cat-and-mouse games of electronic surveillance (in an effort to triangulate actionable facts). I would not want to be responsible for sorting the “good guys” from the “bad apples” in the Tajik security sector. Fearon and Laitin (“Neotrusteeship and the Problem of Weak States,” *International Security* 28, no. 4 (Spring 2004): 5-43) describe consensus among the great powers, and especially the Permanent Five members of the United Nations Security Council that the negative externalities of state failure in weak states can threaten their interests. The ruling class of Tajik elites knowing this, have no incentive to break the cycle of dependence or build sustainable institutions. And there may be no easy answer to this moral hazard dynamic. Charles Tilly is famous for his aphorism that “war makes the state and the state makes war” (Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1992* (Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1991)). Tilly’s argument is that selection effects in the international system—essentially well-founded fears of conquest—produced the modern states of Europe. This authority to tax and conscript citizens has been much, much harder to sustain since the Second World War, since sovereign states almost never disappear today. See Tanisha Fazal, *State Death: The Politics and Geography of Conquest, Occupation, and Annexation*. Princeton University Press, 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 260. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Epkenhans, *Origins of the Civil War*, 354-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. This is exactly why Hobbes’ most famous critics, Locke and Rousseau, devoted so much attention to the narrow empirical question whether the lived experience of state of nature (among tribal peoples residing in North America, for instance) might not be more benign. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. R. Harrison Wagner, *War and the State: The Theory of International Politics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 72. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)