DOI: 10.52536/3006-807X.2026-4.001 PP 4-26 ORIGINAL ARTICLE

PATTERNS OF TRADITIONALIZATION OF SOCIETY IN UZBEKISTAN: CONFLICTING AND CONCURRING DISCOURSES ON THE OLD AND THE NEW

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Article History:
Received: 17 October 2025
Revised: 5 February 2026
Accepted: 9 February 2026

ABSTRACT. *Traditionalization of society has become a major trend in Uzbekistan over recent years. Bearing on a set of discursive strategies pertaining to social struggle over legitimization as well as mechanisms of grappling with impacts of globalization, the resurgence of traditionalization clearly presents one of the most significant paradigms underlying societal change in Uzbekistan. In this article, we set out to explore this shift and its structural characteristic traits. After a brief introduction that includes some empirical, conceptual, and methodological considerations, we will, first, work out a compact analytical framework in which we maintain that tradition and its manifestations hinge on the realm of the social and are, in fact, more fluid and dynamic than commonly assumed. Second, considering the inseparable link between tradition and patriarchy, we will show how patrimonial as well as patriarchal structures reinforce and legitimize the discourse of tradition. Based on these critical considerations, we will, third, discuss the traditionalist resurgence in Uzbekistan and shed light on its implications.*

KEYWORDS: *traditionalization, tradition, state and society, subject, power and security, Uzbekistan, Central Asia.*

INTRODUCTION: EMPIRICAL, CONCEPTUAL, AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Traditionalization of society has become a major trend in Uzbekistan over recent years. While this trend is particularly remarkable in light of the coming to power of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in 2016, it cannot be conceived as a necessary or inevitable outcome of his policies. Indeed, policies of recent years under Mirziyoyev have contributed to a significant opening up of the public discursive space in a broader sense, also including traditionalist views and attitudes. That notwithstanding, the traditionalist turn is a remarkable development worthy of thorough investigation in its own right. At the most basic level, collective predispositions towards traditionalization rest with the commonplace and ordinary sites of daily life, value, and belief systems. It has its roots in familiar reiterations, repertoires, and replications that go beyond day-to-day politics and wield enormous symbolic power over processes of social transformation across all walks of life. At the macro level, growing affinity towards traditionalism may

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be conceived as a part and parcel of broader global forces at play in which recourses to traditional values, norms, practices, beliefs, attitudes, and a relatively high degree of religiosity seem to garner an increasing support across tradition-oriented parts of societies. This often takes place in reaction to what is perceived to be challenges and risks posed by cultural globalization (cf. Vasilache, 2025). Therefore, the resurgence of traditionalization bears simultaneously on strategies of local struggles over social legitimization as well as on mechanisms, in the broader sense, of grappling with the wide-ranging impacts of globalization.

The traditionalist turn is a relatively new trend in which appeal to tradition has become a vibrant part of the public imagination and an important point of reference for social change for all kinds of actors across the entire politico-cultural spectrum. This broad variety of actors includes, inter alia, national elites, diverse conservative segments in society, religious leaders, various disseminators of Muslim beliefs and ways of life, civil society networks and activists (see e.g., Peyrouse & Nasritdinov, 2021; Saini, 2024), and a new and nascent intelligentsia. Focusing on the traditionalist turn, in this article, we aim to make the following threefold contribution. Firstly, we work out a brief analytical framework in which we hold that since tradition hinges on the realm of the social and entails no self-evident or clear-cut meaning, tradition and its manifestations in societal discourses are in fact more fluid and dynamic than commonly assumed. Tradition is, in fact, inseparable from the present, and in being so, change is a defining underlying element of any traditionalist discourse. Therefore, however counterintuitive, traditionalist discourses invariably entail elements of creation and invention. Secondly, on the basis of these critical considerations about the notion of tradition and the resulting heuristic framework of traditionalization, we will discuss the link between tradition and patriarchy, and we will show how patrimonial as well as patriarchal structures reinforce and legitimize the discourse of tradition. Thereby, we will, thirdly, focus on Uzbekistan as an illustrative example and try to uncover the main character traits of the traditionalist resurgence in the country.

While a fair amount of discussion has focused on what tradition means in the current Central Asian context (cf. e.g., Beyer & Finke, 2019; Beyer & Kojobekova, 2019; Cleuziou, 2019; Müller, 2019; Zhussipbek & Nagayeva, 2021), little attention has been paid to exploring traditionalization in Uzbekistan. At the same time, Uzbek society is the largest in post-Soviet Central Asia with a considerable impact in the region and on neighboring societal discourses. That said, we are interested in conceptions of traditionalization in Uzbekistan, understood as processes and discourses that reveal social struggles over ideas of commonly acceptable and legitimate social order and reflect upon ideas and ideologies of proper subjectivity and society, thereby ultimately molding ideas of power. When discursive invocations of the traditional increasingly serve as a collective frame of reference in diagnosing and addressing social problems across different layers of social strata, how then do such narrative appeals relate to the ways in which power is claimed, wielded, or contested? Our starting point is that the concept of tradition is inseparable from the idea and experience of power, both as discursively constructed and as a commonly claimed set of rules.

By combining theoretical insights with empirical investigation, our purpose is not semantic, that is, outlining the various ways in which the concept of tradition is used, or should be used. Our purpose is also not to merely discuss the process of traditionalization as such, but to attempt to shed light on the broader background conditions that underlie its emergence. The approach we adopt originates from an interest in addressing a significant lacuna in research on traditionalization in Uzbekistan (see also Elmuradov, 2024), namely, providing insights into ways the discourse of tradition interacts with patrimonialism, on the one hand and with nation-state building efforts undertaken by national elites, on the other hand. In doing so, we aim to provide a contribution towards understanding some of the important politico-sociological undercurrents at play.

That said, the article is structured in the following way. We will start by engaging in theoretical considerations on the invention of tradition and inquiring into the intimate relationship of tradition with the present. We will expand the theoretical discussion of this link with the Foucauldian concept of discursive power as creative production. Then we will show that there is another inseparable link, namely between tradition and patriarchy, and that this link is underlined by a complex system of beliefs that permeates virtually all aspects of social life. Thus, we also intend to cast light on patrimonialism, but also patriarchal thinking within society,[1] and how they influence the politics of traditionalist resurgence. Finally, based on these twofold theoretical considerations, we will take a look at patterns of traditionalization in Uzbekistan. While this will deliberately not be an empirical analysis, Uzbekistan is both a relevant and illuminative case for the interplay of traditionalization with government policies, on the one hand and social dynamics, on the other hand, as well as for both the parallelism and ambivalence of traditionalization and de-traditionalization patterns.

TRADITION AND THE PRESENT

Tradition and the present stand in a complex relationship to one another. It is important to note from the outset that the concept of "tradition" by no means entails a self-evident or clear-cut meaning. It cannot be claimed that tradition is a pre-social phenomenon. Quite on the contrary, tradition hinges on the very realm of the social, its manifestations are, in fact, more fluid and dynamic than often assumed in public debates. Tradition is not only in need of constant representation in discourses, but also invariably entails the active creation of something new. It requires elements of creation not only because "traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin" (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 1) but also because, very importantly, tradition is inseparable from the present, and in being so, it is the present and its discursive power that is and should be a defining element in any attempt to properly address the phenomenon of tradition.

Thus, since tradition is inseparable from the present, it cannot be understood merely by looking back in time, but mainly by focusing on the present. This seemingly obvious claim entails significant analytical implications and important consequences and reveals something fundamental about the complicated relationship between tradition and the present. In spite of the fact that tradition is an inherently ambivalent phenomenon in

[1] While being fully aware as well as taking into account that patrimonialism and patriarchy are closely interrelated to one another (see Thomas, 2011; Ugur-Cinar, 2017), we will understand patrimonialism here in Weber's sense (see the section on patrimonial discourses below; see also Sell, 2017) as an institutionalized pattern of legitimacy-production of organizations, while we will speak of patriarchal patterns, rationalities etc. when highlighting the societal as well as individual level.

the sense that it reflects a constant struggle over meaning, traditionalist resurgence is often presented as an attempt to uphold and keep alive an invariably centuries-old and uninterruptedly continuing set of practices, beliefs, and customs. Proponents and advocates of traditionalist discourses invoke and depict tradition as a societal resource of authenticity, eternalness, and even sacredness (see e.g., Vasilache, 2025). Tradition in this sense is invoked in temporal opposition between "the old times" and "the present" in which the former is supposed to imply the presence of tradition and thus validity and legitimacy, and the latter, the lack of it.

Tradition, according to Giddens, is a "necessarily active and interpretative concept" and "the integrity of tradition derives not from the simple fact of persistence over time but from the continuous reinterpretation that is carried out to identify the strands which bind present to past" (Giddens, 1994, p. 64). As he states, "[t]he past is not preserved but continuously reconstructed on the basis of the present" (Giddens, 1994, p. 63). Traditions may be reconstructions that are partially "individual or private", but "at a more fundamental level they are always social" (Giddens, 1994, p. 63). There can be no purely private tradition as there can be no purely private language. Moreover, for Giddens, tradition even transcends the present since established practices are claimed to be used as a way to organize the future. In this sense, tradition is — necessarily — also a normative concept. It represents not only what "is" done in a society but also what "should be" done (Giddens, 1994, p. 65). According to Giddens, tradition is "bound up with collective memory", involves a "formulaic notion of truth" and thus "offers a sense of ontological security to those who adhere to it" (Giddens, 1994, p. 65). In so far as tradition is not a fixed object of history, but a part of a process of identity formation, it consequently entails ontological and epistemological implications that bear important discursive significance. In this sense, and in a somewhat critical reading, one can concur that performing traditional practices entails their modification and new interpretation (cf. Anttonen, 2005, p. 35). Thus, Anttonen observes that "as processes of change, appropriation, and interpretation, and as authoritative relationships created between the present and the past, traditions appear as rhetorical constructions that denote an active and political process of creating historical meaning" (Anttonen, 2005, p. 35).

Indeed, tradition, at least in the sense we use here, is not an object of history to merely hand down from generation to generation in the manner of inherited property. Traditions permanently change, are transformed, and need to be adapted, as it were, in the course of ongoing societal renegotiations. And like any other dimension of societal transformation, the process of traditionalization entails elements of invention and creation. In order to account for the role of traditions in changing societies, the historian Eric Hobsbawm has coined the notion of the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 2). The notion is used by Hobsbawm in a broad sense that includes traditions that are actually established only recently, but also those that are constantly (re-)constructed by different actors, as well as those that are "emerging within a brief and dateable period" (Hobsbawm, 1983). According to Hobsbawm, it is "the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant, that makes invention of tradition so interesting" (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 2). He puts forward that the invention of traditions "occurs more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys

the social patterns for which old traditions had been designed, producing new ones to which they were not applicable" (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 4). Nevertheless, "one must be beware of making assumptions that older forms of community and authority structures, and traditions associated with them, were unadaptable and became rapidly inviable" (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 5). While we don't attempt in this paper to enter into the discussion of older forms of community and authority structures and their (in-)viability in modern contexts, we are mindful of the fact that traditionalist imagination appeals to symbolic communities and authority structures within which individuals are envisioned to be made into, and to operate as, subjects. Thus, the appeal to tradition always entails particular ideas and ideals of, as well as attempts to, subjectivization.

At the same time, however, it is important to put the notion of "invention" into perspective. While it highlights the constructed and creative, i.e., the new character of tradition, it should not be misunderstood to denote the completely new construction of something from scratch. The invention of tradition is not, and cannot be, just arbitrary, accidental, or a purposeful innovation without any foundation. In contrast to the colloquial use of the word "invention" — for instance, in "the invention of the steam engine" or "the invention of the lithium battery", in our context, the term should not be understood to imply the coming up of something completely new and unheard of before. Much rather, the invention of tradition can be understood as the creation of a patchwork, consisting of (refurbished) existing elements as well as new aspects. This understanding considers, on the one hand, the constructivist dimension of the new in the creation of tradition. On the other hand, it takes seriously that not each and every practice can be justified and, more importantly, rendered plausible to the addressees as a supposed tradition in just any context and at any time. Thus, traditions cannot be invented just out of the blue.

In this respect, the Foucauldian undertaking of writing the genealogy of power (see also Vasilache, 2023), as well as of discourses and power, understood as a critical endeavor (see Hook, 2005), can be helpful. Looking at the production of tradition, we see that the claim of continuity plays an important role in traditionalist narratives and, thus, can be seen to be highly important for the establishment of tradition. Foucault's concept of genealogy — which "should not be confused with genesis and filiation" (Foucault, 2009, p. 117) — allows describing the very creative production of the discursive claim of the historicity and continuity of discourses. Following Foucault, genealogy functions as a "de-centering" (Foucault, 2009, p. 118) of the question of evolution into making and, thus, rejects the idea of historical necessity (cf. Foucault, 2009, pp.118, 276). In particular, Foucault's history of the prison demonstrates that the genealogy of discourses and power works as a constant (and perpetual) process that, indeed, includes the reference and reuse of existing elements, practices, and rules of knowledge and of knowledge production (see Foucault, 1975, chs. III, IV). At the same time, such reference is highly innovative and inventive since it is selective regarding the elements that are reactivated — or made obsolete by not reactivating them (see Foucault, 1975, chs. III, IV; 2009, p. 117). Moreover, the continual reference and reactivation of elements, practices, and rules of knowledge production is far from a sheer repetition of the past, but a continual innovation, reformulation, updating, and change to meet current functional needs (see Foucault, 1975, chs. III, IV; 2009, p. 117).

Finally, and surely not least, Foucault's insight into the inseparable connection between power and knowledge reveals that the genealogy of discourses is intrinsically power-related — while rejecting a simplistic and, following Foucault, circular idea of institutional power as command and submission (cf. Foucault, 2009, pp.117, 119, 354). In sum, Foucault's concept shows both the selective reactivation and obsolescence of antecedent elements, practices, and rules of knowledge as well as their incessant modification and change, taking place in an inextricable network of knowledge and power. Thus, the conceptual framework of the genealogy of discourses allows a power-sensitive perspective on tradition and tradition-making that describes how the new creation of supposedly unaltered tradition takes place, is made plausible in and for the respective context, and, thus, is embedded in the present of the given place, space, and context.

In addition, Foucault's concept of discursive power is particularly fruitful for better understanding the construction of tradition because he sees power not as a unidirectional force and rejects the idea of an instrumental construction and use of discourses and knowledge through power, but regards power as working on the discursive level itself (see e.g. Foucault, 1975; 1980):

> By de-institutionalizing and de-functionalizing relations of power we can grasp their genealogy, i.e., the way they are formed, connect up with each other, develop, multiply, and are transformed on the basis of something other than themselves, on the basis of processes that are something other than relations of power. (Foucault, 2009, p. 119)

This, however, does not only urge to take power seriously in the discursive construction of tradition, but also — an aspect that is quite regularly missed in studies working with Foucault's concept of discursive power — to put the impact of power into perspective and, in fact, also acknowledge its limits. Structurally similar to the point just mentioned that the notion of "invention" must not be understood to imply that basically everything is possible and that just "anything goes", the Foucauldian concept of the power/knowledge nexus (Foucault, 1980) does not only imply the inevitability of power, but also that power is one important, but not the only epistemic element in the production of knowledge. Aspects of power are necessary, but not sufficient in order to understand how a particular discursive construction of tradition is made plausible and becomes viable — or when this is not the case. This perspective takes account of the observation that attempts of tradition-construction can fail — even when formulated in (supposedly) powerful discursive contexts.

Having said this, the discursive reference to the past in order to construct traditions of a novel type under new circumstances and sometimes for quite novel purposes is something we may call a paradox of traditionalization. The paradox of traditionalization consists in the fact that it is in the name of stability and continuity of tradition that social actors, in fact, call for reform and change. We may witness this especially when social actors draw on tradition to narrate a story of a common past to unite a heterogeneous population under one flag. In doing so, ideas and practices of the past undergo a modern refurbishment (cf. Anttonen, 2005). Actually, traditionalist narratives are flexible in that they are adapted to new circumstances. As a result, the tradition constructed in traditionalist discourses is — and this is its paradoxical structure — to a considerable degree original and new, and can be considered to be *regressive innovation*.

In a similar way, traditionalization can be understood as an interactive and productive process of collective sense-making by which elements of culture or society are modified or adapted to fit into a more traditional framework. The theoretical framework of traditionalization involves examining how cultural practices, beliefs, values, and norms are reinterpreted in light of changing social conditions. Several factors can contribute to the process of traditionalization: globalization, modernization, cultural encounters, social movements, etc. Whereas an increased global interconnectedness can lead to the blending of cultures, societies may in response seek to preserve or reclaim an idea of traditional identity as a way to resist supposed cultural homogenization. Equally importantly, as societies change and seek to open themselves to the world, modernize and adopt new ideas and technologies (as in the case of Uzbekistan), there may be a simultaneous resurgence of interest in traditional practices. This interest can be driven, among others, by a desire to maintain a sense of stable collective identity in the face of rapid change or as a form of cultural nostalgia. All in all, the process of traditionalization involves a complex interplay between continuity and change, as societies negotiate their cultural identity in the context of broader social and cultural transformations. In this continuum of constant negotiation, discursive elements are particularly fluid and prone to change. What appears at first sight to be a reference to uninterruptedly continuing and authentic traditions, at second and closer sight turns out as something that is in fact held together under the dictum of the present, i.e., social changes, shifting socio-cultural, generational, ideational, and power constellations resulting from present challenges. As we shall point out using different illustrative examples from Uzbekistan, the process of societal traditionalization can be seen as a complex interplay between historical legacies, globalization and modernization processes, government policies, and social dynamics.

Thus, since "tradition is not an object of fixed history but a part of a process of identity formation," we should regard tradition as "an interpretative concept, not a descriptive one" (Beyer & Finke, 2019, p. 314). In other words, "tradition reflects the tensions between continuity and change, or predictability and flexibility" (Beyer & Finke, 2019, p. 314). Understood in such a way, one is better positioned to rethink and re-examine ostensibly familiar terrains in light of persisting social struggles. This allows taking a new look at the often volatile and unstable ground upon which the purportedly everlasting and monumental edifice of tradition is believed to reign. It also allows to cross-examine different discursive dimensions and facets of tradition, to grasp the subtle nuances and shades of its meaning, and to understand how meanings are attached to a particular depiction and representation of tradition rather than merely drawn from. By the same token, we hold that such a notion of tradition is more conducive to the analysis of social struggles over meaning, over ideas of legitimate social order, and ultimately over relations of power in a given society.

However, the discursive practice of constructing tradition entails not only elements of adaptation and reconstruction under new circumstances. Although these processes are very important, they need to be accompanied also by the articulation and enunciation of existing differences and distinctions that are registered and marked. In such processes, inequalities are reconfirmed and reinforced in accordance with established power positions. Thus, the traditional is expressed not least on the grounds

of social hierarchies. As Beyer and Finke put it, "[o]n a political level, many cases of retraditionalization can be interpreted as paths by which powerful local and national actors try to redefine social order in their own interests and impose a corresponding set of rules of the game on everyone around" (Beyer & Finke, 2019, p. 314). Thus, after having argued that and how the discourse of tradition is inherently linked to the present, and that this linkage has fundamental implications, we will now take a look at another structurally important link, namely the link between tradition, patrimonialism, and patriarchy, constructed as a primary social structure of power.

TRADITION AND PATRIMONIAL SOCIAL DISCOURSES

There is an inseparable link between tradition and patrimonial social discourses, underlined by a complex system of culturally embedded beliefs, symbols, norms, and values that penetrate virtually all aspects of social life. This intimate nexus fosters a legitimizing role for the continuous reinforcement of patrimonial social structures (Erdmann & Engel, 2006). Patrimonial social discourses and structures are not necessarily based on, and surely not limited to, patrimonial narratives, but are constituted as an all-encompassing perspective — or even world view — permeating basically all social relations and ordering society.

Patrimonial social discourses can be understood as culturally embedded narratives, representations, and systems of meaning that normalize and legitimize power asymmetries in societies by framing patriarchal dominance, gender roles, and hierarchies as natural, inevitable, and/or socially desirable. Patrimonial social discourses predominantly and fundamentally circulate through language. They are, however, also reflected in the functioning of social institutions and everyday practices since they shape how people understand power and authority, social roles, and identities. Like any discourse, patrimonial social discourses operate through representation and articulation, be it through representation and articulation in policy, media, religion, education, law, etc. Although they do not necessarily require a perpetual explicit articulation, they are nevertheless perpetually articulated in implicit agreements, thus, are highly conventionalized and reproduced unconsciously.

Furthermore, patrimonialism can be seen as a characteristic trait of particular political regimes — and indeed plays a crucial role in the political systems in Central Asia (see for an overview Izquierdo-Brichs & Serra-Massansalvador, 2021). At the same time, patrimonialism has a thick cultural subtext, including beliefs and imaginaries of traditional rules of succession and power that play an important role as narratives that legitimize structures in both politics and society (see, for a study of the Russian case, Elmuradov, 2023). Since this seems to be the case in re-traditionalization processes in Uzbekistan, we will take a particular look at the function of patrimonial imaginations and narratives for the justification and fostering of patrimonial structures in Uzbek politics and society. In addition to the structure and impact of political patrimonialism in Uzbekistan (see Ruiz-Ramas & Morales Hernández, 2021), there are multiple dimensions to patrimonial social structures, of which we will treat three dimensions in order to understand the inner workings of patrimonialism and cast light on the link between patrimonialism and tradition-making.

First and foremost, patrimonialism, as any other set of social conventions, functions best when it is not widely contested, but operates as a quasi-natural and self-evident force. Hence, patrimonialism comprises tacit cultural, cognitive, and affective templates, implicit understandings, and intuitive notions of the constitution of social order. Embodied in collective scripts, narratives, and stories told time and again as well as normalized through socializing institutions and everyday practices, patrimonialism provides a profound and overarching background of both individual behavior and social interaction. It is this structuring background against the backdrop of which people come to conceive and make sense of basic concepts in everyday social situations and relations, but also of human affairs of a complex nature, beliefs of earthly and heavenly significance, matters of power, authority, and social legitimacy. Such a background shapes the very thinkability and intelligibility of institutions, ideas, policies, etc. Thus, patrimonialism works as an unspoken, almost "natural" force. Even when it manifests itself in spoken words, its verbal expressions may come across as nothing short of obvious and unquestionable truth. This is reflected, for instance, in everyday wisdoms and ready-made reality-constituting scripts that circulate and have particular proverbial currency in a given society. For example, as it directly relates to our case, there is a saying in Uzbekistan that goes, quite revealing, that if "father approves, thus God approves" (*"Ota rozi, xudo rozi"*). Just like any other power matrix in a society, patrimonialism seems to operate best when it unfolds fluently, irresistibly, and almost effortlessly in everyday language as an unquestioned and unquestionable rationality.

Secondly, and equally important, one of the main principles upon which social order and legitimacy in a patrimonial society is based is the idea of male paternal authority. The idea of male paternal authority orders society along the lines of gender inequality. This normative idea owes its origins, according to Weber, to the authority of the father, at multiple complex levels. Tradition constitutes a crucial element of patrimonialism. Weber describes patrimonial domination as "primarily traditional, even though it is exercised by virtue of the ruler's personal autonomy" (Weber, 1978, p. 232). By traditional authority, Weber means authority based "on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them" (Weber, 1978, p. 215). Based on ideal typical distinctions, Weber's definition of patrimonialism was later adopted and popularized by Shmuel Eisenstadt as neopatrimonialism. His approach aims at analyzing contemporary societies in which patrimonialism still operates, but does so under more complex systems and therefore needs to be rethought accordingly (Eisenstadt, 1973). According to Schatzberg, patrimonialism is based on acceptance at a collective un- or subconscious level (see also Lacan, 2017) of the idea of male paternal authority. In patrimonial social contexts, there is a "tacit normative idea that government stands in the same relationship to its citizens as a father does to his children", also mirrored in metaphors, such as "presidential father" (Schatzberg, 1993, p. 455). As Ugur-Cinar argues,

> by providing shortcuts in the minds of citizens, politicians can rely on culturally embedded roles and obligations about family members. As fathers and husbands, state authorities are to be esteemed as natural sources of authority. At times as children and at times as wives, citizens are expected to follow the lead of the all-knowing leader who will bring happiness and fortune to the rest. (Ugur-Cinar, 2017, p. 328)

Under patrimonialism, formal rules may exist, but they are not always adhered to as the patrimonial ideology penetrates the legal-rational system and interferes with its logics and functions. For instance, it has been well observed with respect to power transition in neopatrimonial political systems of Central Asia that "transitions at the top of the power hierarchy represent a caesura" which "can be accompanied by disintegration of the political system or even of the state's unity", and that "because regularized procedures for the transfer of power are usually lacking, even when an autocrat dies of natural causes, his passing leads to an exceptional, transitional situation that is often highly precarious. Struggles over power and policy directions may erupt, as well as those over key positions and the country's future political orientation" (Vasilache, 2017, p. 25). Having said this, the paternal-like hierarchical power structures in which Central Asian leaders are embedded are, in parts, also reflected in the various flattering titles they have adopted. For instance, the former president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, was informally referred to as *Doda* ("papa"). And whereas his Kazakh counterpart Nursultan Nazarbayev has been known in his country as *Yelbasy* ("leader of the nation"), the Tajik president Emomali Rahmon has chosen to be referred to by the lengthy and time-consuming title of *The Founder of Peace and National Unity, Leader of the Nation, President of the Republic of Tajikistan, His Excellency Emomali Rahmon.* However, none among the Central Asian leaders surpasses the former Turkmen President Saparmyrat Nyýazow, who named himself *Türkmenbaşy* ("head of all Turkmen"), and his successor Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov, who adopted the title *Arkadag* ("protector"), or his son, the current president of Turkmenistan, Serdar Berdimukhamedov, who allows himself to be called *Türkenistanyň Watan goragçysy* ("defender of the motherland of Turkmenistan"). Their autocratic leadership style, unparalleled in the region, closely resembles what Max Weber has called sultanic.

Thirdly, patrimonial social discourses are often underlined by an ambiguous and rather poor distinction between the private and the public realms. This ambiguity allows social meanings, perceptions, responsibilities, and power relations to shift fluidly between the private and the public spheres, often serving to naturalize established power hierarchies, for example — as we discuss in more detail in our following focus on Uzbekistan — by framing certain kinds of private relations as matters of public significance or by treating political issues rather as private matters. Instead of treating the private and the public as distinct domains, patrimonial discourses reproduce and reconstitute these categories through articulatory practices that mix and blend them with certain, in fact loose and fluid, in contrast to stable and fixed, understandings of supposedly traditional identities, norms, and values. However, the boundary between the private and the public spheres is always ambiguous because its construction is historically contingent and variable (see on the private-public boundary also Vasilache, 2012). Thus, the ambiguity itself is not a flaw but a productive site of hegemonic struggles, where competing discourses seek to fix the meaning of the boundary in order to legitimize certain forms of authority over others. In contexts where the traditionalization of society has emerged as a rather new pattern, patrimonial discourses may often strategically blur the line between the private and public realms by enabling a diverse range of actors — state institutions, religious authorities, or community leaders — to participate in and shape public discourses under the guise of protecting tradition. This blurring of the distinction between the private and the public has manifest economic implications, too. As a result, "power lies not so much

in formal control over institutions of the state, […] as it does in the ability to provide (or block) access to business opportunities or posts in government" (Lewis, 2012, p. 116). However, the ambiguous (in-)distinction between the private and the public realms is not restricted to the domain of informal power rules and patron-client relations (cf. Ilkhamov, 2007), but encompasses the broader public discursive realm. In Uzbekistan, as we shall see in the following section, the current processes of revitalization of practices that are understood as traditional and patrimonial take place against the background of societal transformations and innovations.

THE NARRATIVE POWER OF TRADITION: THE CASE OF UZBEKISTAN

In Uzbekistan, the process of societal traditionalization can be seen as a complex interplay between historical legacies, globalization and modernization processes, government policies, as well as social and societal dynamics. In the following, we will focus on the interplay of traditionalization with government policies, on the one hand, and social as well as societal dynamics, on the other hand. Following independence, Uzbekistan underwent a period of transition characterized by efforts of the state to assert a collective national identity and, for this purpose, revive cultural traditions (Bell, 1999; Adams, 2010; Rasanayagam, 2014). The government has played a central role in shaping the course of societal transformation through its policies on culture, education, and religion. While efforts to preserve and promote traditionalized customs and values were made throughout the post-Soviet period, they coexisted with the pressures of modernization and globalization and shaped state-society relations. There have been efforts to promote state-supported traditional Uzbek customs and values through state-sponsored events, festivals, and educational programs. At the same time, the government has also maintained tight control over religious expression and cultural practices, particularly those perceived as challenging state authority.

Moreover, in Uzbek society, like in every society, there were and still are diverse social dynamics at play, including generational differences and changing socialization patterns. These dynamics influence the ways in which traditional practices are reinterpreted, with younger generations often engaging with tradition in new ways, while older generations uphold more conventional practices. In addition, all the social dynamics take place against the backdrop of globalization and modernization. While the forces of globalization and modernization have brought about economic development and technological advancements in Uzbekistan, they have also led to cultural changes and challenges to customary norms and values perceived as traditional. Therefore, we will discuss how social dynamics shape the trajectory of societal transformation by contributing to the ongoing evolution and redefinition of tradition.

Government policies

Since the initiation of the reform and opening up policy in 2016, Uzbekistan has undergone significant societal transformation, facilitated primarily by the endeavor of the reform-minded government to transform political, economic, social and cultural spheres, while, at the same time, sticking to "the simultaneous pursuit of stability and transformation" (Schuck & Vasilache, 2021, p. 114) characteristic for most Central Asian countries since their independence (see also Elmuradov et al., 2025).

With the traditionalist resurgence of the last few years and the considerable rise of religious practice, the state has begun to feel a need for more strict control of conservative and religious elements in society. In particular, religion has taken on a new ambivalent role in new attempts of cultural nation-building under Mirziyoyev. While the state explicitly embraces Islam as a national heritage and moral guideline, it also seeks to tighten government control of religious education and practice. Secular and religious elites share a broad view that Islam should play an important role in national identity. At the same time, they are apparently concerned about uncontrolled conservative trends in society and fear outcomes that they perceive as undesirable. This becomes visible, for instance, in the fact that the state has significantly increased its role in the field of religious education with the aim of taking the rising religious interest out of the shadows of private and informal circles. Islamic research centers and institutes have been established to advance a state-sponsored, supposedly civic version of Islam and, thus, to disseminate government-approved interpretations of Islam. The state policy is based on a broader strategy to react to the growing religious sentiments in society, and does so in ways in which "the state reserves the right to determine what is taught in the name of Islam and who is entitled to do so" (Schmitz, 2023, p. 6).

The religious policy under Mirziyoyev basically continues the policies of his predecessor. This is particularly evident in legislation. There are new legislative decrees and laws that seek to regulate the changing public and religious constellations in Uzbekistan. For example, a decree by the Cabinet of Ministers on normative standards for school uniforms in the country stipulates that in view of "different nationalities and religious denominations, and due to the secular character of secondary education, school uniforms with elements that reflect belonging to different religions, denominations, as well as subcultures (hijab, kippah, cross, etc.) are not allowed" (The Cabinet of Ministers, 2018, ch. 3, no. 7, all translations are our own). At the same time, a recent law "On Liberty of Conscience and Religious Organizations" lifts the ban prohibiting persons (not registered as a cleric) from appearing in public spaces in religious clothing. However, this newly enacted law limits religious education to officially approved religious institutions and state-authorized instructors (cf. Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2021). As we can see, the state authorities seek to maintain what could be called a relatively flexible hands-on approach in defining and dealing with the changing role of religion in society.

That said, the wearing of beards among young men and certain sorts of headscarves among women has risen in popularity and has also become a subject of concern for authorities (see Hashimova, 2019; Saida & Dzardanova, 2024). There have been frequent reports in recent years of police singling out men with long beards in Uzbekistan, a campaign presented by officials as an effort to combat radical Islam in Central Asia's most populous nation of 32 million inhabitants with deep Islamic roots (see Hashimova, 2019). Secular elites tend to consider beards as a sign of religious radicalism. Men with long facial hair are treated with prejudice by secular elites. Thus, an explicit display of perceived religious piety that deviates from the secular-leaning, state-sanctioned version of faith is discouraged. In a similar vein, the growing trend of wearing headscarves among women is viewed with prejudice by both state authorities and secular-leaning national elites. While state institutions, public offices, and universities still retain the right to enforce a dress code, some educational institutions, especially schools, have

loosened the constraints. During the ruling of the first president, Islam Karimov, it was prohibited to wear religious clothing in all educational institutions. However, schoolgirls were recently permitted to wear headscarves, but as an exception. The reform-minded Mirziyoyev government explained this shift in policy approach by the large numbers of petitions from parents. As the Minister of Public Education, Sherzod Shermatov, stated:

> Taking national traditions into account, we will allow girls to come to schools in a white or light national headscarf. Do not think that tomorrow everyone should come to school like this. If a pupil walks freely, do not force her to wear a headscarf. The goal is to educate our girls, dear parents. We are a secular state. Education and religion are separate from one another. (Kun.uz, 2021)

It seems that there is a tacit concern among secular political elites in Uzbekistan about a potential fragmentation of society between the extreme religious and secular ends of the social spectrum. According to Davletova, "past repressive policies against religious groups and believers, and the poor quality of secular education, have fostered a return to traditionalism and even radical interpretations of Islam" (Davletova, 2019). However, Davletova also rightly points out that the issue of religious radicalization in Uzbekistan is often exaggerated. She notes that despite all odds, "Uzbek Islamic traditionalists are hardly keen on giving up their secular freedoms" and that, in fact, for the most part, "they are more eager to introduce some Islamic values into everyday life, especially retreating to more conservative social roles for women" (Davletova, 2019). According to Davletova, "[e]fforts to tame religiosity and traditionalism with repression will not work". Instead, "the government should demonstrate its devotion to its proclaimed policy of openness and transparency" (Davletova, 2019; see also, with a focus on EU-supported civil society programs against religious extremism in Kyrgyzstan, Pierobon, 2021). In the long run, "[m]ore room for secular discussion, and a stronger secular education system, should balance the voices of religious groups in public discourse" (Davletova, 2019).

At the same time, secular political elites tend to promote the broader public image and perception of Uzbek national identity at home and abroad through reimagining and representing the role of religion and traditional values in a way that could be called an objectification and musealization of religion and traditional values. By objectification or musealization of traditional values, we refer to a process in which elements of collective national identity, history, religion, and traditions become objects of symbolic representation and preservation rather than living practices. This entails a materialistic and performative perspective on traditional values and religious legacy. Values are celebrated in festivals at home and abroad, presented for tourism, and performatively recreated mainly as symbols, exhibits, or heritage artifacts. While on the one hand, this interplay can be seen as a cumulative result of complex processes of modernization and globalization, on the other hand, it is closely intertwined with concurrent processes of urbanization, commercialization of culture, and generational value shifts.

The peculiar predisposition of secular elites towards a materialistic perspective on tradition and religion, as well as their objectification, ultimately makes traditions and religion suitable as historical objects for exhibition in museums, as is mirrored, for instance, in the establishment of the highly representative museum project "The Centre of Islamic Civilisation" in Tashkent. Of course, state-sponsored, secular and even musealized representations of tradition, religion, and national heritage have their

justification in terms of cultural policy, and, in fact, as such do not necessarily conflict with individual practices, piety, and belief. However, the state-sponsored, quite intense objectivization and musealization of religion and tradition has little to do with the actual practices of believers and advocates of conservative values. While the ordinary followers of faith can practice their religion quite freely, it can be safely assumed that most of the practitioners are aware that the state closely monitors the religious situation in the country, and that this is undoubtedly aimed at a disciplinary effect. At the same time, one of the reasons for the comparatively free religious practice is the liberalization of the media landscape under Mirziyoyev:

> The official commitment to freedom of opinion and speech has given rise to a lively blogging scene. Like in the democratic West, anyone who wishes may express themselves on the internet. Consequently, religious experts are also active online, offering information and instruction. They include influential actors who undermine the state's efforts to create a more 'secular' Islam by insisting on the distinction between state laws and divine commandment and, in the case of contradictions, declaring the latter to take precedence. Among ordinary believers, whose need for proper knowledge about Islam is enormous, the online preachers enjoy an authority with which the secularized teachings of state institutions cannot compete. (Schmitz, 2023, p. 6)

Another remarkable observation regarding the dynamics of state-society relations in the context of traditionalization is that in recent years, the state has introduced significant restrictions and limits on weddings, family events, and other private ceremonial gatherings. These restrictions target events that are defined as involving excessive spending, extravagance, and wastefulness — and, thus, are declared not to align with national values and traditions. For example, the state has imposed strict regulations on large-scale weddings by introducing, among other restrictions (see Kun.uz, 2025), a limit on wedding size (max. guest numbers around 200-250) and by setting a time frame (events must end by 11 pm). Certain rituals and supposedly "imported" or "hybrid" practices that are seen as excessively extravagant and costly, and not as part of national tradition, are discouraged. In fact, weddings and family ceremonies in Uzbekistan can be very expensive. Sometimes, families who cannot afford it give in to social pressure and hold large, lavish celebrations. The social pressure is embedded in strong expectations to be a generous host, quite often not taking into account the family's income situation. Thus, social judgment is attached to the quality of hospitality, based on, and reinforced through, family and community narratives. The new rules and regulations are part of a long-term government initiative aimed at promoting a change and a cultural shift in how celebrations are viewed and conducted (cf. Shukhratova, 2025) — while at the same time declaring these new ideals to be part of traditional values and practices.

Under President Mirziyoyev's leadership, Uzbekistan has also witnessed several shifts in various other aspects, including a changing role of women. The government has implemented various initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. These initiatives include legal reforms to protect women's rights, increasing access to education (cf. Kun.uz, 2022) and healthcare for women, as well as promoting women's participation in the workforce and in decision-making roles. The government has implemented policies to support women entrepreneurs, providing access to funding, training, and resources to start and grow businesses (see Kun.uz, 2019a). This shift acknowledges women's contributions to the economy and encourages

their active participation in the workforce. Legal reforms have been enacted to address gender-based discrimination and violence against women. This includes amendments to existing laws in order to strengthen protection for women's rights, such as measures to combat domestic violence and ensure equal treatment under the law (see Kun.uz, 2019b). Uzbekistan's engagement with international organizations and initiatives focused on gender equality has also influenced domestic policies and practices (see World Bank, 2024). Collaboration with international partners has provided opportunities for knowledge exchange and capacity-building in advancing women's rights and gender equality. All in all, while traditional gender norms may still influence societal attitudes and practices, there has at the same time been a noticeable shift towards greater gender equality and the empowerment of women. These processes, however, run parallel to, and are entangled with, social and societal dynamics of traditionalization.

Social and Societal Dynamics

Social and societal factors play a crucial role in the process of traditionalization. Social norms, conventions, institutions, values, as well as changing beliefs and socialization patterns based on generational differences, shape the trajectory of transformation of and within society by contributing to the ongoing evolution and redefinition of tradition. These factors also influence the acceptance or contestation of new interpretations and practices within the cultural framework of a society. When new interpretations and practices emerge, they may be initially contested, but also may gain widespread acceptance and adherence over time and even become normalized and integrated into the social fabric, as supposedly traditional practices. In Uzbekistan, societal transformation is underlined by a broader shift in the discursive landscape of society. This shift is characterized, on the one hand, by a marked secularization of significant but still minoritarian segments of society, and on the other hand, by a traditionalization of larger sections of society. Against the background of this big picture, widespread recourse to conservative moral values, beliefs, and norms, as well as a relatively high degree of religiosity seem to have gained new momentum. In social media platforms, conservative moods and trends have achieved increased prominence. At the same time, in state-run public media and institutions, the state tacitly seeks to convey the impression of a secular moderator. There is still only a little public space to engage in discussions of secular and traditional transformations, with or without the state taking on the mantle of the mediator, who, in fact, supervises and controls the discourse. The Habermasian idea of "the unforced force of the better argument" (Habermas, 1996, p. 306, see also p. 541) and the democratic form of deliberation guided by his concept of "communicative rationality" (Habermas, 1996, p. 4, see also pp. 5, 9, 396) do not seem to function properly, although there are initial signs of a newly emerging generation of public intellectuals and civil society activists who seek to engage in discussions. The nascent public domain is just beginning to evolve and is still quite far from the ideal of communicative rationality in open public communication.

Thus, in Uzbek society, we can observe a coexistence of traditional and modern socialization models and value systems (see Elmuradov, 2021). In this sense, secularization and traditionalization may be conceived as concurrent trends that operate concomitantly, without necessarily clashing with each other. Nonetheless, the

traditionalist turn that we seek to investigate in this section is a relatively new and upward trend. When we speak of a traditionalist turn, we should note that the concept of tradition in Uzbekistan is predominantly invoked in two, quite polarized, ways: either as a certain drawback that needs to be overcome, especially in contrast to modernity, or as a unique cultural quality to be embraced and thus inevitably supported, often in alignment with nationalism and moral conservatism. This distinction outlines the general mode of thinking about tradition in Uzbekistan, where diverse actors aspire, by referring to supposedly "age-old national traditions", to redefine an idea of proper social order in their own interests. Using particular discursive repertoires and strategies, various traditionalist and non-traditionalist segments of society participate in discursively shaping societal self-representation.

It is important to note that in Uzbekistan, traditionalization does not predominantly work as an attempted return to the past, but as a discursive reorganization of modern social life around culturally sanctioned traditions without abandoning patriarchal frameworks. Rather than resisting modernity, Uzbek society demonstrates what can be called a selective modernization with cultural re-traditionalization. In this blend, modernity is adapted, transformed, and aligned with depictions, ideals, and practices of society that are framed and seen as "culturally acceptable" or "nationally appropriate". Thereby, the past is mobilized to legitimize contemporary social norms and authority structures, while moral-religious revivalism is aligned with national and cultural tradition rather than political activism. In particular, it can be observed that discursive references to traditional vocabulary have grown in popularity in everyday and colloquial language in recent times. It has become popular to refer to proverbial expressions of the traditional lexicon, such as, for example, when a boy is born, "qori bölsin" ("let the newborn be a reciter of the holy book of Islam") or, when a daughter is born, "soliha bölsin" ("let the newborn be pious and virtuous"), or to refer to a birthday as "shukrona kuni" ("the day of gratitude") instead of "tug'ilgan kuni" ("birthday"). Of course, these expressions in themselves cannot necessarily be seen as reflecting an intensified religious interest or piety by those who use them. Many sayings, terms, and phrases in day-to-day use, across different languages and cultures, are in fact often used simply habitually, without any intention of the speakers to actualize their maybe deep-going religious, historical, or cultural roots. However, the just-mentioned examples indeed are more than just habitual sayings without further impact, firstly given that their widespread use is a rather recent and new phenomenon in an upward trend of traditionalization, and secondly, because their use is explicitly negotiated within discourses of traditionalization and societal change. One remarkable case example is the discourse on the proper use of "qori" ("reciter of Koran").[2] A local religious cleric was reported to have said in a public preach that "not everyone should or can become a qori",[3] highlighting that not every individual should aspire to become a professional Islamic reciter, but that there are many other professions that Muslims can and should be pursuing. In response to his remarks, another senior local religious leader quickly put forward that each Muslim should, in spirit, wish for himself and for others to be proficient readers and reciters of

[2] "Qori" is a person who recites the holy scripts with the proper rules of recitation using the different linguistic, lexical, phonetic, morphological, and syntactical forms permitted in reciting the Koran.

[3] Shukrulloh Domla replies to Abdulatif Domla, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TCo5NaxxtE, last accessed on 04.02.2026.

faith, regardless of their profession.[4] He pointed out that the knowledge of, and ability to, relate to the holy scriptures is something that goes beyond worldly matters such as professions. In such discursive disputes and battles of words in social media, we can witness that the meanings in the discourse of tradition are fluid and dynamic, and that this is the case even within confined circles.

Having said this, patrimonial traditionalism in everyday language can be seen as a paradigmatic example of how power draws through subjectivation processes and shapes subjectivation practices. Popular wisdoms like the Uzbek saying that "one is not supposed to get on the roof of the house where the father is" ("Ota turgan uy ustiga chiqilmas") can be seen to demonstrate a threefold impact of power in discursive mechanisms of subjectivation. Firstly, and quite obviously, the content of the saying itself reproduces gendered power relations and is aimed at positioning the subjects in a given hierarchical setting. Secondly, the self-evidencing everydayness of such sayings suggests the timeless and necessary character of the given order, in which the subject is expected to be included, and that makes it necessary for the subject to shape her or himself in order to fit. Thirdly, and related to the second aspect, not only the given order is presented as self-understood, but the entire process of subjectivation into that order is masked as an unquestionable procedure – it should not even be perceived as a social convention, but rather as a meaning in itself, as a quasi-natural condition and fact that is simply valid in a primordial sense, without the need for approval.

Some other remarkable instances in the discourse of tradition relate to the changing role of women in Uzbek society. The long-standing patriarchal structures in Uzbek society are mirrored in quite clearly defined gender roles and expectations, through which women were relegated basically to domestic duties with limited access to education and employment opportunities. However, while patriarchal gender roles are still both persisting and strong, in recent decades, there has been a gradual shift in societal attitudes towards the role of women in society. Increasingly, women are recognized for their contributions beyond the domestic sphere. This shift in cultural attitudes reflects broader social and societal changes and evolving notions of gender equality.

Until quite recently, young women in Uzbekistan were often informally banned from travelling abroad without the permission of their male guardians — typically their fathers or brothers, or when married, their husbands. Such informal mobility restrictions and practices of gender inequality are now on the retreat, but also some legal discriminatory norms such as, for example, the legal prohibition of women from driving heavy vehicles, have recently been lifted (see The Times of Central Asia, 2024). At the same time, traditionalizing gender roles and expectations towards women still persist. These are first and foremost reflected in the common societal expectation that the choice of a marriage partner is predominantly made by parents and that women's roles are closely tied to rules of sexual behavior, tightly controlled by the family and community.[5] In a critical reading, the symbolic expectations in society can be seen to normalize and naturalize existing social conventions and give rise, as it were, to

[4] Abdulatif Domla on the claim by Shukrulloh Domla: https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=M3B9k5ynQdE, last accessed on 04.02.2026.

[5] Similar phenomena and examples can be traced also in other Central Asian societies. See e.g. Beyer & Kojobekova, 2019; Cleuziou, 2019; Zhussipbek & Nagayeva, 2021.

attitudes of silencing through an (obviously arrogant) presumption of "knowing better", as Bell Hooks insightfully observes elsewhere: "no need to hear your voice, when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice" (Hooks 1990, p. 343).

In view of social inequalities based on gender, the concept of *uyat* ("shame") still plays a particularly important role (see for the culture of *uyat* in conceptual terms Thibault & Caron, 2022a; Caron, 2022). The culture of *uyat* subjects women in particular to a code of rules that is unwritten, and can therefore be applied in a flexible and expansive manner, but that is also deeply rooted in society. The rules of shame not only function as instruments of external social control, but also as an internalized normative authority. As Levitanus (2022, pp. 188-119, 131-134, 140) shows with a focus on queer individual self-perception, both the external pressure and the internalization of the rules and norms of *uyat* have a huge impact, often leading to tragic consequences, including suicide.

Following Foucault, it can be argued that *uyat* contributes to the constitution and (self-) governance of subjects as both an external and internal dispositif. In this sense, Thibault and Caron identify a "culture of shame in Central Asia" (2022b), in which the standards and ideals of *uyat* have a significant influence on the constitution of gender subjectivities. The norms established and perceived in the context of *uyat* do not refer exclusively to women. Rather, rules of *uyat* are part of a broader set of gender norms and of the generalised hetoronormative gender order of society (see e.g. Thibault & Caron, 2022a, pp. 3-5; Levitanus, 2022, pp. 120, 139). However, due to its patriarchal foundation and its sexualizing impact, the regime of *uyat* addresses women, girls, and queer persons in a prioritized and particularly intense manner (see Thibault & Caron, 2022b; Thibault, 2022; Levitanus, 2022). For instance, as Thibault (2022) has shown with regard to male heterosexual sex-work in Kazakhstan, the discourse about this phenomenon is fueled not least by a general taboo surrounding sexual behavior that deviates from marital norms — in particular because this phenomenon seems to undermine traditional heterosexual gender relations, in which women are assigned the role of sexually shy, reserved, and ultimately passive actors.

The unwritten, yet omnipresent, rules of *uyat* contribute to the establishment of particular social taboos (see Levitanus, 2022, p. 120), and thus to the production of "a veil of silence" (Levitanus, 2022, p. 120, see also pp. 125-128, 139). Certain phenomena are constituted as such shameful deviations that it seems necessary to make them disappear by framing them as something unspeakable. In this context, the ideas and norms of *uyat* do not only serve as a mere standard of behavior. Rather, within the ideals of *uyat*, some phenomena appear so scandalous and intolerable that even the knowledge of their existence is considered inappropriate — and, thus, even their suppression must be concealed, made invisible, and kept secret. At the same time, however, *uyat* also depends on the revelation and public exposure of perceived misbehavior and its scandalization. As Levitanus highlights, "it is not the challenge or the violation of the norm itself that is critical here, but the visibility and the public perception of the violation that is then required to be followed by punishment" (2022, p. 120). Thus, *uyat* establishes a tension between, and a simultaneity of, secrecy and unspeakable taboo, on the one hand and public exposure and visibility, on the other hand.

Thus, as already mentioned above, the public discourse in Uzbek society is still quite far from the Habermasian framework of open public deliberation. However, it is also worth noting that the newly emerging civil society plays an essential role in the discursive and societal dynamics of transformation. In the light of rapid developments in Uzbek society, a new generation of urban intellectuals, journalists, public commentators, and civil society activists has emerged who lead animated discussions about, among others, the role of women, religion, and tradition in the context of state and society relations. Loosely self-identifying as ideological successors of Jadids, Muslim modernist reformers in the early 20th century, Neo-Jadids belong to the newly emerging community of intellectuals and civil society activists who, despite significant ideological differences, advocate social and cultural change in the collective national consciousness based on open and free public debates. Nonetheless, the nascent public domain is just beginning to evolve and is still quite far from the ideal of communicative rationality in open debate.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we sought to inquire into the rise of traditionalization as a new societal trend in Uzbekistan in recent years by looking at collective strategies of discursive legitimization, as well as consider both the wider implications of the traditionalist resurgence and its counter-movements.

In conceptual terms, we argued that tradition is inseparable from the present in the sense that change is a defining element of any traditionalist discourse, and that tradition and its manifestations are in fact more fluid and dynamic than commonly assumed. Focusing on Uzbekistan as a case, it could be shown that there is an inseparable link between tradition and patrimonial as well as patriarchal social relations underlined by a complex system of beliefs, symbols, norms, and values that penetrate virtually all aspects of social life, including politics. Patrimonial and patriarchal social structures play a significant role by underlying and reinforcing discourses of power. Comprising tacit cultural, cognitive, and affective templates, implicit understandings, and intuitive notions that are embodied in collective scripts, master narratives, and conventions, patriarchal social structures provide a relevant overarching discursive background in Uzbek society. At the same time, however, since the initiation of the reform and opening up policy in 2016, the societal discourses in Uzbekistan have undergone significant transformations in non-traditional directions, too. This is facilitated by leaning towards secularization and by engagement in active discussions about issues pertaining to social change and reform in — yet rather marginal — segments of civil society.

Thus, Uzbekistan's ongoing societal transformation is characterized by a broader dual shift in the country's discursive landscape: on the one hand, a marked secularization of notable, yet smaller segments of the population, especially reflected in the discourse of political and cultural elites and the newly emerging generation of urban intellectuals and civil society actors, and on the other hand, an increasing traditionalization across larger sections of society. Although this ongoing social transformation reveals a complex reconfiguration of the discursive field, no stark societal division or polarization can be observed across broader strata of social groups in the country.

The missing polarization or societal division is not self-evident. One possible — and surely not the sole — reason for this might be that when social groups share a long, common historical experience — such as Soviet-era state-building, strong national identity projects, and shared cultural repertoires — they may retain a sense of unity that reduces sharp contrasts and visible divisions. People may incorporate both secular and traditional elements into their everyday lives, producing overlapping rather than contrasting positions. Furthermore, the Uzbek government promotes integrating narratives (national unity, modernization, plus "traditional values", etc.) through education, media, and public rituals. This also produces a relatively uniform discursive field in which differences exist, but do not harden into stark contrasts and visible social divides. All in all, both secularizing and traditionalizing trends evolve without direct confrontation, with discrepancies remaining limited. At the same time, however, while providing tacit cultural, cognitive, and affective templates, patriarchal social structures serve as an implicit and profound overarching background and play a very significant role in shaping and reinforcing the shifting discourse. Against the background of this picture, the challenge of framing and interrelating tradition and modernity represents one of the most significant discourses underlying societal change in Uzbekistan.

FUNDING

This work was supported by Volkswagen Foundation, Grant No. 96 723 and 96 723-1 within the project "Institutional Change and Social Practice: Research on the Political System, the Economy, and Society in Central Asia and the Caucasus". Volkswagen Foundation is the largest private science funding organization in Germany and is independent of the Volkswagen enterprise.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

AE: conceptualization, theoretical and methodological approach, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing; AV: co-conceptualization, theoretical and methodological approach, co-writing – original draft, writing – review & editing.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback and helpful comments as well as the editorial team of the Journal of Central Asian Studies.

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