State–Society Relations in Kyrgyzstan: A Qualitative Study of Local Politics

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Abstract
The post-Soviet Central Asian region presents an interesting case in understanding state-society relations. Kyrgyzstani politics has been characterized by the competition amongst clans and patron-client networks. Yet since independence Kyrgyzstan has undergone major institutional reforms aiming to introduce democratization, good governance and development. This paper will focus on local political processes in Kyrgyzstan and will examine the process of decision making in two villages. I will claim that local political processes are neither based on clan identity (see Collins 2006, Schatz 2004) nor on UNDP-driven framework of local governance. I will argue that local political process is contextual characterized by tension, conflict and a consensus amongst weak state institutions, international institutions and local informal leaders. This paper utilizes Migdal’s ‘state-in-society’ approach which focuses on interactions between formal and informal institutions.

Introduction
One can get a rapid introduction into Kyrgyzstani politics by taking a cab in any of its cities. One can notice that driving norms are just based on rules. Particularly in the South, where not all intersections have traffic lights, drivers have to make a decision about who will give way based on multiple factors. First is the status of the person driving the vehicle or the passenger in the vehicle. The status can be judged by the size and make of the car, and its license plates. License plates expose immediately the social status. It can be a ‘krutoj’ (cool) number that is hard to get or ‘gos nomera’ (state numbers issued only to high ranking state employees). Such cars usually demand priority on the road and are rarely stopped by the GAI (state transport agency). In smaller towns, the relationship to the driver or their relatives will also determine the right of way.

On the road, one can observe how some drivers flash their car headlights. This usually indicates ‘GAI is nearby and should slow down’. Cars with ‘ordinary’ license plates have developed a system of signals to warn each other about GAI inspectors, who usually hide behind trees on the road sideline.

This solidarity of drivers against the inspectors is not necessarily an action against the state. Drivers know that the fines are earnings for GAI inspectors who use them to
compensate for their low salary. Drivers and GAI can always negotiate the rate of the fine. Surviving on the roads becomes a matter of understanding different driving norms, where status can shape the driving experience. Driving exposes the nature of state-society relations, in particular the relationship between formal and informal norms that guide people’s actions in their daily lives and shape the political system.

The literature on Central Asian politics stresses the weaknesses of formal institutions and the strengths of informal institutions. Cormier (2007) states that many Kyrgyzstani farmers opt out of formal contracts, finding them ‘useless’ because they are not reinforced by the legal system. As a result, unprotected farmers resort to ‘alternative order-creating institutions, such as operating po-kyrgyzski’ (457). Operating ‘po-kyrgyzski’ refers to non-legal ways of dealing with disputes. Farmers either quietly comply with the demands or not fulfill the contractual responsibilities. In resolving disputes, a few turn to the court system for justice, and most are unaware of other legal services provided by non-state legal organizations.

According to Cormier (2007), the Kyrgyzstani population, just like many citizens in most post-soviet Central Asia, is struggling to understand the new legal framework. She writes: ‘Imagine what it must be like to be faced with the prospect and (shock) of adjusting to a completely new set of economic, legal, and even social rules—without being entirely aware of what those rules are. Imagine that simultaneously your family association with your place of work is entirely disrupted: You are informed that you are now an “entrepreneur”. You soon learn this means that you, alone, are responsible for generating your income and providing for your family’ (Cormier, 2007: 436).

Cormier (2007) argues that norms and conventions have strong legitimacy because they were collectively established as ‘appropriate’ rules of conduct. However, the new rules lack this kind of legitimacy. ‘In the context of post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan, the legal working rules that partially comprise the existing institutional framework were not the manifestations of collective action in the same way as norms and conventions are’ (Cormier 2007: 461).

This relationship of formal and informal seems to be ‘paradoxical’. The two can coexist as well as be functionally dependent on each other. Reeves (2007) shows how borders near the Kara-Suu market blur the line between formal and informal forms of access, and both are ‘spatially and functionally intertwined’ (123). The Chernyj vhod (back door) is the illegal border crossing, yet it is often close to, ‘or right under the nose of the official border posts’ (133). The official borders become irrelevant when the state permits such informal arrangements to exist. The operators of the illegal borders share their profits (dolya) with official border guards for their non-interference.

It is interesting that people who use informal norms (whether they be Chernyj vhod, driving and conflict resolution) do not see them as illegal. On the contrary, informal norms are legitimate because they allow ordinary people an alternative way to deal with the situation when formal rules are costly, unfair or inconvenient. For instance, informal borders allow poor traders to avoid paying bribes and be subjected to harassment. These informal crossings make trade possible, maintain people livelihoods and minimize the possibility of conflicts. The Chernyj vhod symbolizes yntymak (peace). The state’s efforts to monopolize border movements are intensely contested by society.
Reeves (2007) argues that the co-existence of formal and informal is not simply a story of corruption, ‘A language of corruption suggests a normative functioning system, from which the corruption is a deviation (hence ‘X is a corruption of Y’). What we have here, by contrast, is a situation where ‘the state’ is constituted as the state by its appropriation of informal exchange. The goods that informally go through the chernyj vhod are not simply a deviation or a corruption ‘of’ the state; neither are they incidental to its constitutions and its everyday functioning. The state here rather thrives upon the very proliferation of informal activity’ (134).

Sometimes, informal institutions do not contest the state. Beyer (2007) claims that aksakal courts try to create ‘state-like ‘rules and associate themselves with the state to gain legitimacy. She argues that aksakal courts function by imitating the state. ‘Next to their knowledge about customs, it is the constructions of knowledge about the state that aksakals apply in their decision –making procedures in order to not only emphasize their judgments, but also to maintain and elevate their authority and their status among the village population’ (Beyer, 2007: 2). In one village, the aksakal court developed its own stamp, official invitation letters and other institutional features to resemble a formal court.

This reveals how the interactions between formal and informal institutions are contextual in some cases. Informal institutions do not automatically enjoy legitimacy over formal institutions. The dynamic between the formal and informal can be either problematic or beneficial to both parties. It is important to recognize that the state is not separate from society and that the boundary between the two is elusive. The state is not a finished construction and it is not clear to all the parties ‘who’ and ‘where’ the state is. Uncertainty and arbitrariness characterize everyday encounters on the roads, at the borders and in the villages.

This paper will examine the political interactions between formal and informal institutions in two villages in Kyrgyzstan. The paper will examine how different actors participate in community decision-making and governance. The aim of the paper is to examine the power relations in two localities and understand the different outcomes of these relationships. Informal institutions can be defined as ‘socially shared rules, usually unwritten, that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels’ (Helmke and Levitsky 2004: 727). Informal institutions should not be confused with weak formal institutions, ‘informal behavioral regularities’ like removing one’s coat in a restaurant, informal organizations (unless essential to understanding informal rules), and a broader concept of culture. Informal institutions are depicted as shared expectations rather than shared values. Formal institutions are legal codes of conduct in different spheres of life and are written and reinforced by the state.

This paper has four sections. In the first section, I will outline the dominant theoretical approach to explaining politics in Kyrgyzstan. I then present the outline of Migdal’s theory that suggests to analyse the dynamics of interactions between key actors without neo-liberal and neo-institutional biases. In the second section, I will present my research design. Third section discusses key findings based on my fieldwork in Osh. Finally, I will conclude my paper with remarks about the patterns of interactions between formal and informal institutions in Kyrgyzstani context.
Theoretical Framework

Political process in Kyrgyzstan can be analysed through two dominant perspectives. The first approach suggests the primacy of clans (Collins 2006, Schatz 2004) and argues that clans and tribes function as corporate groups and engage in competition over resources. The second approach is put forward by Joel Migdal and is known as ‘state-in-society’ approach. This section will outline key arguments of both approaches.

Clan politics

Collins (2006) and Schatz (2004) argue that in Central Asia clan identity is significant in people’s everyday life and that it determines social and political practices. For the most part, proponents of the clan discourse (Collins 2006; Schatz 2004; Burn 2006) base their analysis on a loose definition of ‘clan’, highlighting the universality of clanism across ethnic and cultural lines. This approach argues that clans function as corporate groups that compete for political power and economic resources with each other and act as political substitutes for formal institutions. Collins (2006: 335) argues that clans are legitimate and persist because they function as a social safety net and provide social support and financial resources to survive in harsh economic conditions.

Collins (2006) argues that clan politics impedes democracy and regime durability. However, this approach came under heavy criticism. Radnitz (2005) and Temirkulov (2008) show how clan identity was not relevant for the political mobilization during the ‘Tulip Revolution’ and people’s actual participation discredited the idea of Kyrgyzstan as a clan-based society. Sjoberg (2008) also claims that clans do not determine the voting patterns during elections. Furthermore, Gullette (2006) also argues that ‘clan’ and tribe’ are concepts of ‘genealogical imagination’ used to construct a national identity by various groups, and are not present in reality. The critics state that Collins’s and Schatz’s analysis of clans is seriously inhibited by lack of conceptual clarity. Their definition of clans includes everything from family to regional and elite networks, reducing various complex networks to a single concept. Contemporary scholarship on politics in developing countries has not moved far from modernization theory. The clan politics approach, although focuses on informal institutions, employs a neo-institutional rational, prescribing rational behavior to clans and its members.

State-in-Society Approach

Migdal (1988) argues that institutional change and outcomes are a result of bitter competition between state institutions and local elites for the control of state resources and power. Migdal (1988) advocates a ‘state in society’ approach, where the state is seen as a part of the society, not above it, both simultaneously molding each other.

Migdal (1988: 33) argues that the state in a developing country struggles to mobilize society because the latter has different centers of power, and social control is fragmented and heterogeneous (i.e., local elites, community self-help organizations, local networks and NGOs). Individuals’ decision to belong to a particular organization depends upon their survival strategies. As Migdal (1988: 29) notes, ‘Here, individuals must choose among competing components in making their strategies of survival; these are difficult
choices when people also face the possibility of competing sanctions.’ In Migdal’s terms, a state is weak because it is unable to insert itself into citizen’s strategies of survival.

But despite this, the state is still important in people’s lives because it tries to govern their behaviour however contested they may be. Migdal (1988: 39) notes, ‘In web-like societies, although social control is fragmented and heterogeneous, this does not mean that people are not being governed; they most certainly are. The allocation of values, however, is not centralized. Numerous systems of justice operate simultaneously.’

Migdal suggests a framework where the state is disaggregated into its multiple levels. This anthropological slicing of the state helps to analyze the operation of different levels of the state in various contexts. It is particularly important to study lower levels of the state outside the capital, as the state most prone to be weaker in its capacity to initiate and carry out policies. The state capacity is central to its ability to dominate in the society.

The state-in-society approach aims to examine other systems of social control to understand the state’s capacity. Migdal suggests that the ‘struggle’ between the state and social forces can produce four ideal type outcomes: a) total transformation—the state’s penetration leads to destruction, co-optation, or subjugation of social forces b) the state’s incorporation of social forces- the state tries to organize a new pattern of domination by creating new social organizations, injecting new resources and symbols. This might affect the state’s legitimacy and its ability to achieve integrated domination c) social forces’ incorporation of the state—the state fails to change the rules of the game and people’s identity despite generating new patterns of domination; the non-state actors appropriate the organization and symbols of state’s components; d) state’s failure of any penetration—this could happen when the state is highly disengaged. Most interactions between formal and informal forces fall into the second and third category.

Helmke and Levitsky (2004) suggest a similar fourfold typology of informal institutions that aim to capture the relationship between informal and formal institutions – see Table 1. The typology suggests two categories where informal institutions are seen as a) functional, and therefore enhance the performance of formal institutions; or as b) dysfunctional, therefore undermining the performance of formal institutions. The typology is also based on two other dimensions, where first shows the degree to which informal and formal institutional outcomes converge. The second dimension captures the effectiveness of relevant formal institutions.

<table>
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<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Effective formal institutions</th>
<th>Ineffective formal institutions</th>
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<td>Convergent</td>
<td>Complementary</td>
<td>Substitutive</td>
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<td>Divergent</td>
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Source: Helmke and Levitsky 2004: 728
First, complementary informal institutions can co-exist with formal institutions and fill in gaps ‘either by addressing contingencies not dealt with in the formal rules or by facilitating the pursuit of individual goals within the formal institutional framework’ (728). In many cases, these informal institutions do not just co-exist alongside formal ones, but are key agents in making effective the formal ‘rules of the game’. For instance, religious informal networks have been ‘assisting’ the state in propagating the need to reduce spending on funerals. The state itself has been only partially successful in addressing this issue.

Second, accommodating informal institutions ‘create incentives to behave in ways that alter the substantive effects of formal rules, but without directly violating them; they conflict the spirit, but not the letter, of the formal rules’ (729). These institutions find ways to get around the formal system. Actors use them when they are unable to change and openly violate formal rules. The current election process in Kyrgyzstan is a good example of an accommodating institution. Informal institutions follow the formal rules of elections but contradict its spirit by electing people based on localism and not on the qualities of the candidates.

Third, competing informal institutions develop incentives that are incompatible with formal rules, where following one set of rules means violating the other. These informal institutions are often found in the context when formal rules do not work or are inefficient. As we saw, the alternative border access is a competing informal institution.

Fourth, substitutive informal institutions emerge in contexts where the state is weak and lacks the capacity to enforce its rules. Substitutive informal institutions are employed to achieve what formal institutions were designed to do, but failed to deliver. Aksakal courts in Kyrgyzstan is an example of this relationship.

Lauth (2004) and Boesen (2006) claim that if informal institutions exist then their functioning is expected, whether they are good or bad. They also suggest that the interplay between informal and formal governance mechanisms should be analyzed with attention to the goals of the formal and informal actors. When objectives converge, informal governance can either complement formal governance, or substitute it if the later is not effective. If goals diverge, informal institutions can either accommodate effective formal governance or compete for primacy when governance is weak. Informal governance may at different times enhance or undermine key aspects of formal governance.

**Background Information and Research Design**

Kyrgyzstan is one of the poorest countries in the CIS: 47.6% of the people live below poverty line and 13.5% live in conditions of extreme poverty (UNDP 2002). The unemployment rate is 18%, though much higher in rural areas. Many households have at least one or two members of their families working abroad and supporting their families by sending money back home. There are officially about 500,000 Kyrgyzstani migrants (10% of the population), most of them from the rural South, between 18 and 45 years old, working in Russia and Kazakhstan (Toralieva 2006).

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input on the development of a national strategy on decentralization of public administration and local governance development in Kyrgyzstan until 2010.

Decentralization introduced new institutional and legal framework in Kyrgyzstan. It resulted in new administrative divisions of the country and the establishment of so-called ‘local self-government’. Decentralization reforms created elected councils (keneshi) at every administrative level (oblast, rayon, and aiyil) and an aiyil okmoty (local governance structures) in 1996.

But decentralization proved to be incomplete and inefficient. New Keneshi institutions designed to serve as a check and balance to the executive, have been found to be meaningless (Gravingholt et al. 2006). Most aiyil okmoty (the village administration) responsible for governance management, have limited ability to initiate and implement policies because of lack of financial resources. Most ayl okmoty cannot generate their own income and therefore expect resources to be transferred from the centre. The local administration staff is poorly trained (i.e., a weak state capacity). The top-down style of decision-making continues to operate in the country (Gravingholt et al. 2006).

Decentralization nevertheless had significant implications on local politics in Kyrgyzstan. The principle of self-governance created space for informal and non-governmental actors in the local governance sphere. It also facilitated international development interventions at local level through the notion of community development. Key donors such as World Bank, ADB, UNDP and DFID launched a number of development projects, one of them introduced at almost every village (ARIS-Community Development and Investment Project). Decentralization and international intervention produced unanticipated outcomes such as further empowerment of local elites. Community development did not change local power structure and failed to empower the poor by including them in project participation (Babajanian 2009).

New regulations of self-governance are unclear to all parties, including aiyil okmotu staff. Many people are unaware of new roles and responsibilities of structures aiyil kenesh deputies (local councils) and water users associations (created after privatization of water provision system). People often draw parallels with old kolhozes and sovhozes that provided many welfare services and maintained the infrastructure, but become frustrated when their aiyil okmotus do not match old expectations.

Decentralization also created disparities in aiyil okmotus’ capacities in different regions. In 2003, the central government agreed to strengthen the aiyil okmoty budget, by allowing 90% of land tax to stay with aiyil okmoty. This created regional economic inequalities. Some aiyil okmotus have been able to raise public revenues but others do not have the same opportunity (eg., One of the villages in my case studies increased its budget by 25 times). Most villages do not have sufficient land resources to use or to rent out.

The focus of this research was to examine various decision making processes and to trace the patterns of interactions between different actors in rural villages in Kyrgyzstan. I undertook 6 months of participant observation and in-depth interviews in four different villages in Kyrgyzstan. The villages were chosen according to the aiyil okmoty (local administration) capacity, its resources, and geography (mountainous or suburban area). The study chose three villages with the population ranging from 3000 to 7000 people. The sample of villages included suburban (close to Osh, the second largest city in
Kyrgyzstan) and remote mountainous villages. The villages also represented various resource capacities. The village close to the city belongs to the richest aiyл akмоты in the country that get its revenue from the largest market in Central Asia. The mountainous village was the poorest, with few land resources and had 90% of its budget depends on subsidies. The sample also included villages that have ‘average’ budgets and have some potential to generate revenue from land and municipal resources.

The data consists of 85 semi-structured interviews with local elites, village residents of diverse economic backgrounds, local district state officials, and members of various NGOs and international organizations. The semi-structured interviews allowed respondents to develop themes and talk about their experiences ‘on their own terms’. I adopted a flexible and exploratory approach. Most interviews were conducted over traditional tea-drinking sessions (see also Weeden 2002 and Schatz 2004). I retained conversational interviewing style to ease my respondents and allow them to introduce issues they deemed important. The interviews aimed to understand the judgments and practices of different key actors, who shape local politics.

Two case studies
I will present findings from two villages, E and M. I will discuss how residents see the state and how informal and formal institutions interact.

Seeing the state
Village residents are ambiguous in how they see aiyл okmotы (see also Corbridge 2005). On one hand aiyл okmotы is perceived as the lowest branch of the state, but on other hand their staff are identified with the community. Aiyл okmotu head is usually part of the local elites. Babajanian (2009) notes that aiyл okmotus are often deeply enmeshed in the existing local power structures. Local aiyл okmotu officials use their positions to trade goods and information in exchange for material compensation and political support. Aiyл okmot is rarely interpreted as a structure that serves their local residents’ needs. It is always equated with the aiyл okmotu head. Aiyл okmotu is either good or bad depending upon the qualities of the person heading it. It is not situated in the larger institutional context.

Beyer (2007) notes that in rural areas village residents complain about the absence of the state. It is common to hear that the state existed during the Soviet era but not anymore. The state has not disappeared but it has certainly withdrawn many of its responsibilities. Aiyл okmotu staffs are present in the office until 11 am. Everybody knows that the state is available to people for 2-3 hours a day, between 8-11 am. The head of aiyл okmot is usually ‘hard to catch’, he is always somewhere in various meetings. It is a common scene to find many pensioners waiting in a hallway. Aiyл okmot often communicates that the residents have to rely on themselves, and they receive this message and have learnt not to depend upon aiyл okmotus. They seek its help only when it was absolutely necessary. In most cases that means that they either need an issuance of documents or an allocation of a land plot.

We avoid going to AO. We go only when we are desperate. It does not feel like we have AO. For instance, I have 5 children. I applied for land for my sons five
years ago and they are not giving land to me. I got tired of going to AO (Aksakal, village E).

Most residents were frustrated by the state. Migdal (2001) notes that the state is perceived as illegitimate if it’s unable to insert itself in people’s survival strategies. For Migdal, the state is weak because it cannot compete with the benefits people gain from alternative social systems. Residents understand that the state is unable to help and many are sympathetic towards this state of affairs. In this regard, many do not expect much from the state and are prepared to sort out their problems without state assistance. Villagers are deeply distrustful of the state because it is corrupt, unjust and potentially dangerous. This failure to maintain social justice turns residents against the state. In other words, the state is unable to uphold its own norms and often broke its own rules.

The legal system is rotten…this year I had this incident in my school and I saw myself what has become of this system. They [policemen] were threatening me for a month. They were constantly demanding money from me. When I refused to give any money they were openly rude and insulting. They needed to get something out of me, at least 1 000 soms [USD 23]. I was shocked to see that they were not interested in having justice..Before I used to recommend people to go to police and resolve their conflicts legally. Now I am the first to say: “Never go there. It’s a waste of time and money” (School teacher, village E).

Beyer (2007) notes that people in the absence of regular interactions with state officials, construct the image of the state based on the memories of Soviet times. The image of the Soviet state is alive and strong in people’s memories. Many wish the return of the Soviet state, even if this means returning to a totalitarian state. Migdal’s (2001) theory does not address cases when the society experienced strong state intervention over a long time and then has a weakened state. In many post-soviet contexts, residents of rural areas have a positive image of the Soviet state and a negative image of post-soviet state. The Soviet state is described as fair and honest, whereas post-soviet state as corrupt and unfair. In line with these sentiments, McMann (2009) finds that market reforms resulted in growth of corruption after independence. Citizens make particularistic demands of government officials in the context where non-state resources are scarce and there’s a big lack of market enhancing institutions.

During Soviet times people were honest. Now everyone steals. It’s hard not to steal when you know that everyone steals, starting from the top. The fish gets rotten from its head first. No one trusts the state. Not even a tiny bit. If tomorrow there will be a war, I would not join our army. Who should I fight for? The state that steals from its own people? I will fight for my 15 sotkas of land plot but not for the state. They all steal and there’s no punishment. They imprisoned someone for stealing two chicken for 5 years but those that steal millions are free and are driving around on Hammer jeeps (Construction worker, village K).

Migdal (2001) argues that the state is still important to individuals. Despite weak state capacity and corruption, residents still desire the state, wish it were stronger and generally regard state officials as significant actors. In most villages many residents asked me whether I received aiył okmotu ‘s permission to interview them. On one occasion, a head of the street (kocho-baschy) allowed me to interview people in his area only after he had confirmed with the AO head that it was okay. This need for aiył
**Informal institutions and alternative norms**

Migdal (1994) insists on studying the periphery because it presents multiple viable informal institutions that exercise social control. In rural Kyrgyzstan some of these institutions are ‘old’ such as *tooganchilik* (solidarity among relatives), *koshuna* (neighborhood networks), *aksakals* (networks of elderly), *joro* (networks of friends based on social status). Some institutions are new: such as *davatchi* (religious networks), *aksakal courts* and *jamaats* (community based self-help associations). These various informal networks have different patterns of interactions. Some are based on patronage and are hierarchical. Others are more egalitarian in their nature. People can belong to several networks simultaneously, and in some occasions these networks can overlap. These networks are not static either. They can dissolve or join other networks. Helmske and Levitsy (2004) suggest their interactions with the state will depend on state capacity to reinforce its rules and on how convergent their goals are.

Although society is fragmented, traditionally *aksakals* have had authority in rural areas, derived from social norms of respecting elderly men. They usually maintain social order in the community by using informal tools such as *uiyat* (shame) and *bata* (blessing).

After independence in 1991, *aksakals* began to take an active role in local politics. Temirkulv (2008) argues that *aksakals* played an important role in mobilizing citizens for the ‘Tulip Revolution’ of March 2004. Toralieva (2006) notes that migration of educated and progressive village members has left many communities mainly consisting of older members. This has caused a shift toward conservatism in politics. Migration has also affected the social structure of rural communities.

Our people have become divided into 3-4 categories. The first category of educated is abroad, no one is here. There is a second category of educated who are still here in the cities, they are in offices or running businesses…So the ones that you see here are the ones that stayed behind. They are either in poor health or old, or don’t have any skills. I mean this is all we’ve got (*Aiyl Okmotu*

Head Deputy, Village M)

One reason for *aksakals* emerging as an active institution is the role of the international donor community. In many villages, donors reach out to community networks and ‘empower’ them to participate in development projects. As a result, *aksakals* have been actively involved in many projects. In most *aiyl okmotus*, there is a presence of at least one or two international organizations, and in many villages *aksakals* have been chosen by international NGOs as their agents for distribution of humanitarian aid.

Many villagers suggest that *aksakals* have retained their authority in mostly mountainous regions where people are ‘unspoiled’ and are more ‘traditional’. *Aksakals* in a mountainous village serve as a substitutive informal institution by undertaking key decision-making and responsibilities. The weakness of the state has allowed *aksakals* to become politically active. The state itself facilitated their engagement by identifying them
as important actors. On one occasion, a group of Chinese businessmen arrived to hold negotiations with the state authorities on using the main road of the village for transporting coal from a neighboring rayon to China. The road was to go through the center of the village and it would have created problems for the residents as heavy trucks would have certainly created cracks in the houses close to the road. Negotiations to work out a compensation package for the use of the road and potential damages to some households needed to take place. Surprisingly, when the businessmen went to the aïyl okmot office, its head insisted that negotiations take place with aksakals. The leader of aksakal network, a well-educated local school teacher, wrote a document, stipulating a list of proposed compensations. Being reluctant to let a Chinese company to use the road, he came up with some unrealistic requirements. The list included the following conditions: 1) to provide people with pure drinking water; 2) to asphalt the entire road before using it; 3) to set up a village fund and to transfer 500,000 soms [USD 11,627] to it annually; 4) to give 2 tons of coal for each family in the village for free annually; 5) to pay compensation for damaged house near the road; and 6) to take care of the local ecology.

The AO head of this village openly admits that the real power brokers are aksakals. Aksakals made a decision against the Chinese business and some did not agree with. The decision was contested by higher state officials who wanted to attract the investment. Needless to say the company could not agree to satisfy all the demands. The Chinese businessmen attempted to change aksakal’s demands by holding another round of negotiations with top state officials. Despite the pressure from a number of state officials, aksakals’ position remained unchanged. Migdal (1994) would suggest that in this particular context the state failed to change the rules of the game, as at the local level aksakals incorporated the state.

Those Chinese company representatives later came with rayon akim, Jogorky Kenesh deputies, the head of oblast administration Jantoro Satybaldiev¹, and other authorities to push us to open the road. But we didn’t change our mind even when these state officials came to us…We were not against using the road, we were against using it for free…the state officials got upset with our people… We understand our state would benefit from this enterprise but we had to look after our own interests as well.

Aksakals identify themselves not only with their locality and but also with the state. But in this case aksakals find it more important to protect the interests of the community. Aksakals did not want to repeat the mistakes of the residents in Jumgal who had lost out to gold mining foreign companies, who had caused environmental damages. Aksakals follow the developments in the country and watch the news regularly.

Why do you think we required them to do such things? We see on TV how these foreign companies cheat our people. For instance people from Jumgal didn’t make any contract with foreign companies for their road and now that company doesn’t pay anything for Jumgal people. We also told Chinese company to make a contract and sign it through the notary legally. Where would we search for this Chinese company if they would leave us tomorrow after using our road?

¹ Not related to the author.
In addition, aksakals have become actively engaged in elections. During elections for AO head, aksakals wanted to make sure that the candidate from their village won the elections. They organized pre-lections, where they chose one candidate and forced other to withdraw their candidacies. This exemplifies accommodating nature of this institution (Helmke and Levitsky 2004). Aksakals did not violate the formal rules of elections but did facilitate a selection of ‘their’ candidate who would be compliant to aksakals’ authority. Currently the government has decided to cancel elections at the village level because voting is not fair and just, but based on local ties. As a result, elections have further fragmented communities and created conflicts.

We conducted our own pre-elections before the official elections to select one candidates from our village out of a running of eight. Aksakals didn’t want our village votes to be split... We went to Gulcho(district center) and ordered voting ballots. Every candidate selected his representative (doverennoe litso). Aiyl baschy (village head) made a ballot box and they visited every single house to get a vote. After that we got together and counted votes and our local teacher won the nomination. After that we withdrew our candidacies and let him win the actual elections. If we wouldn’t do this Kyzyl Korgon village would win the elections (school director, village M).

The substitutive nature of aksakal institutions has also weakened the state. Village residents state that all their community matters are first taken to the mosque (a regular gathering place of aksakals) and not the aiyl okmoty office. Aksakals, on the one hand, does not want to weaken the state, and seek state assistance and hope that the state could be more capable. Many of the current aksakals see the Soviet type of state as desirable. Many of them were educated and trained by the Soviet educational system, and have worked for 20-30 years for the Soviet state as brigadiers in kolhozes or lecturers in universities. This link with the state makes aksakals not competitive with the state, but rather cooperative whenever possible. In addition local and regional governments reach out to aksakals to mobilize support during elections. Ironically, aksakals who had supported state officials for minor rewards saw their authority reduce, and are referred to as ‘dejurnyj aksakals’ (aksakals on duty), which suggests that have been ‘bought out’ by the state and their loyalty questioned.

Although some are unhappy about aksakals’ monopoly on decision-making, no other institution can really contested its authority. Aksakals network is exclusive, it prevents other groups from participation in politics. Women and young people are excluded from the decision making process. Dissemination of information is limited and many community members are not fully informed about the decisions taken by the aksakals.

We have a situation where five aksakals have monopolized decision making. But we do not have open conflicts with them. We cannot and we should not. They are in such age. We need to show respect. So we agree with their decisions. But I think so far they have not made really bad decisions (School director, village M). Aksakals have been resolving many conflicts in the past but they failed to be impartial. Because of this they lost people’s trust a bit. These few aksakals make decisions on everyone’s behalf. They [AO head] think if they [aksakals] will approve something then there is no need to ask others. It is very hard to confront them. I cannot ask: ‘Why are you not taking other people’s needs into
consideration. Why are you not thinking about the future?’ I am also an aksakal and cannot quarrel with them (Aksakal, village M).

Migdal (1988) argues that in contexts where countries underwent drastic changes such as market reforms, society is likely to be fragmented. In suburban villages there are many fragmented informal institutions with none of them securing full legitimacy and respect. Residents identify various networks they belonged to or have found to be influential. In this context, many identify with criminal networks as possessing authority.

People unite into gap (network in Uzbek. Literally translated-gossip) here. Aksakals have their own network. Young people have their own gap. Those who have studied together will have one. We help each other during toys (celebrations). People listen to their own leaders, there’s no one leader for all of us (Ayl village head, village E)

If I need help I will not go to police or to ayil okmotu. I will turn to important people. These are the people that have connections with influential state officials and the criminal world. If the criminal world could open a legal office people would go to them to sort out their problems (School teacher, village E)

In suburban context, the society is characterized by, as Migdal (1994) dispersed domination. Here, neither the state nor any of the institutions have established an ‘overarching hegemony’. Each of these actors establishes and maintains authority within a certain arena only. Migdal (1994) argues that social life will then be marked by struggles and standoffs among these various actors over range of issues and resources. Aksakals do not retain their ‘traditional’ authority and are excluded from community decision making, but nevertheless have some authority over ceremonial matters. The battle is partially lost because respectable and knowledgeable aksakals no longer exist.

Frankly speaking aksakals do not have any role. They are barely surviving themselves let alone solve community problems. In the past they had authority. In the past elderly would organize meetings and have their say. That’s why at the start of our independence aksakal courts were working. We used to have respected aksakals who worked as kolhoz heads or schools directors during the Soviet times. They were listened to as they had knowledge and experience. But we have lost today those kind of aksakals, they are gone (Farmer, Village E).

The village situated right next to a biggest market in Central Asia, the market has transformed some of the local values, and young entrepreneurs have emerged. Their economic power translates into political power, whereas aksakals survive on pensions and cannot compete with financial resources (see also Bourdieu 1984 for symbolic struggles).

I can sense how our perception of their authority is changing. It also has to do with the general change in people’s values…If you compare the respect towards poor aksakals and young ‘krutoj’ new Kyrgyz, you can see that no one listens to aksakals. Our poor aksakals sense these changes as well and they have become quiet. There were cases when they were told to be quiet so they have become withdrawn (School director, village E).

Although the network of entrepreneurs seeks power and access to state resources, it is reluctant to perform any of the community services. Many entrepreneurs said that they are too busy to involve in politics. One businessman said: ‘We leave in the early morning
to our jobs and come back late. We don’t see each other, there is no time. We are all surviving."

Helmke and Levitsky (2004) would suggest that business networks are dysfunctional informal institutions. They do not substitute nor assist the state, but they capture it. They engaged in fierce competition amongst themselves to win the position of aïyl okmotu head. One of the richest local businessmen won the election twice. One of the candidates describes the last election as fiercely competitive, as the battle of ‘their pockets’. She explains that candidates spent astronomical sums of money to win elections.

Well, our AO head managed to buy off everyone. I think I was the one with least money…I spent about 1 000 000 soms [USD 24 000] on my elections and I did not win. Everything is accomplished only with money. You also have to bribe people. No one will vote for you unless you hand some money in their hands (Candidate for AO head, village E).

Migdal (1994) argues that even in cases of dispersed domination, the state will still play an important role. Aïyl okmoty is important because it is captured by local elites and it has sufficient capacity to accomplish projects. The AO in village E recently increased its budget by 25 times. It gained some social control by asphaltalling the roads, rebuilding several schools, and building several new sport centers.

Since AO is captured by local elites, the key decision-making involves only a few influential informal leaders. Since people are aware of this system, they ask their informal leaders to communicate their matters to the head of aïyl okmoty. One of the informal leaders said that the key decisions are done informally, in small private meetings:

Our AO does not have a fair process of prioritizing and negotiating different needs. I lobby the interest of our village and we get things…You have many people pulling the ‘blanket’ on their side. We all know that if the baby does not cry it won’t get mother’s milk.

Another informal leader said:

Sometimes people ask me to communicate to him[aïyl omoty head] our water problems or the need to clean the canal. Our canal needs cleaning every two years and we don’t have the technology. So then I go and talk to him. He helps us with technology or money. He never refused to help me and people know this. Sometimes if he can not help us with money he suggests we collect money from every household to do the work. But later he cuts down our costs from taxes.
Conclusion

The paper examines how institutional arrangements are a result of contestation and accommodation between the state and various informal institutions (social forces). The states cannot establish domination by default and it struggles and bargains with various informal institutions for social control and domination of its rules. The study also highlights how the state does not exist outside of society, and it is constantly molded by it. There are different outcomes of state-society interactions. In the mountainous villages, in the context of weak state and active international intervention, aksakals can appropriate the state. In many areas, aksakals functions as substitutive and complementary institutions. They transform into accommodating institution during elections to compete for power and retain their authority. The suburban village exemplifies the common battle between state and society, where no single group monopolizes the power, and they engage in different bargaining games. The paper also shows how the state is still important despite the weak capacity, because very few informal institutions want to compete with it.

The research suggests that tribal and clan divisions do not play a political role. There is little support for informal institutions based on uruu (clan). The study also contributes to the literature on transitions to democracy, decentralization and development. Institutional engineering has its limits and democratization and market reforms might produce results that were not anticipated. In the context of rural poverty and weak state capacity, local politics do not follow a democratic model. Finally, the paper contributes to development studies literature, suggesting that without the knowledge of the local power structures, international intervention can be misguided.
References


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