**TITLE: HOBBESIAN NEOPATRIMONIALISM**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

In May of 2016, a referendum approved 41 changes to Tajikistan’s constitution. Voter turnout was reported to be 94.5%, with 92% of voters approving the referendum. The content of the alterations was impossible to misunderstand: the goal was to legally institutionalize the cult of personality that has emerged around Emomalii Rakhmon. He was ceremonially declared “founder of peace” and “leader of the nation.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Though the constitution had already been altered once to allow Rakhmon to continue ruling until 2020, new changes allow the 64-year old to continue to serve as president indefinitely. The age limit for running for president was also altered, presumably so that if Rakhmon were to perish unexpectedly, the mantle of the presidency could pass smoothly to his son in the style of a constitutional monarchy. These changes were transparently designed to make a single family the focal point for political power. They were passed through an institutionalized, formal, and superficially democratic process. These new measures to centralize personalist power may represent the popular will of the citizens of Tajikistan. Or perhaps many people turned out because they knew they were expected to watch each other vote. It is very difficult to determine what high levels of participation in voting exercises mean in authoritarian settings like Tajikistan.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Samuel Huntington (1965) 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]](#footnote-3) Political order is provided by a kind of hybridization of institutions, blending traditional authority (loyalty to a monarch, “father figure,” or *khan*) and the bureaucratic authority of modern institutional counterparts (colloquially called a “single party” or “hegemonic party” systems – a polity where formal processes of contestation exist, dominated by “safe districts” for the incumbent party). Rather than flog Tajiks for failing to live up to an idealized democratic standard, following Heathershaw (2009) this chapter attempts to locate the basis of Rakhmon’s political legitimacy in the lived experience of Tajiks.[[4]](#footnote-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 (2009:13) call a “closed access society” or “the natural state”:

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” 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 are the dominant form of human social organization for most of recorded history. They emphasize that a 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 a closed access to an open access order. 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 (151).[[5]](#footnote-5)

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. As shall be argued in the conclusion of this chapter, this is not necessarily a normatively bad thing. State legitimacy 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 argument, which has an element of explicit extortion, is that even if there were consensus that an open access order were 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 sense. *Hobbesian Neopatrimonialism* is the best way to understand the roots of the broad-based social legitimacy that Rakhmon enjoys.

What is meant by *Hobbesian Neopatrimonialism*? The component parts of the mass noun 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, originally conceptualized by Max Weber (1953), is a traditional form of government with a single “big man” male figure acting as the universal patron at the top of the (then tribal, now nation-state) power pyramid – the terminal enforcer of property rights, the final judge above which there can be no appeal. Hale (2014:9-10) calls this *patronal politics*:

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.

The prefix “*neo*” – new – is here meant to reference that patrimonial government systems in the modern world system (post-WWII, post-decolonization) are constrained by a set of global norms that locate sovereignty with the people of a state and legitimacy with the consent of the ruled. A defining feature of todays neopatrimonialist regimes is that while all of the property with a sovereign state’s territory is *de-facto* the property of the political sovereign, his family, and a small circle of elites, there are a variety of *de jure*  institutions that give the impression that political power is institutionalized. Neopatrimonial practices, in other words, do not mean that there is not a constitution, elections, a parliament, and lip service is to the rule of law.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This chapter proceeds in sections loosely organized around analysis of the doorstep conditions in North, Wallis, and Weingast. The first summarizes the literature on the processes that produced 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 independent from the state. Distributional politics are organized around *avlod* blood ties, which are occasionally cemented by strategic marriages. The main exceptions are foreign-seeded groups that are funded by foreign charity, which even in the best of all 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 Rakhmon’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 mechanisms of centralization suggest that they depend heavily on leveraging foreign aid and a benign interstate threat environment, however. It is clear that Rakhmon has coup-proofed his regime, but it is less clear that centralized control of Tajikistan’s military by a personalist presidential apparatus has yielded the kind of professional military that tends to be associated with European state-building or benign counterinsurgency. A final section concludes.

**1. WHY WAS THERE A CIVIL WAR IN TAJIKISTAN AFTER INDEPENDENCE?**

Emomalii Rakhmonov, as he was called at the time, was not installed from the top-down by anyone – he was elevated from below by indigenous Tajik social forces. He gained control of the state apparatus of newly-independent Tajikistan amidst a brutal civil war. He was not himself a field commander, but he ascended with assistance from a variety of Tajik warlords – celebrity social actors defined by a demonstrated ability to shape and control large-scale violence. Why did Tajikistan fall prey to civil war?

The permissive cause of Tajikistan’s civil war was the disintegration of the Soviet Union which created a sudden window of state weakness.[[7]](#footnote-7) The new government inherited a discredited, bankrupt, and very weak security apparatus. State agents could not credibly commit to enforce political bargains in the future.[[8]](#footnote-8) As the tide of Russian power receded, Tajikistan was suddenly cut adrift in a very difficult neighborhood. Some, but 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 would survive and which would be discarded, and what the relative distribution of social benefits would be. With the fundamental rules of the political game up for grabs, many high-stakes questions remained.[[9]](#footnote-9) 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, and all of these countries 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 the politics that pit conservatives against new social forces? Consensus on these of details regarding Tajikistan’s civil war is much more difficult to achieve and these issues will likely remain controversial far in the future.[[10]](#footnote-10) Writing at the time of the worst violence, however, Akiner (1997:622) provided an outstanding summary statement 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.

Most accounts of the war’s outbreak emphasize three processes: deeply-embedded regional divisions within Tajik society, relatively sudden mobilization of Tajiks around high-stakes political questions (such as the role of Islam, the artificiality of the Soviet-inherited borders, and the plasticity of property rights in the Soviet-inherited 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 – *kolkhoz* and *avlod* structures, which provided a convenient heuristic for who 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 (2006) presents a variety of data demonstrating that cadres from Khojand (then Leninobod) had monopolized state positions and reported directly to either Tashkent or Moscow for decades. A few prominent families had grown especially wealthy by monopolizing political connections and 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 (2014) documents, embattled cotton-producing elites joined forces with rural criminal networks and local strongmen as the state fragmented. Voluntary village defense forces assembled into loose armies very quickly. 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 but also a great deal of support among the non-Khojandi intelligentsia. Militias targeted civilian populations throughout 1993 and 1994 to destroy the civilian base of the other side’s fighting force, especially in the rural south.

Emomalii Rakhmonov came to power in 1992, with all of this violence as a backdrop.[[11]](#footnote-11) He became the face of the franchise as PFT militias recaptured Dushanbe in the subsequent months. An election was organized a few months later to validate his authority. Reported social participation was high, even in eastern parts of the country that 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 Rakhmonov, the Yeltsin government legitimized 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 supported the opposition coalition. The brutality of the final phase of the war was stupefying, with rape, mutilation, and starvation employed. One observer famously noted, “Neither side distinguished itself by humanitarian conduct in the war; ultimately, the side that won committed more atrocities.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

The final phase was largely concluded by December of 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 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, but official records claim that the war ended with the 1997 Russian-led peace process.

Why did Russia, which was itself experiencing its own kind of state failure at the time, spend resources and political capital securing Tajikistan (and, by extension, shoring up Rakhmonov’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. To simplify the matter, 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 to infect the other states of Central Asia with toxic ideologies was terrifying.[[13]](#footnote-13) Even without the boogeyman of radical Islam, the fear that secular nationalist Tajiks living in Bukhara and Samarkand might “awaken” to a national identity and be ready to serve as fifth-columnists pushing secession from Uzbekistan was another escalation scenario. At some point the Uzbek government might have opted to just unilaterally redraw the map of Central Asia by incorporating the Tajik region of Khojand – or perhaps all of the Ferghana Valley. Revisiting borders in this way would have had unpredictable domino effects as Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan noted that their abundant oil and gas reserves could be the targeted. If millions of refugees tried to board trains and head West all at once, it would be very destabilizing. In sum, Russia asserted leadership over Tajikistan’s peace process to prevent Uzbekistan or the United Nations Security Council from doing the same. With the security of the entire region, and Russia’s role as a leader within it, potentially at stake, Tajikistan was not allowed to slide completely into Somalia-style state failure.

With the benefits of hindsight, certain aspects of civil war settlement in Tajikistan have gained clarity. 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 absolutist government centered on Rakhmonov. For another, Russian military interventions were never actually aimed at providing a framework for secure disarmament. Informally, rebel militia commanders and pro-regime paramilitary commanders were treated in largely the same way – invited to merge their militia memberships into the state without even a 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. But very few observers were *too* surprised 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. 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 many unsavory options, the worst of which was ongoing civil war.

**2. WHY NO RULE OF LAW FOR TAJIK ELITES?**

Returning to North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009): 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 the non-Tajik Soviet middle class fled, never to return. Their exodus removed the members of the polity that would have been the most likely constituency in support of the rule of law.[[14]](#footnote-14) Another important legacy of the disintegration of the Tajik state was the introduction of new elites – many of which were field commanders, whom I elsewhere call warlords – into Tajik politics. In the process of settling the war, with considerable assistance from outside actors, the inherited Soviet state apparatus was cannibalized and ministries were turned over warlords, who colluded together to guarantee social order. Gradually yoking these warlords to the state required that Rakhmonov maneuver carefully, exploiting frictions that emerged as warlords played a complex game of coalition formation against each other. Manipulation of personal favor networks and a variety of opaque deals were all, in the end, only as good as word of one person: Emomalii Rakhmonov. Today he is known as Emomalii Rakhmon, having shed the Russian suffix for the purer Persian. As the 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. Tajik warlords from different social backgrounds understood that the breakdown of the state created the possibility for them to rise above their station, and they did.

From the perspective of most Russians, one Tajik warlord was interchangeable with another. I have modeled this process formally in Driscoll (2015). Tajikistan is thus an object lesson in “R before D” – reintegration of armed groups into normal society with only very cosmetic kinds of disarmament.[[15]](#footnote-15) What happened in Tajikistan was more akin to a very costly lottery and coalition formation game. In the first stage warlords fought with each other for the right to install a president. In the second stage, once a figurehead president was installed, a Russian-led peace process incorporated all of the fragmented violent social capital into the state security forces without really disarming anyone. Behind the scenes, warlords continued to maim and kill each other for the privilege to loot the state apparatus with impunity. Some lucky warlords managed to do this for years (or decades) before being selectively purged or disappeared; some are still in the state apparatus today; unlucky or incapable warlords exited the game much more quickly.

The popular perception in Moscow was that all of the leaders in this part of the world were 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. Warlords kept their guns so that they could threaten to remove Rakhmon in a coup if he did not allow them to loot the state – so he did. Uzbeks and Russians wanted order, and they got it: Rakhmon offered them a local conservative client and face of the franchise, so long as they were willing to be realistic and allow some of their 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.[[16]](#footnote-16) Rakhmonov, bolstered by unambiguous and largely unconditional support from patrons in Moscow, 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, and, gradually, one at a time, anyone else who demonstrated excessive ambition. This process of whittling down representative of the various social forces that might have served as a check on Rakhmonov did not happen all at once; gradual maneuvering within shifting bounds of coalition politics, and walking a tightrope to very carefully 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 rights to be a violence sub-contractor for the state and enforce the law.[[17]](#footnote-17) Importantly, what kept Tajikistan politically stable though this process was not respect for the rule of law, but shared appreciation of the fact that Rakhmonov’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 Rakhmon as a kind of “front man” or hostage in the mid-1990s. But gradually, by playing one warlord against one another, the insecure and coup-prone Rakhmonov dropped the Russified suffix on his family name and transformed himself into “Rakhmon.”

How did this happen, as a practical matter? Broadly speaking, the arrangement was that the president helped 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 of Dushanbe, the largest city in the country, the house 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 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. With no 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, keeping control of the rents of the territory so long as they made formal nods to the authority of the capital and made sure 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 requiring what amounted to an extremely violent urban gang war. Many warlords died in what amounted to intra-coalitional squabbles withinthe faction that won the civil war. The winners of this violent tournament then competed in another shadowy competition for Rakhmon’s favor. In the end, 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.[[18]](#footnote-18) The violence of the war cowed Rakhmon’s political competitors, and so did the nature of the post-war order. Politics were –are – a dangerous profession in Tajikistan. The most naked political violence took place in the 1998 Parliamentary and the 1999 Presidential election cycles, in which there were so many assassinations of potential candidates that there was nearly no name but Rakhmonov’s even listed on the ballot.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Rakhmon could renege on promises of amnesty and non-prosecution to criminals if they become too ambitious. Rakhmonov gradually transformed himself from a puppet of Russia and various warlords to an unchecked executive. How he did this without being removed in a coup was a process, the details of which are beyond the scope of this chapter. Essentially, Rakhmon’s political strategy was guided by three components: he went after warlords one at a time, he transferred their wealth to other warlords as side-payments for their loyalty, and he established a reputation as a man of his word. Consider this observation of his governance style by a then-member of the United Nations Tajikistan Observation Mission (UNTOP), from an interview conducted in 2007:

Rakhmonov 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.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

The processes of civil war settlement came along with personal benefits to Rakhmon. For one thing, selective integration of former combatants allowed Rakhmon to assemble a military apparatus that could police the interior hinterlands of Tajikistan quickly and at modest cost. 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 that had been “Islamic terrorists” and “criminal insurgents” just weeks earlier. What the soldiers were offered in exchange for doing this was very 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 process of civil war settlement 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 turns out that, given the choice, almost no one wanted see the disintegration of the Tajik state and almost everyone wanted a small fiefdom within it. Rakhmonov discovered, in other words, that even in one of the poorest republics in the 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 the institutions of the Tajik state were important, however, both because it meant that Rakhmon had something material and tangible to hand out to cement transactions. Less obviously, because it allowed all of the warlords to 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 political game. Politics came to be seen as dangerous and dirty by civilians, but from the perspective of warlords bargaining with each other, the deals involving subordination to Rakhmon’s hierarchy often made all parties better off.

A third advantage of integrating the warlords that the warlords did not initially foresee is that Rakhmon eventually received personal credit, in terms of social legitimacy among Tajik civilians, as he gradually 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 that believed it was morally unnatural for rapists and murderers to hold positions with social power, respect, legal immunity, and institutionalized protection. Once the worst periods of violence passed and normalcy returned, purges occurred. First, the perceived Uzbek clients were liquidated, then the worst offenders with portfolios tied to discredited Soviet patronage structures, then the obvious sociopaths found themselves out on the street, then some of the patrons who retained and protected the sociopaths, and, finally, anyone else who tried to challenge Rakhmon. As the president, he could control the timing of cabinet reshufflings and criminal prosecutions to take advantage of shifts in the public mood. Rakhmon rode successive waves of popular opinion and doled out punishment in humiliating show trials, many Tajiks must have thought that these men got exactly what they deserved.

A fourth advantage is that buying off warlords – many of whom were men of modest means – is that it was relatively cheap to do so. Purchasing the loyalty of entire regionally-backed family networks of the old Khojandi elites required ceding positions of real power, such as governorships or control of industrial bottlenecks. Once the gun overtly entered politics and the primary actors were sometimes warlords from urban slums or rural areas, loyalty could sometimes be purchased by spot payments or 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” is 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 providing a pool of rents more than sufficient for this purpose.[[21]](#footnote-21)

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, Emomalii Rakhmon is seen as being the source of all law. The transcripts of Rakhmon’s public speeches are littered with references to *huquqi* (legal) and *consitutoni* (constitutional) norms, but these concepts has been invoked primarily to justify anti-corruption prosecutions meant to punish Rakhmon’s political enemies.[[22]](#footnote-22) There is no social expectation that the law will constrain his family or his power in any way. The law changes more-or-less according to his whim. In many respects, Emomali Rakhmon is just the kind of sovereign so familiar to Thomas Hobbes: He is the law.

**3. WHY ARE THERE SO FEW PERPETUALLY-LIVED TAJIK ORGANIZATIONS?**

North, Wallis and Weingast (2009) identify impersonal perpetually-lived organizations as a second doorstep condition. These entities provide a theoretical platform for elite bargaining. Perpetually-lived organizations that are external from, and thus potentially competitive with, the ruler highlighting the potential for circumstances under which the grasping hand of the executive could be checked and creating space for symbolic performances of opposition to state power. The authors define a perpetually lived organization as an organization with a legal existence independent of the identity of any specific individual members, such as trade unions, religious institutions, or modern corporations.[[23]](#footnote-23) Without these independent institution states can, and almost always do, manipulate individual people – even powerful people – with either positive incentives (e.g., buying them off with prestigious jobs that include 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 untouched by the state. Few indigenous civil society organizations meet these criteria, and none are capable of challenging to the state, even symbolically. Mosque networks are organized around charismatic imams. There are family and *avlod* networks, providing the social capital for militia formation and warlordism in the 1990s, and pooling resources to send promising children to school in the hopes of joining the bureaucracy of the *nomenklatura*. Business networks, both legitimate or clandestine, are also almost always based around families. The principals are just men of different ages, easily coopted or coerced.

What is observed instead? The institutional inheritance of Tajikistan is hard-wired for what Hale (2014) observes across Eurasia as “patronal politics” – a kind of 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) that organize political life in the polity. Levels of personalism vary, but at the extreme ends of the Eurasian spectrum, like Tajikistan, we find leaders empowered to dole out life opportunities more or less according to their whim. [[24]](#footnote-24) Political success in this setting often requires that an entrepreneur make himself (for it is usually a man) noticed and then get co-opted by the president’s machine. There is very little room at the top and it is a steep and irreversible fall for those that fall from favor. Various social forces – even armed actors who could in principle organize a military coup – come to calculate that they cannot do better for themselves or their families than playing by the rules.[[25]](#footnote-25) In the social order that is observed, what Weber (1953) would call “traditional authority” and “bureaucratic authority” sit comfortably nested atop one another. 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.

However, since these practices are observed elsewhere in the region, in neighboring countries that did not experience civil war, the civil war cannot be the whole story. [[26]](#footnote-26) A deeper cultural logic may be 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 had internalized, in the words of Jones-Luong (2002:2), “a social contract in which society offered the state political quiescence in exchange for cradle-to-grave welfare.” These cultural habits seem to have persevered, despite the manifest absence of social services in post-independence Tajikistan.

The quiescence has always been easiest to observe in rural areas, where 70% 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 do not dirty themselves with politics.[[27]](#footnote-27) To the extent that rural people stay engaged 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 concordance with the springtime *Navruz* holiday. The television had just one channel, and it played patriotic songs, and songs of peace. Rakhmon’s face kept appearing on the screen. I knew with certainty that if it were not for Rakhmon the lights would still be off. I am certain that the family I was living with understood this the same way.

Every few years, popular voting exercises – with limited competition – reinforce legitimacy of the order-producing party that could hardly be better designed to demonstrate quiescence. The spectacle has been described as a “ritual of consent” (Heathershaw 2007).[[28]](#footnote-28) Elections have never served the function of providing a mechanism of accountability for Rakhmon. Everyone has known since the mid-1990s that no challenger will be allowed to remove him from power and many suspect results are fabricated. Still, evidence of compliant rural voting behaviors on a massive scale allows Rakhmon to claim, plausibly, to be the choice of “his” people.[[29]](#footnote-29)

In sum: Political power outside the state is atomized. So from whence might perpetually-lived non-state institutions evolve that might be capable of competing with Rakhmon and his single-party regime? It is discouragingly difficult to speculate an answer this question.

New indigenous economic elites are not likely to form perpetually-lived corporations to challenge the state from below – not soon. 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, since they depend upon extracting rents, whether from cotton mono-cropping, drug trafficking, foreign charity, or remittances. 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 the cotton industry, and it is likely that these Tajiks will be poorer a generation from now than they are today for reasons described by Markowitz (2014). Indeed, his description of the political economy of repression in Central Eurasia repressive regimes bears summary.[[30]](#footnote-30) Since *kolkhoz* structures are the central social unit of Tajik rural life in Khatlon, and since only 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 bottlenecks on a few railroad stations, has co-evolved with single-party rule. Personal connections with an authority somewhere within the state bureaucracy – a broker for cotton sales 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.

The Tajik diaspora provides an important social safety-valve. Given the lack of economic freedom and the overall dearth of social opportunities in Tajikistan, and the fact that high-prestige educational attainment requires leaving the country, brain drain for the most privileged children of the most privileged families will continue. This is a relevant demographic fact: young Tajik men that might be hanging around Dushanbe and marginally employed, potentially susceptible to thoughts of revolution, are absent from the social milieu. The diaspora is unlikely to spawn perpetually-lived organizations to challenge Rakhmon. 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.[[31]](#footnote-31) 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 imagine the kinds of social value transformations that are the drivers of modernization theory occurring. [[32]](#footnote-32) Since much of this immigration is illegal, either the Uzbek or Russian state can credibly threaten to legally deport troublemakers – or their friends or girlfriends – back to Tajikistan.

One potential check on Rakhmon’s power might be factionalism within the Tajik state. A central argument in Driscoll (2015) is that however absolutist a figurehead leader like Rakhmon might appear, he is forced to operate in the shadow of a coup. The various security ministries of the Tajik state certainly seem to operate with greater autonomy than other ministries, such as education or foreign affairs; that the ministries with guns would enjoy a high amounts of autonomy (allowing for private enrichment), is consistent with a logic of coup-proofing. Outside of the armed forces, various semi-private banking and brokerage companies that manage the virtual state monopoly on cotton production operate cooperatively with, but independently from, the party apparatus. In some sense, all of these are good examples of perpetually-lived organizations and it is possible, in theory, for them to function autonomously from the Presidential Administration.[[33]](#footnote-33) Hale (2014), while employing the master-metaphor of a pyramid, emphasizes the possibility of states with multiple pyramids. Different cadres sometimes control functionally-autonomous ministries, supported by different social groups with different agenda, which serve as a check on each other’s ambitions. In the post-Soviet republics that have evolved towards 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 (2009) had in mind, though in a very weak personalist state apparatus like Tajikistan, they may be the closest available (partial) substitute.

Another potential source of opposition to the state could come from 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 a focal point for opposition to Rakhmon’s rule. It has not succeeded, as Epkenhans (2015) documents. Since the 1997 General Peace Accord this party has strategically subordinated its religious message to a broader focus on socioeconomic development and adherence to democratic principles, but has not been able to shed its association with the civil war (and so-called “Wahhabism”). The IRPT has been more or less completely marginalized in contemporary Tajik politics – but perhaps it is reasonable that a future party could succeed where they failed, mobilizing support from a broad constituency outside of Rakhmon’s patronage net. This kind of institution is much more in line with the historical processes that informed North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009). Missionary work is conducted Tajikistan by Christian and Islamic groups, and a variety of practitioners dedicated to shaping the ground “beneath” and “around” the state through, for example, the social provision of literacy. In the best case, this charity will contribute to processes of development and democratization. In the worst case, however, sermonizing could generate disruptive behaviors threatening to Tajik social order. This threat is taken seriously by military representatives of Russia and NATO member countries. [[34]](#footnote-34) Technical assistance for various tasks associated with threat assessment -- such as scrutinizing the content of writings by roving transnational clerics using sophisticated computer-enabled tools -- will probably continue.[[35]](#footnote-35)

What about NGOs and other familiar faces of civil society? Many in the West imagine themselves to be allies of Tajik civil society and 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, but a potential check on Rakhmon’s power could emerge from the social milieu of Tajiks that 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. This aid provides demand for much of the high-end service market in the Dushanbe economy.[[36]](#footnote-36) The few thousand English-speaking Tajiks that have managed to take part in this economy are much more well-off than their counterparts who do not. 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, and their offices employ much of what passes for the Tajik middle class. As a sociological phenomenon, there is no question that there is a self-funded part of Tajik society that is independent, in practice, from the oversight of the state. The constant turn-over 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, actually, a seed-bed of perpetually-lived organizations.

Tajiks have admittedly been relatively marginal actors within the community thus far, but when one counts all of the embassy drivers, the fixers, the people who have drifted from one project to another, there is a substantial portion of the indigenous Dushanbe economy sustained by a source of wealth largely external from the government.[[37]](#footnote-37) The big problem is that the Tajik state still has a clear comparative advantage in the application of violence vis-à-vis 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.[[38]](#footnote-38) Power and the use of violence are ultimately in the hands of the Tajik state.[[39]](#footnote-39)

**4. IS TAJIK MILITARY CENTRALIZATION REAL OR ILLUSORY?**

North, Wallis, and Weingast (2009:153) observe that “natural states rarely have consolidated control of the military, although the Soviet Union was an exception.” Though much of the previous section documents the ways in which Tajikistan’s Soviet inheritance may limit the possibility of transitioning towards open access, the Soviet Union built what Roeder (2007) calls a hierarchically-organized “segment state” in pre-independence Tajikistan – a self-regarding political community, institutionalized with maps, censuses, museums, elementary school curricula, a ministry of intererior and defense and all the rest. Even if it is not a full monopolization of violence which, following Weber (1953), would imply that only uniformed agents of the state would be permitted to be violence specialists, Tajikistan is closer to this doorstep condition than the other two. This is remarkable. The 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 a set of well understood “rules of Rakhmon’s game,” then violence within the borders of Tajikistan is as monopolized as anyone could reasonably hope for such a poor mountainous state.[[40]](#footnote-40) If we conceptualize 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 or deterring terrorist acts without collateral civilian damage) per unit of foreign aid invested in the country, Tajikistan has 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 what passes for post-independence state capacity in Tajikistan is 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 comes from the fact that Tajikistan, contra many post-colonial states that have experienced civil war in places like Africa, was not allowed to fully fail in the early 1990s. Having observed the capacity of the Popular Front for Tajikistan to impose its military will on the country, Moscow intervened after domestic processes gave them a local agent that they could use to shield themselves from liability. Propping up the state apparatus provided a kind of carcass that the warlords could feed upon; gradual introduction of humanitarian assistance from the West put more meat on the carcass. Selective assassinations and training for border patrols kept the Panj river as a symbolic border between the CIS security community and the belt of boiling state failure that stretches from Afghanistan to Somalia. Russia did not try to do very much more – but what they did 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 receives a great deal of security assistance. What for? The disputed status of the Crimean Peninsula notwithstanding, inherited interstate borders of the post-Soviet republics are stubbornly immutable social facts. Repelling Uzbek tank divisions is not likely to ever be a mission for the Tajik military. Internal uprisings are the real threat. 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. Just like many personalist rulers elsewhere in the world, Rakhmon is probably much more concerned about the possibility of a Tajik military that is too strong and confident, with the capability and confidence to execute a military coup, than about the possibility of a weak Tajik military that is incapable of securing its borders. [[41]](#footnote-41) Rakhmon has proven himself to be an adept political survivor, with sophisticated instincts for managing divide-and-rule strategies, keeping different “blocking coalitions” balanced against one another. The task of keeping different hierarchical silos of the military in a balanced competition with one another – with the burden of conscription quotas and the prestige of military ascendency spread around the different regions of the country – is surely a simpler task, as far as coup-proofing, 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 enough or crazy enough to consider revolution viable and/or flirt with confrontational forms of violent activism. This task is not very expensive. 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 Queda, Iran: These are all “power words” when it comes to attracting the attention of foreign security bureaucracy and a kind of international aid.

State weakness, in this context, may not even be a bad thing from the perspective of the small circle of elites that surround Rakhmon *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.). Rakhmon’s family and inner circle are very well-positioned to take a first cut of foreign aid as it flows in, and best positioned to anticipate, and pre-position assets and capital, to take advantage of foreign-assisted processes of economic liberalization.[[42]](#footnote-42) It is worth reproducing the blunt summary of Cooley and Heathershaw (2017: 11) at length:

Elites wield liberalization initiatives as instruments to advance their narrow economic and political interests. Instead of reducing state predation and elite enrichment, financial liberalization has enabled these practices on a more global scale. Small wonder, then, that even a ‘laggard reformer’ like Tajikistan in 2011 experienced an estimated capital flight of over 60 per cent of its GDP, according to the IMF. In Central Asia, crony capitalism is the onlycapitalist game in town, resourced by correspondent relations with major world banks, advice from law firms and auditors, and cooperation with the World Bank, IMF and other leading institutions of global financial regulation.

With this in mind, it is worth taking seriously the possibility that military centralization is somewhat theatrical.[[43]](#footnote-43) The Tajik military is no more a bastion of professionalism than any other state military in the region, and this is not 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. It may be a mistake to over-state the efficacy of “capacity building assistance” aimed at linking donor constituencies in Western embassies to members of the Tajik state security services.[[44]](#footnote-44) This doorstep condition appears to be much closer to practical fulfillment than the other two, however, and 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, since Tajikistan’s history suggests social order could unravel with great speed and this unraveling would be even worse, both for Tajiks and for the great powers, than the authoritarian peace observed.

If the argument in this chapter is correct, it implies that the Tajik state that is parasitic on some of the worst aspects of the War on Terror. There is 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 be a threat to their interests (Fearon and Laitin 2004). To the extent that great powers worry about Tajik terrorists or refugees, aid flows to Tajikistan in large quantities. To the extent that Tajikistan is a man-made humanitarian disaster and drug trafficking route, aid slows to a trickle. Russia is interested in making sure that there is a local actor that is seen as legitimate, so that there is order in Tajikistan. The ruling class of Tajik elites have no incentive to break the cycle of dependence or build sustainable institutions.[[45]](#footnote-45) And may be no easy answer to this moral hazard dynamic. When foreign support is critical to propping up a country andshared understandings exist that state disintegration would create real costs for the great powers (e.g., in the form of refugee flows, Salafi terrorist pockets threatening to Russia, and the like), there can be an extortion dynamic, where 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.”

**5. HOBBESIAN NEOPATRIMONIALISM**

Thomas Hobbes (1651) was, among other things, an 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. Hobbes’s observations are relevant to understanding the roots of political legitimacy in contemporary Tajikistan. The legitimacy of Rakhmon’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 (1651) described the modal psychological response to the phenomenon of civil war accurately.

The insights of Hobbes 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 is that that life without a sovereign is horrible beyond imagination, buttressed by the post-Soviet institutional inheritance. For the citizens of Tajikistan old enough to remember Soviet times, and particular for those who experienced the violence of the war directly, the Hobbesian picture 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.[[46]](#footnote-46) In principle, as Wagner (2006: 72) notes, the sovereign has as much to fear as the citizens by rebellion, since he would be plunged the state of nature along with everyone else, which is why Hobbes emphasizes 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 Rakhmon’s personal network, looting the state, and selectively distributing money and life opportunities to buy off potential opponents.

More than any other country in the region, the legitimacy of Tajikistan’s regime rests quite explicitly on the claim that the alternative to Rakhmon’s personalist rule is violent civil war. Consensus is congealing on a particular hegemonic interpretation of Tajik social history: That the war was a failed attempt by radicals from traditionally under-represented groups to seize the state. 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 Emomalii Rakhmon – the “founder of peace” – was personally involved in the violent processes of war termination.[[47]](#footnote-47) The settlement did not involve the comprehensive disarmament of warlords by state authorities, but the cannibalization of the state by various warlords. Tajikistan’s war left scars on social memory, eviscerated the economy, and hollowed out state capacity, so when these warlords were jailed or imprisoned, removing the threat of a coup as the last check on Rakhmon’s exercise of arbitrary power, few mourned. Today few families dominate senior posts in government and control state-owned enterprises; all owe their positions to Rakhmon, personally. There is not much effort to deny or whitewash this fact. It is not clear that it would be safe for a member of Tajikistan’s Academy of Science to articulate a counter-hegemonic interpretation of the Tajik Civil War, since the version that reinforces the Hobbesian legitimacy argument 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 to 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. There is, by extension, no way to credibly threaten to make foreign aid conditional – certainly not conditional on “good governance” reforms that might democratize politics, empower opposition voices to call for redistribution and accountability, and the like. *“Better the devil we know…”*

Rakhmon has learned that he can survive politically by weakening the state and keeping power centralized on himself. Rather than institutionalize, 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.[[48]](#footnote-48) This mode of managing a coalition of violence entrepreneurs is not good for the rule of law, nor likely to produce perpetually-lived oppositional organizations to challenge the state. There is scant evidence that Rakhmon weighs these outcomes against his core value: social order.

So long as Rakhmon’s health holds, I would be very surprised if the observations in this chapter become obsolete. The reason that closed access orders are such an enduring form of government is that the fundamentals do not change very much. And things don’t change much in Tajikistan.

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1. In November, the parliament also approved changes to the penal code making it a crime, punishable by 5 years in prison, to insult the “Leader of the Nation.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Wedeen (2006). The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) did not monitor the May 2016 referendum. Though widespread fraud and manipulation of voter tallies has been reported in Tajik elections since independence by various observers, I am not aware of any study that convincingly quantifies the extent to which Tajiks themselves believethe vote totals in Tajik electoral exercises. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Samuel Huntington (1965), 408-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This exercise inevitably involves making psychological suppositions about others based on extended personal observation behaviors. A self-assessment of the kinds of biases that permeated my observations can be found in Driscoll (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 Walsh (2009), 177-80 and Wedeen (2009), 87-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ilkhamov, Alisher. 2007. "Neopatrimonialism, interest groups and patronage networks: the impasses of the governance system in Uzbekistan." *Central Asian Survey* 26(1):65-84. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Fearon and Laitin (2004: 81) 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.” See also 79-82 generally. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A formalization of this logic can be found in Fearon (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. At least 40% 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, that were obviously never meant to be interstate chokepoints? Would Bukhara and Samarkand resume their traditional role as Tajik cultural poles? Might borders be re-drawn (perhaps peacefully, as in Czechoslovakia) to make it so? [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Epkenhans (2016) 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 (2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In mid-November 1992, through a process that self-consciously re-appropriated the institutional and electoral machinery that Tajiks inherited from Soviet times, Rakhmonov 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 18 November, 1992, 186 deputies out of the 193 that were present elected Emomali Rakhmonov as Chairman of the Supreme Soviet. Epkenhans (2016:342). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Quoted in Driscoll (2015), 76, FN 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. 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 as 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. According to Nakaya (2009), 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Torjensen, Stina and S. Neil MacFarlane (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. 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 will be allowed to be the ‘silent partner’ in which hotel-casino investment, provide bazaar security, or control rural drug transit rents through Eastern Badakshon, the answer from Moscow or Washington would probably be “who cares – and where is this ‘Eastern Badakshon,’ anyway?” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. 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 statically-robust predictors of the length of time a warlord “survived” in the Tajik state. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ultimately there was only one contender, Davlat Usmon of the Islamic Renaissance Party. His son was kidnapped the day before ballots were cast. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Interview conducted in Tajikistan on July 22, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. 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. His total assets – which his family has not retained, since it was expropriated – pales next to the hundreds of millions of dollars, all liquid and hard to trace, documented by Cooley and Heathershaw (2017:101) in what they call Rakhmon’s “slush fund.” [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Collins (2006) traces the punitive use of anti-corruption drives back through Soviet history, emphasizing that Tajikistan was largely spared from the Brezhnev-era purges in the early 1980s. The first and most prominent political prosecution for corruption was Abdulmalik Abdullojonov, after he was defeated by Rakhmon 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See, for instance, the ethnographic observations of behaviors consistent with “father knows best” beliefs documented in Liu (2002), Chapter Four, 147-202, and Liu (2012), Chapter Six, especially 159-65 and 190-6. States of post-Soviet Eurasia cluster at the bottom of cross-national indices of democratic quality. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. This was described informally in the previous chapter. For a more in-depth formal treatment see Driscoll (2015), Chapter 2, especially 36-7, as well as the formal propositions in Appendix 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. None of the states of Central Asia are consolidated democracies. Exposure to large-scale Hobbesian anarchy was not part of the formative experience for 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 war. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. The Tajik government seems to have ambitions to do more but lacks capacity, having articulated broad ambitions to curtail the freedom of information. As state capacity grows and best practices evolve in its neighbors, it will model those practices. Since it is a crime to “slander” the President or insult officials, self-censorship is required by journalists. The Nations and 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”. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Elections are a kind of competitive tournament for the benefit of Rakhmon and other regime elites, observing which local party officials are most capable of turning out the vote. Second, for non-elites, they are a kind of national festival to participate 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 (in terms of providing social order) for authentically contested democracy. See Wedeen (2006) for plausible speculations on the psychological effects of repetitive compliant behavior in semi-authoritarian electoral regimes. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Those voting numbers from the first paragraph of this essay are meant to impress *you*, dear reader. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. 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 Rakhmon, since a challenge would require a focal figurehead spearheading opposition within the territory of Tajikistan – a dangerous proposition. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. On the transformation of social values, see, for instance, Boix (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. I base this speculation on the following thought experiment: If Rakhmon 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. There is a crude complementarity between Russian and American interests when it comes to Tajikistan for reasons discussed at length in Fearon and Laitin (2004): The great powers want, above all, for Salafi Jihadists to not be permitted gain a foothold anywhere in the region. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. The decision in 2016 to require that all mosques in Dushanbe 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” is seen by Western analysts as an existential threat will depend a great deal on diplomatic relations between Iran and the West. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Between roughly 1996 and 2004, the amount of foreign assistance that flowed into Tajikistan was larger, and 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 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 2-3 year “soft money” contracts – that occupy a high social stratum in Dushanbe. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. 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 the experience of Tajikistan itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. The Law on Public Associations was amended in 2015 to require all NGOs that receive 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.” NIT report, page 7, FN 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. One might caricature the liberal attitudes of Western development professionals as utopian, but my experience suggests most are conservative kinds of realists who understand this. Violent social change is not the mission. Democracy may be a good long-term ideal outcome; 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Weber’s monopoly is an ideal unattainable in reality. Even in very well-governed OECD countries, the ideal is violated by the existence of criminal fraternities, martial arts academies, and veteran associations. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. This is a common pattern since the second world war, as documented in Quinlivan (1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. For evidence consistent with this theory see Cooley and Heathershaw (2017), Chapter 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. I am not sure that anyone can credibly claim know what incentives drive decision-making by regional authorities in the Pamiri mountains – not Rakhmon, not the Russian Embassy, and certainly not British or American academics, even if they make time to visit Dushanbe themselves once or twice a year. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to review all of the kinds of security assistancefrom Russian, European and American sources, except to say that the war on terror is unlikely to be a passing phase and 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 it to be my job to sort the “good guys” from the “bad apples” in the Tajik security sector. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Charles Tilly (1991) is famous for his aphorism that “war makes the state and the state makes war.” Tilly’s argument is that selection effects in the international system – essentially fears of conquest that were well-founded – produced the modern states of Europe. This authority to tax and conscript citizens is harder to sustain since the Second World War, since sovereign states almost never disappear today (Fazal 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. This is exactly why Hobbes’s 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Epkenhans (2016), 354-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. 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, or that a change in the overall system or the personality at the top, would lift more Tajiks out of poverty faster. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)