

Institutional Capacities of the Mahalla Institution in the Formation of Civil Society in New Uzbekistan

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Abstract: This article examines the philosophical essence of the mahalla as a civil institution in the context of New Uzbekistan, focusing on its social ontology, axiological foundations, and praxeological functions in the process of civil society formation. The study conceptualizes the mahalla not merely as a traditional community structure, but as a complex socio-philosophical phenomenon that embodies mechanisms of local self-organization, collective responsibility, and normative regulation within society. Particular attention is devoted to analyzing the interrelation between the mahalla institution and key contemporary socio-philosophical categories, including social identification, social capital, and civic participation.

The analysis demonstrates that within the framework of the ongoing socio-political transformations in New Uzbekistan, the mahalla functions as an important mediating institution that facilitates the interaction between the state and society, while simultaneously reinforcing the cultural and moral foundations of communal life. Consequently, the mahalla institution is theoretically substantiated as not only a historically rooted social structure but also as a significant socio-philosophical mechanism that contributes to the sustainable development of civil society institutions and the consolidation of the spiritual and ethical stability of society.

Keywords: mahalla institution, civil society, social ontology, axiological system, praxeological functions, social capital, civic participation, collective solidarity, social identification, New Uzbekistan.

Introduction

In the context of contemporary globalization, issues related to ensuring the sustainable development of society, protecting the interests of the population, and addressing social problems at the local level have become increasingly significant. Under such conditions, particular attention should be devoted to the mahalla institution, which constitutes one of the fundamental components of civil society. Throughout centuries, the mahalla has remained an integral element of the social organization of the Uzbek people, functioning not only as a territorial unit but also as a distinctive social, cultural, and moral space that facilitates community cohesion and socialization. Within Uzbek society, the mahalla has historically operated as a unique mechanism of local governance, articulating and representing the everyday needs, interests, and concerns of the population. Traditionally, the mahalla functioned as a form of community-based self-governance characterized by principles of public accountability, mutual assistance, collective solidarity, and social responsibility. Consequently, the mahalla institution should be analyzed not merely as an administrative structure but as a complex social institution that embodies historically rooted mechanisms of communal organization and normative regulation. “The mahalla is, first of all, a healthy social environment. Public opinion, which has a strong influence here, regulates the behavior and relationships of mahalla residents based on justice and moral criteria. There are great opportunities for

the effective organization of spiritual work among the general public in the mahalla. In particular, the mahalla plays an invaluable role in the development of such qualities as national values, kindness, and the struggle for the honor of the country”[1;378].

During the years of independence in Uzbekistan, the legal status of the mahalla institution has been substantially strengthened, its institutional capacities have been expanded, and the necessary socio-political conditions have been established for it to function as an effective intermediary between the state and society. At present, the mahalla actively participates in addressing a wide range of social issues, including youth education and socialization, social protection of vulnerable groups, resolution of family-related problems, poverty reduction initiatives, and the maintenance of public safety at the community level.

Research Methodology

The present study aims to elucidate the philosophical essence of the mahalla as a civil institution within the socio-political context of New Uzbekistan, focusing on a comprehensive analysis of its social ontology, axiological content, and praxeological functions. The research methodology is constructed upon a multi-layered philosophical framework that integrates socio-philosophical analysis, an institutional approach, and a set of interdisciplinary research methods. Within this methodological framework, the mahalla is conceptualized not merely as a traditional territorial community but as a complex socio-institutional formation that embodies historically rooted mechanisms of communal self-organization, normative regulation, and civic participation. The analytical perspective adopted in this study enables the exploration of the mahalla institution through the interrelated dimensions of ontological presence, value-based orientation, and practical social functionality.

Overall, the integration of these methodological approaches makes it possible to examine the philosophical foundations of the mahalla civil institution in a comprehensive manner, encompassing its ontological, axiological, and praxeological dimensions. Consequently, the study provides a theoretical substantiation of the mahalla’s role in the context of New Uzbekistan as a significant socio-philosophical mechanism that contributes to sustainable social development, stimulates civic engagement, and reinforces collective solidarity within society.

Result and Discussion

Various theoretical approaches exist in the scientific study of the mahalla institution, allowing for a deeper understanding of its role in social life. In social sciences, the mahalla is often interpreted as: “a social institution”, “a component of civil society”, “and a form of self-governance”. According to the sociological approach, the mahalla represents a system of social relations in which interactions, social roles, and norms among individuals are formed. From this perspective, the mahalla functions as a mechanism that ensures social stability within society. Within the framework of the mahalla, individuals adapt to social requirements, internalize social values, and perceive themselves as part of the community. From the legal perspective, the mahalla is considered an organ of citizens’ self-governance. This approach serves to define the legal status, powers, and role of the mahalla within the system of public administration. Particularly in the conditions of independent Uzbekistan, the legal consolidation of the mahalla institution and the assignment of specific responsibilities have increased the significance of this approach.

From a political and philosophical perspective, the mahalla is recognized as a fundamental institution of civil society. According to civil society theory, independent social structures must exist between the state and individuals. The mahalla represents one such structure and plays an important role in expressing and protecting the interests of the population.

The theory of local self-government first emerged in Western Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century. It developed through in-depth analyses of the relationships between local authorities and self-governing bodies, as well as the principle of electing representatives responsible for managing public

affairs. During the early stages of modern history, the concept of the independence of self-governing bodies elected by citizens attracted serious attention from the academic community. These institutions were considered distinct from central government authority in managing the affairs of rural communities and cities. As a result, it became common to view them as separate entities operating outside the sphere of state administration. The European Charter of Local Self-Government, adopted by the Council of Europe on October 15, 1985, defines this concept in Article 3 as follows: “Local self-government denotes the right and the ability of local authorities, within the limits of the law, to regulate and manage a substantial share of public affairs under their own responsibility and in the interests of the local population”[2]

These rights may be exercised by councils or assemblies composed of members freely elected through secret, equal, direct, and universal elections, or by executive bodies accountable to them.

Of course, laws are imperfect in many ways. Even the most ideal law will never work without a well-oiled, proven, and effective mechanism for its implementation. The Strugatsky brothers discussed this in their novel: “When I come to a foreign country, I never ask whether the laws there are good or bad. I only ask whether they are enforced”[3]. Indeed, the democratic nature of laws in every country is determined not only by their humanistic content but also by the approach to their implementation.

The role of local governance in democracy was also emphasized by Alexis de Tocqueville in *Democracy in America*, where he wrote: “Town institutions are to liberty what primary schools are to science; they bring it within the people’s reach”[4]. Tocqueville argued that participation in local institutions allows citizens to develop democratic values and civic responsibility. The opportunities inherent in such institutions are extremely broad, providing citizens with favorable conditions for political participation. Self-governance institutions create unique opportunities for the formation of elements of political culture. Consequently, their activity ensures both the stability and adaptability of the political system. The stronger the role of civil institutions becomes, the more society moves toward democratization, ultimately leading to the development of a truly free and open society. However, as Tocqueville emphasized, “a nation may formally establish a free government without non-governmental organizations or collective institutions”[4]. Nevertheless, in such circumstances, citizens would not possess the true spirit of freedom. It should be noted that self-governance—namely local or municipal administration—is a method of managing local affairs carried out by elected bodies representing the interests of the population in administrative-territorial units, along with their administrative apparatus”. In Western Europe, this concept initially developed as a theoretical framework. In civil society, the stronger the role of public institutions becomes, the more society moves toward democratization and the development of a free and open society.

In the second half of the 20th century, in conjunction with the “welfare state” theory, “the concept of municipal (self-governing) administration also began to evolve. Consequently, municipalities came to be seen as a means of providing social services that equally guarantee and protect the interests of all segments of the population within a given territory”[5].

Mahalla, as an institution in Uzbek society, has evolved not only as a historical tradition but also as an essential component of contemporary state and societal governance. Its legal foundations and practical activities within social life are closely interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Without a solid legal framework, the mahalla institution would face difficulties in effectively performing its social functions. Conversely, without active participation in social life, the mahalla would remain merely a formal administrative structure. Therefore, this chapter analyzes the legal status of the mahalla institution and its practical activities in the social sphere as an integrated system.

Consequently, institutions of self-governance function as a pivotal intermediary nexus linking the state and citizens, through which a distinct form of social relationship between public authority and the populace emerges. The construction and consolidation of civil society cannot be confined solely to ensuring citizens’ participation in public and governmental affairs. Rather, self-governing bodies

establish the institutional and normative conditions necessary for citizens to attain a meaningful and recognized position within the structures of state and societal life.

This process encompasses the advancement of education and upbringing, the enhancement of individuals' professional competencies, intellectual capacity, and creative potential, as well as the strengthening of mechanisms of social protection. A fundamental mission of these institutions is to elevate the civic consciousness and spiritual-moral development of each individual, while simultaneously working to eliminate negative manifestations such as parochialism, regionalism, and narrow communal particularism.

Professor Kang Bong Ku of the Institute for Asia–Pacific Studies at Hanyang University (Republic of Korea), who has conducted scholarly research on the essence and significance of the mahalla institution in Uzbekistan, emphasizes that “the most crucial aspect of the functioning of the mahalla lies in its close cooperation and partnership with state institutions. The mahalla addresses numerous issues that fall beyond the jurisdiction of formal legal regulations through the principles of humanitarianism and neighborhood solidarity. The preservation and intergenerational transmission of traditional values, the promotion of a healthy lifestyle, and the provision of social protection for the population constitute some of the most important functions of the mahalla”[6]

In academic discourse, this observation highlights the role of the mahalla as a community-based socio-institutional mechanism that complements formal governance structures by integrating traditional social norms, informal regulatory practices, and locally embedded forms of social support within the broader framework of civil society development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the mahalla institution constitutes a multifaceted social institution of strategic significance within Uzbek society. It operates not merely as a manifestation of historical and cultural heritage, but also as a fundamental pillar of the contemporary civil society framework. The significance of the mahalla institution becomes particularly evident in the organic interrelation between its normative–legal foundations and its practical functionality within the sphere of social life.

As an organ of citizens' self-governance, the mahalla performs the function of a stable intermediary mechanism linking the state and society. The everyday problems, needs, and interests of the population are primarily identified, articulated, and addressed at the mahalla level. This process contributes to the decentralization of social governance, bringing administrative and social decision-making processes closer to the local population.

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