Political Liberalization and Emerging Civil Society in Uzbekistan: The Cases of Public Reaction to Demolition Program and the Use of Forced Labor

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Abstract

Conventional wisdom highlights civil society as an integral component of a democratic society. Due to the dominance of the state in all aspects of life, civil society was largely absent in Uzbekistan until the change of government in 2016. The new President Mirziyoyev's liberalization policy towards media gave birth to a strong group of opinion formers visible on social media platforms, otherwise known as "bloggers". This paper seeks to identify how Mirziyoyev's liberalization policy affects Uzbekistan's path to consolidate its democracy. It argues that the recent political liberalization showed early signs of the emergence of civil society groups. To support this argument, the paper uses the case of two unrelated incidents: large scale demolition of people's properties by the *khokimiyat* in Urganch, and forced labor of public servants in the Bukhara region.

Keywords

civil society – liberalization – online platforms – bloggers – Uzbekistan

1 Introduction

Civil society is defined as a group of people who are combined to achieve common goals and who operate free from government control.[1] Civil society

1 Fredrik Uggla Axel Hadenius, "Making Civil Society Work, Promoting Democratic Development: What Can States and Donors Do?," *World Development* 24, no. 10 (1996): 1621–39.

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is seen as an integral component of democratization2 of societies as well as a "healthy" component of established democracies.3 According to Diamond, who analyzed functions and features of democratic civil society, any talk about democratic change in any given country needs to begin with the focus on its civil society.4 Numerous studies and reports of international organizations have claimed that civil society promotes democracy.5 The literature conceptualizes the forms of civil society and its role in democratization is diverse. To some scholars, civil society is vital in transitioning to democracy,6 while to others, civil society is considered to have a supplementary role among other contributing factors.7 However, the scholarship tends to agree that civil society has a role to play in democratic governance.

Due to the dominance of the state in all aspects of life, civil society was largely absent in post-Soviet Uzbekistan.8 Up until late 2016, the country was known as one of the world's most closed and consolidated authoritarian countries. With the change of leadership in late 2016, new President Mirziyoyev's liberalization policy touched many sectors of the country. Along with eco- nomic liberalization, the government policy paid attention to strengthening some human rights, liberalizing media as well as unblocking social media platforms. This policy gave birth to the formation of a strong group of opinion formers in social media platforms, otherwise known as "bloggers".

This paper argues that recent political liberalization in Uzbekistan shows the early signs of the emergence of civil society groups. Provided such liberalization policies continue and an emerging civil society takes stronger roots, the country may develop a civil society to help with the transition towards a democratic society. To support this argument, the paper will use the case of two unrelated incidents: the large-scale demolition of people's properties by the

2 Larry Diamond, "Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation," *Journal of democracy* 5, no. 3 (1994): 4–17.

3 Michael W and Edwards Foley, Bob, "The Paradox of Civil Society," *Journal of Democracy* 7, no. 3 (1996): 38.

4 Diamond, "Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation," 4–17.

5 See Henk E.S. Woldring, "State and Civil Society in the Political Philosophy of Alexis De Tocqueville," *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 9, no. 4 (1998): 363–73. Michael Bernhard, "Civil Society and Democratic Transition in East Central Europe," *Political Science Quarterly* 108, no. 2 (1993): 307–26.

6 "Civil Society and Democratic Transition in East Central Europe."

7 Jan Aart Scholte, "Civil Society and Democracy in Global Governance," *Global Governance* 8, no. 3 (2002): 281–304. Peter McLaverty, "Civil Society and Democracy," *Contemporary Politics* 8, no. 4 (2002): 303–18.

8 Babken Babajanian, Sabine Freizer, and Daniel Stevens, "Introduction: Civil Society in Central Asia and the Caucasus," *Central Asian Survey* 24, no. 3 (2005): 209–24.

khokimiyat (regional government), and the forced labor of public servants in Bukhara region. First, to explain the context, the paper provides a brief background of civil society in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. Second, it reviews the existing literature on the role of civil society in democratization. Finally, it discusses the emerging elements of civil society in Uzbekistan based on two case studies. It is worth mentioning that Uzbekistan under Karimov always claimed to already have a strong civil society.9 For the purpose of this research, civil society is understood a voluntary association of people that are not controlled or funded by the government, i.e. private associations that promote civic engagement in the best interest of their members or of the citizens more broadly. Since the civil society that the previous government claimed to have was in reality government-controlled NGO s, I do not consider them as civil society in this research.

2 Post-Soviet Uzbekistan and Its Civil Society

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, post-Soviet countries' path toward a market economy and a democracy was uneven. While some chose a faster transition to liberal society, others, especially some of the Central Asian states, took a gradual approach to transition.10 Under Islam Karimov's leadership, Uzbekistan widely promoted the concept of "building a civil society" *(fuqarolik jamiyati)*.11 However, the referred *fuqarolik jamiyati* was not aimed at keeping the government accountable or promoting the interests of the public. Rather, it was supposed to contribute to the development of the "Eastern style of democracy" (*Sharqona demokratiya*), which was known as something that leads to "collectivity, order, and respect towards authority as a unique tradition of the 'Eastern' society".12 This was the previous government's approach to claim the developing civil society in its tailored way and pace. Such a form of civil society served the best interests of the government and certain circles

9 Uzbekistan National News Agency, "O'zbekistonda Fuqarolik Jamiyatining Shakllanishi: Bugungi Holat, Yutuqlar Va Istiqbol," http://uza.uz/uz/society/ozbekistonda-fuqarolik-jamiyatining-shakllanishi-bugungi-holat-yutuqlar-va-istiqbol-24.10.2008-5399.

10 Alisher Ilkhamov, "The Thorny Path of Civil Society in Uzbekistan," *Central Asian Survey* 24, no. 3 (2005): 297–317.

11 Suda Masaru, "The Politics of Civil Society, Mahalla and NGOs: Uzbekistan," *Reconstruction and Interaction of Slavic Eurasia and Its Neighbouring Worlds. Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University* (2006): 335.

12 Ibid., 362.

of the elite. It is worth noting that some level of freedom of expression was still practiced in the early 1990s, but it disappeared gradually due to the repressive policies of the regime, which put an unofficial ban on many democratic principles such as freedom of expression and human rights.13

Even community centers known as *mahalla*, that once were a form of indigenous civil society, were turned into the surveillance and nation-building machine at the hands of the government in each suburb and communities. Even if presented by the Uzbek propaganda as "self-governing bodies" (*o'z-o'zini boshqarish organlari*), they were the grassroots-level representation of executive branch in the country. The family environment, such as talks at the dinner table or among close friends, was the only safe places where people could exercise their freedom of speech and critique the government's politics. While family, kinship, or faith-based unofficial groups might have existed during Karimov's era, even such tight circles were cautious to discuss or criticize the repressive government and exercised self-censorship. Hence, one can debate if a local civil society existed in the country prior to 2016.14

Although freedom of speech and political pluralism had been guaran- teed in Uzbekistan's constitution,15 unwritten rules of censorship dominated all aspects of life, ranging from expression of political views on the government policies, to suggesting gaps to improve the country's public policy. The media was under the strict control of the government and most of its con- tent was filled with broadcasts on the peaceful and prosperous life of Uzbekistanis. For a quarter of a century, Uzbekistan remained as "a consolidated authoritarian"16 regime.

This approach changed when the new government came to power in late 2016. Following domestic and foreign policies of its reformist President Mirziyoyev, political and economic liberalization had been widely celebrated

13 It is worth to note the bravery of some former MP s who openly criticised the authoritarian nature of Karimov's government at the sessions of Uzbek Parliament Oliy Majlis during early years of the country's independence. However, since the MP s were part of legislative body, they are not considered as civil society for the purpose of this research.

14 Ilkhamov, "The Thorny Path of Civil Society in Uzbekistan," 297–317.

15 See Article 29 Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan. **"**Everyone shall be guaranteed freedom of thought, speech and convictions. Everyone shall have the right to seek, obtain and disseminate any information except that which is directed against the existing constitutional system and some other instances specified by law. Freedom of opinions and their expression may be restricted by law if any state or other secret is involved."

16 Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2019: Uzbekistan," https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/uzbekistan.

by the international community.17 The country released prisoners of conscience and human rights activists who had been jailed under Karimov.18 Under his personal initiative, Mirziyoyev encouraged mass media in the country to become a real "fourth branch of governance" (*to'rtinchi hokimiyat*).19 Journalists were urged to openly cover the issues related to government policies, the performance of regional and suburban governors in general, and of any government official in particular. In his speeches, he also called the public to be critical to the work of public servants and exercise their rights to freedom of speech. The new leadership lifted all the blockages to Facebook, YouTube, and Telegram platforms, as well as to several websites such as Voice of America and BBC Uzbek. Encouraged by such policies, some citizens have slowly learnt to express publicly their views on political and social affairs.

3 Which Forms of Civil Society?

Although the exact role and the nature of civil society in democratization is much debated in academia, the scholarship tends to agree that it is an essential part of both transitioning to democracy as well as sustaining it.20 The literature conceptualizing the forms of civil society can be grouped into three major schools of thought. The first, known as the Tocquevillian approach, defines civil society as "free associations that exist as intermediate institutions between citizens and the state, and in which citizens can realize their social freedom and equality".21 According to it, the free associations could serve as a "buffer between the state and citizens",22 and prevent the government's exercise of oppression.23 The Tocquevillian approach tends to highlight the

17 The White House, "The United States and Uzbekistan: Launching a New Era of Strategic Partnership," https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/united-states-uzbekistan-launching-new-era-strategic-partnership/. and; Mariusz Marszewski, "Thaw in Uzbekistan. Reforms by President Mirziyoyev," (2018).

18 Freedom House, "Freedom in the World 2019: Uzbekistan".

19 See Xabar.uz, "Shavkat Mirziyoyev: 'Oav Amalda 'Tortinchi Hokimiyat' Darajasiga Kotarilishi Zarur'," https://www.xabar.uz/uz/siyosat/oav-amalda-tortinchi-hokimiyat-darajasiga-kotarilishi-zarur.

20 See Bernhard, "Civil Society and Democratic Transition in East Central Europe," 307–26; Diamond, "Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation," 4–17.

21 Woldring, "State and Civil Society in the Political Philosophy of Alexis De Tocqueville," 363.

22 Ibid., 367.

23 A de Tocqueville, "Democracy in America (Vol. 2). (G. Lawrence, Trans., Jp Mayer, Ed.)," (New York: Harper & Row, Perennial Library. (Original work published 1840), 1988).

associational life of civil society and views its institutional dimension suchas NGO s.24

The second school of thought on civil society is known as Walzer's value-based associations. Walzer defined civil society as "the space of un-coerced human association and also the set of relational networks—formed for the sake of family, faith, interest, and ideology—that fill this space."25 According to the third school of thought, which stresses behavioral forms of civil society, civil society means people expressing their resistance to dominant elites or their government through street protests or unorganized individual resistance.26

Besides the aforementioned schools of thought, some scholars offer their own definitions of civil society. Diamond, for example, suggests that civil society is a "realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules".27 On the other hand, some scholars tend to be skeptical about the actual use of NGO s for broader human and societal needs.28 Studies on civil society were also conducted on a case study basis in many countries.29 Although the findings and arguments of the above scholarly works are useful to understand the nature and functions of civil society, their analyses do not include the case of civil society development in Central Asia in general and in Uzbekistan in particular.

The existing research on civil society in Uzbekistan has been conducted in a comparative perspective with other Central Asian as well as South Caucasus states, and therefore lacks in-depth analysis.30 Though some scholars argue that civil society "is best represented by non-governmental organizations"31 in the context of post-Soviet countries, they overlook the important point that

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as cited in ; Woldring, "State and Civil Society in the Political Philosophy of Alexis De Tocqueville." page 366.

24 Foley, "The Paradox of Civil Society," 38–52.

25 Michael Walzer, "The Civil Society Argument," *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift* 94, no. 1 (1991).

26 Çağlar Enneli, "Civil Society and Appearances of Resistance," 1–20.

27 [italics in original]. Diamond, "Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation," 5.

28 Cecilia Tortajada, "Nongovernmental Organizations and Influence on Global Public Policy," *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 3, no. 2 (2016): 266–74.

29 James L. Gibson, "Social Networks, Civil Society, and the Prospects for Consolidating Russia's Democratic Transition," *American Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 1 (2001): 51–68.; Sungmoon Kim, "On Korean Dual Civil Society: Thinking through Tocqueville and Confucius," *Contemporary Political Theory* 9, no. 4 (2010): 434–57.

30 See Babajanian, Freizer, and Stevens, "Introduction: Civil Society in Central Asia and the Caucasus," 209–24.

31 Ibid., 212.

NGO s were not free from government control. There were some youth associations, the popular one being *"Kamolot" yoshlar ijtimoiy harakati* (youth social movement "Kamolot"). Although by its nature as the youth association, it was meant to serve the best interest of its members—the youth, "Kamolot" was controlled and partially funded by the government32 and served to promote the latter's agenda among youth.

Other studies were produced by international organizations such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), but they mostly focus on NGO s and *mahallas*,33 here too controlled, if not wholly or partially funded, by the government. London-based scholar and activist Alisher Ilkhamov, studied the operation of international NGO s such as the Soros Foundation in Uzbekistan, and thus overlooked homegrown civil society.34 What he fails to notice is that such international NGO s might have their own ideologies or their donor's agenda to prioritize,35 which might not have been in the best interest of Uzbekistan.

Here I apply Gibson's argument on the role of social networks in developing a civil society to an online space.36 Based on his study of Russia's civil society, Gibson argued that "a vibrant civil society profits from well-developed social networks. Indeed, the existence of expansive social networks may well be the most important precursor to the development of the effective and autonomous political organizations thought necessary to the successful consolidation of a democratic transition".37 To him, social networks were the circles of people or "discussion partners"38 with whom one would discuss important and politically relevant matters. Gibson explained that "in terms of political capacity, it appears that Russian networks have considerable potential for shaping political values".39 The members in such networks had a high level of trust to one another and served to "diffuse"40 democratic ideas in the country. Gibson's analysis claimed that by diffusing ideas on democratic governance and

32 Deniz Kandiyoti, "Post-Soviet Institutional Design and the Paradoxes of the 'Uzbek Path'," *Central Asian Survey journal* 26, no. 1 (2007): 31–48.

33 See Asian Development Bank, "Civil Society Briefs: Uzbekistan," https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/29303/csb-uzb.pdf.

34 Ilkhamov, "The Thorny Path of Civil Society in Uzbekistan," 297–317.

35 Tortajada, "Nongovernmental Organizations and Influence on Global Public Policy,"266–74.

36 Gibson, "Social Networks, Civil Society, and the Prospects for Consolidating Russia's Democratic Transition," 51–68.

37 Ibid., 52.

38 Ibid., 56.

39 Ibid., 59.

40 Ibid., 51.

facilitating such political culture, the social networks may be a precursor to democratization in that country.

This paper aims at extending the applicability of Gibson's' argument to an online space and to another country, Uzbekistan. Affected by globalization, the nature of civil society is evolving,41 and the introduction of new online platforms to the everyday life of the public has contributed to the emergence of new types of public spaces. By analyzing the current trend of the emerging civil society, this research will attempt to check if Gibson's argument that strong social networks contribute to strong civil society may be applicable to the case of Uzbekistan.42

4 Early Signs of Civil Society in Online Platforms

Mirziyoyev's personal efforts to remove unwritten rules on criticism of ministers and *khokims* (provincial governors and city mayors) have encouraged journalists and ordinary citizens to voice their own views.43 The President established his virtual reception for all citizens of the country—an online platform where people could submit their complaints on a wide range of issues including the operation of their local government agencies and officials.44 Although the very function of the virtual office was a form of introduction of e-governance in Uzbekistan, its existence brought a long-due change for the society. People felt encouraged by the President himself to raise the issues that they previously feared to even talk about.

Via official as well as unofficial media, people witnessed how the raised issues were being addressed effectively—or not. In many of his speeches, the President referred to the increasing number of applications received by the virtual reception and regretted that these issues were not solved earlier at the

41 Tortajada, "Nongovernmental Organizations and Influence on Global Public Policy,"266–74.

42 Gibson, "Social Networks, Civil Society, and the Prospects for Consolidating Russia's Democratic Transition," 51–68.

43 Umida Hashimova, "A New Era for Press Freedom in a Changing Uzbekistan?," *The Diplomat*, https://thediplomat.com/2019/07/a-new-era-for-press-freedom-in-a-changing-uzbekistan/.

44 O'zbekiston Respublikasi Prezidentining Virtual Qabulxonasi, "O'zbekiston Respublikasi Prezidenti Shavkat Miromonovich Mirziyoyevning Virtual Qabulxonasi," https://pm.gov.uz/oz#/authorities/1.

local regional levels.45 Such an approach to openly talk encouraged people to voice their concerns related to local governance, as well as other socio-political issues faced by their communities, families, and themselves individually.

In his speech early in 2019, President Mirziyoyev mentioned that one mil- lion online application-appeals are received annually from the citizens at the virtual reception platform. In addition to it, some government ministries have established their own virtual offices for the matters within the scope of their agencies.46 The establishment of these platforms has also further raised the internet literacy of the population. Now, mass media and the public more broadly have slowly transitioned from "everything is perfect in Uzbekistan" narratives to a critical analysis of policy and events.

In light of this liberalization policy, the public has started being politically more conscious. Online platforms have created a safe space for debate and politically active groups of people have emerged on several social media platforms. Among them, bloggers such as Khushnudek Khudoyberdiev attracted more than 300,000 members to his Telegram channel where he discusses various social issues, including government policies and their implementation.47 Another blogger, Umid Gafurov's Telegram channel *troll.uz*, addressing a simi- lar range of issues, has more than 68,000 members.48 *Asanov formati* (Asanov's format) is yet another channel with its almost 9,000 members that discusses current events related to the history of Uzbek language and educational sub- jects more broadly in the country.49 The popularity of these and many other channels illustrate how Uzbek social media are blossoming. With their simple language and yet detailed analysis of government policies, bloggers have won the attention and loyalty of thousands of followers in online spaces. They thus contribute to create online associations which people join freely to engage in discussions on politics, schooling, religion, and the environment, thus emerging as an early form of civil society in online spaces.

45 O'zbekiston Respublikasi Vazirlar Mahkamasining nashri Pravda Vostoka, "O'zbekiston Respublikasi Prezidenti Shavkat Mirziyoyevning Oliy Majlisga Murojaatnomasi," https://www.pv.uz/oz/newspapers/poslanie-prezidenta-respubliki-uzbekistan-shavkata-mirzieeva-olij-mazhlisu-2020.

46 Kun.uz, "O'zbekiston Respublikasi Sog'liqni Saqlash Vazirining Virtual Qabulxonasi Tashkil Etildi," https://kun.uz/uz/news/2016/12/25/uzbekiston-respublikasi-soglikni-saklas-vazi rining-virtual-kabulhonasi-taskil-etildi.

47 Xushnudbek.uz, "Huquqshunos Xushnudbek Xudoyberdievning Telegram Kanali," https://t.me/xushnudbek, https://t.me/xushnudbek.

48 Telegram Channel of Umid Gafurov, "Troll.Uz Uyda/Doma" https://t.me/umidgafurovcom.

49 Telegram Channel of Eldar Asanov, "Asanov Formati," https://t.me/AsanovEldar.

5 Massive Demolition of Properties in the Name of "Obod Qishloq" (Prosperous Village)

In the summer of 2019, the demolition of properties belonging to 400 families located on Ashkhabad Street, Urganch city (Khorezm region) was commenced by the local government. This was done under the framework of the "Obod Mahalla" (Prosperous Neighborhood) and "Obod Qishloq" (Prosperous Village) programs, aimed at rebuilding cities and villages with modern and efficient infrastructure. Although the process was supposed to be regulated by a government resolution, "On the Exemption of Land Plots for State and Public Needs,"50 local authorities were not following legal regulations in giving proper notice and complete compensation payments to the owners of houses. In the case of Urganch, only a certain percentage of compensation was paid to some of the affected families and nothing to others. According to the affected families, the *khokimiyat* promised to pay the full compensation only after families moved out to temporary tents in Chondirkiyot village.51 Hundreds of people had to arrange temporary shelters on their own, while others lived in arranged tents. Outraged, 1000 people living in tents for more than a month, with no water and sanitary facilities, came to protest on the night of July 26, 2019, closing a major highway of the Khorezm region.

This type of protests would not be known to the public beyond residents of Urganch unless the issue was covered and discussed by active bloggers on various online platforms. Massive demolition of properties that left people homeless was indeed widely discussed. The debate evolved among several groups, most of them calling on the government to respond to the crisis and to fire and punish the incompetent *khokimiyat* officials. Such wide and extensive civic engagement on the matter then caught the attention of government officials and force the government to respond to the incident.

The matter even reached President Mirziyoyev, who then assigned the Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov to deal with the crisis. Aripov flew to Urganch to meet with the affected families, and arranged that half of the compensation be paid in full to 207 of the affected households, according to the initial agreements.

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50 Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan, "Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan on the Order of Compensation for Damages to Citizens and Legal Entities in Connection with the Exemption of Land Plots for State and Public Needs," (May 29, 2006).

51 Zafarbek Soljonov, "Ochiq Osmon Ostida Yashayotgan Xorazmliklar. Shahar Hududida «Snos» Ishlari Avjiga Chiqmoqda," kun.uz, https://kun.uz/news/2019/07/19/ochiq-osmon-ostida-yashayotgan-xorazmliklar-shahar-hududida-buzilishlar-avjiga-chiqmoqda-ishlar-qonuniy-bormoqdami.

The local *khokim* ensured that the remaining compensation amounts were to be paid in the following weeks.52

After initial coverage by bloggers in online platforms, the Urganch protests were widely discussed by official media as well, forcing the government to re-consider its demolition program. From then on, it was announced that all planned demolition works were suspended until full compensation was paid to the owners of properties and their consent had been formally received. Any demolition works were as of now to be managed directly by the Prime Minister's Office.53

This case epitomizes the role of bloggers in creating a form of civil society: active critics of government policies both at central and local levels force the government to readjust its policy and take better into consideration the needs of the population. Following the street protests and their own support, President Mirziyoyev convened a meeting where he harshly criticized the approach taken on demolition works led by local governors in certain regions of Uzbekistan and mentioned the role of bloggers in making the issue public.54 The Urganch *khokim* had to apologize to the affected people saying it was his mistake.55

6 Public Servants' Forced Labor in the Bukhara Region

The second case to support the argument of this paper on the emergence of an online civil society unfolds in the Bukhara region. On August 2, 2019 one of the country's prominent bloggers reported on his Facebook channel, troll.uz, that the workers of public organizations were forced to clean a public cemetery. The activist shared some evidence, included the screenshot of text messages sent by the heads of public organizations—hospitals, schools—calling their staff to turn up at the cemetery at 7AM, as well as pictures of people cleaning the place. This report drew the attention of a wide public who condemned

52 This paper did not seek for data on whether and to what extend the remaining compensation amounts were paid to the affected families or not.

53 Press Service of the President of Uzbekistan, "Tadbirkorlikni Rivojlantirish Bo'Yicha Belgilangan Vazifalar Ijrosi Tahlil Qilindi," https://president.uz/uz/lists/view/2788.

54 Radio Freedom, "Mirziyoyev 'Xiyonatchi' Hokimlarni Jazolashga Buyruq Berdi," https://www.ozodlik.org/a/30090260.html.

55 Xabar.uz, "Nihoyat. Xorazm Viloyat Hokimi Ham Uzr So'Radi (Video)," Xabar.uz, https://www.xabar.uz/siyosat/nihoyat-xorazm-viloyat-hokimi-ham-uzr-soradi-video.

forced labor of any forms.56 Later, the blogger uploaded a video where he addressed the *khokim* of the Bukhara region and the Minister of Labor and Social Protection, which was successful in drawing the attention of the local government on the issue.

In response to emerging discussions about the forced labor allegedly led by Bukhara region *khokimiyat*, official media sent their journalists to the field to check the information and confirmed the forced nature of the work.57 However, in his statement, the *khokim* rejected all these claims, saying people were working in the cemetery voluntarily since their relatives and ancestors were buried there.58

This is another example of the emergence of a civil society in the form of politically active bloggers. The local authorities had to arrange television programs showcasing civil servants willingly working in the cemetery. Although in this case, the public appraisal in online platforms could not make the local government confess the issue, it still made them respond to the matter, and further pressured the *khokim* to make a statement against the use of forced labor. As an emerging civil society, a politically active blogger and his followers together were able to address one of the common issues in state administration—forced labor.59

Although the Ministry of Labor did not officially respond to the matter, official media reported that it started an independent assessment of the situation. The rise of this new civil society confirm it can keep the government and its officials at least partly accountable, therefore potentially leading the way to a proper democratization of the society. Recent official discourse shows that the government tends to celebrate the emergence of such a form of civil society: two popular bloggers were awarded with medals by the Prime Minister at the occasion of Journalists and mass media workers' Day.60

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56 See "Bloger: «Qabristonni Tozalashga Onamni Majburiy Olib Chiqishdi»," Xabar.uz, https://www.xabar.uz/uz/jamiyat/bloger-onamni-qabristonni.

57 Bardoshbek Samad, "Dalil Ham, Isbot Ham Bor. Buxoro Oyni Etak Bilan Yopmoqchimi?," kun.uz, https://kun.uz/44658777.

58 Oktam Barnoev, "Bayonot," https://www.facebook.com/barnoevofficial/posts/706415529830131?_tn_=-R.

59 It is worth to note that the use of forced labor had been practiced in the country for yearsin various sectors areas such as cotton harvest.

60 GAZETA.UZ, "Glavnyy Redaktor «Gazety.Uz» Nagrazhden Ordenom «Dustlik»," Gazeta.uz, https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2019/06/27/awards/.

7 Conclusions

This paper's contribution to the literature is twofold. First, based on two case studies from 2019, it demonstrated that in an authoritarian context, the partial liberalization of media, as well as relaxing restrictions on freedom of speech might contribute to the creation of early forms of civil society. Although these civil societies may be limited to online spaces so far, they often succeed in drawing the attention of the government to the issues they raise, and thus bring change to poor governance or other abuses by government representatives. Secondly, this paper extended Gibson's argument on the role of social networks in developing civil society61 to an online space. If sustained with continuous liberalization, such online networks may evolve into stronger (but not necessarily formal or registered) civil society forms. By keeping the government accountable through its civic engagement, such civil society may contribute to the transition from authoritarianism to a more democratized regime.

For Uzbekistan to consolidate its transition, these civil society forms need to be strengthened and sustained. To borrow Gibson's words, "organizations that evolve from the grassroots take time to grow".62 Uzbekistan's emerging civil society is evolving and growing every day in online platforms. Whether the country is genuinely on the way to democratization through current liberalization policy, or it is a cosmetic form of democratization, only time will show.

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