HSR (LONDON),
HOUGHTON STREET REVIEW JOURNAL
ISSN: 2058-5519|Impact factor-15.9
http://houghtonstreetreview.com/index.php/hsr

Legitimacy of State Power in Developed Countries: Theoretical Foundations, Governance Quality and Implications for Uzbekistan

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doi:https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23701924

Abstract: This article examines the legitimacy of state power by combining classical and contemporary theories with the experience of developed countries. It brings Weber's typology of domination, Easton's distinction between specific and diffuse support, Beetham's multidimensional model and Scharpf's input/output distinction into dialogue with the debate on the quality of governance (Fukuyama, Rothstein and Teorell, Evans). The article argues, first, that legitimacy cannot be reduced either to democratic procedure or to administrative performance; second, that the quality of governance should be assessed separately from the type of political regime, yet remains durable only where institutional safeguards—the separation of powers, the rule of law and effective parliamentary oversight—constrain executive discretion; and third, that overstating the role of external control and civil-society participation is as misleading as ignoring it. The article concludes by discussing what these findings imply for Uzbekistan, where the legitimacy of public authority is increasingly built on legal reform and the visible performance of the state. The analysis is conceptual and comparative, and it identifies directions for empirical research on legitimacy in Central Asia.
Keywords: legitimacy; state power; quality of governance; Max Weber; separation of powers; rule of law; parliamentary oversight; Uzbekistan

1. Introduction

Legitimacy—the widespread belief that a political authority has the right to rule and that its commands deserve to be obeyed—is the quiet foundation on which every durable political order rests. Where it is strong, the state can govern largely by consent; where it erodes, rulers must rely ever more heavily on coercion, material inducements or improvisation. For this reason legitimacy has remained one of the central problems of political science since Weber, and it has acquired fresh urgency in an era marked by declining trust in institutions, populist mobilisation and the growing complexity of governance (Norris, 2011).

Over recent decades, hundreds of works in Western political science and sociology have addressed the theoretical, methodological and historical aspects of legitimacy. Most of them, however, rest on the political traditions and experience of developed democracies. Research on how the legitimacy of state power is secured in Uzbekistan—particularly at the present, distinctive stage of its development—remains comparatively scarce, as it does for many other developing and transitional states. The distinctiveness of the Uzbek case is generally acknowledged. This makes it possible to approach the problem comprehensively, to avoid a narrow, one-sided ethnocentrism, to use more

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productively the rich theoretical arsenal that political science has accumulated, and to move from macro-theory towards historically grounded analysis at a more concrete level.

The article addresses three research questions. (1) How do classical and contemporary theories conceptualise legitimacy, and what do they imply for the way it is sustained in developed countries? (2) How should the quality of governance be assessed in relation to legitimacy, and why must it be analysed separately from the political regime? (3) Which institutional safeguards—the separation of powers, the rule of law and parliamentary oversight—underpin legitimacy, and what follows from this for Uzbekistan?

The article is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical literature. Section 3 describes the methodology. Section 4 presents the analysis in four parts: the territorial organisation of the state, the assessment of governance quality, the limits of external control, and the separation of powers and the rule of law. Section 5 discusses the implications for Uzbekistan, and Section 6 concludes.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Legitimacy as belief and as reservoir of support

Lipset (1959) defined legitimacy as the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing institutions are "the most appropriate ones for the society" (p. 86). Easton (1965) refined this idea by distinguishing specific support, which depends on the satisfaction produced by concrete policy outputs, from diffuse support, which is a deeper attachment to the regime. He likened diffuse support to a reservoir of goodwill: as long as the reservoir is full, a political system can survive periods in which its outputs disappoint, whereas once the level drops below a critical point, political stability is at risk. Beetham (1991) added that legitimacy is not a single attitude but has three dimensions: conformity of power to established rules (legality), justifiability of those rules by beliefs shared by rulers and ruled, and demonstrable expressions of consent. Scharpf (1999) contributed a further distinction between input legitimacy (government by the people, resting on participation and representation) and output legitimacy (government for the people, resting on effective problem-solving).

In our view, state power is the principal means through which a political community exercises authority: it operates through the systematic activity of state bodies, by which the people exercise the power that belongs to them. State power is necessary for stabilising the life of society and for realising and protecting the rights and freedoms of persons and citizens. Legitimacy is what turns this capacity into an accepted authority.

2.2 Weber's typology of domination

Weber's starting point is that domination means a probability that a specific command will be obeyed (Weber, 1978; 1990, pp. 25–26). Consequently, both sides live in a state of expectation: rulers expect obedience, while society is prepared to accept their demands only if it considers them legitimate and just. Weber studied legitimate forms of domination through the motives for obedience and distinguished three pure types: traditional, charismatic and rational-legal.

Traditional legitimacy corresponds historically to the era of monarchs and, in Weber's view, rests on hereditary succession and, ultimately, on the notion of divine right. In the doctrine of divine right, the ruler's decision is regarded as an earthly expression of divine rule and therefore takes precedence over any purely human judgement (Dogan, 1994, p. 148). Variants of this type survive today in states such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, Jordan and Kuwait.

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Charismatic legitimacy relates to extraordinary personal qualities; Weber originally associated them with magical abilities. He adopted the concept of charisma from the theological work of Rudolph Sohm, which is why this type retains a latent religious connotation. Charismatic authority is marked by a claim to absolute legitimacy and ascribes to the leader unique, even supernatural, attributes: the leader is seen as a messianic figure able to change a situation through personal influence and authority. Leaders such as Franklin D. Roosevelt in the United States, Winston Churchill in Britain, Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union and Mao Zedong in China are frequently cited in this connection, although the comparison needs care: in constitutional democracies charismatic appeal operates within, and is constrained by, rational-legal rules, whereas in personalist regimes it can displace them.

Rational-legal legitimacy has taken shape in most modern states and rests on formal rules and their consistent application. It is founded on belief in the legality of those who exercise power: individuals obey established rules, and those in positions of authority themselves act according to law. In Weber's account, bureaucracy is the purest form of this type of domination. Toward the end of his life Weber sought to identify yet another type, which he called plebiscitary leader democracy: the rule of a charismatic leader whose position is confirmed through popular acclamation and parliamentary endorsement.

2.3 The governance-quality debate

A parallel body of work focuses on how well the state actually governs. In the procedural tradition associated with Weber, the quality of administration depends on the selection, rotation and remuneration of civil servants. Rothstein and Teorell (2008) shifted attention to the impartiality of institutions in the exercise of public authority and advanced it as an independent criterion of governance quality. For a deeper understanding of present-day governance problems, the contributions of Evans (1995) on embedded autonomy and of Jensen and Meckling (1976) on agency relations are particularly relevant, since both address the problem of delegating powers and building effective channels of communication within hierarchical structures at the micro and macro levels. Fukuyama (2013) criticised the most common errors in the measurement of governance quality, among them reliance on indicators of results while ignoring the exogenous factors that shape them—the political context, the activity of civil society and the participation of local communities—and proposed grounding the assessment in the relationship between state capacity and bureaucratic autonomy.

3. Methodology

The study is conceptual and comparative-analytical. It relies on a systematic analysis of the scholarly literature on legitimacy and governance quality, on the comparison of institutional arrangements in developed countries, and on a doctrinal analysis of the principle of the separation of powers and the rule of law, including programmatic statements of Uzbekistan's first President. The aim is not to measure legitimacy empirically but to clarify concepts, expose theoretical tensions and derive propositions that can later be tested. A limitation of this design is that it does not capture citizens' attitudes directly.

4. Analysis

4.1 Territorial organisation of the state as a context of legitimation

The territorial structure of the state shapes the channels through which authority is justified. Developed countries are usually divided into unitary states and federations. A unitary state is a union of politically homogeneous territorial units that are parts of a centralised state and do not possess sovereignty. It presupposes a single citizenship, a unified system of legislation, taxation and finance,

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and unified central authorities. Unitary states may be centralised or decentralised. In a centralised unitary state (France, with its prefectural tradition, is the classic example), local administration is run by officials with general competence, such as governors or prefects. In a decentralised state (Sweden is a frequently cited case), local branches of ministries and agencies operate, and local self-government carries significant weight. Their powers include the solution of sectoral problems of national importance.

The state may delegate part of its functions to territorial units for solving problems of national importance while retaining the right to supervise their implementation. A temporary union of states created to achieve specific goals is called a confederation. As a rule, confederation is a transitional arrangement and cannot be considered a method of state structure, since it lacks the attributes of a state, such as sovereignty and territorial unity. For the study of legitimacy the significance of these distinctions is that centralised arrangements concentrate legitimation in the national centre, whereas decentralisation creates additional, local arenas in which citizens experience the state and form judgements about it.

4.2 Assessing the quality of governance independently of the political regime

The assessment of the quality of governance requires distinguishing at least three independent and effective dimensions: the procedural dimension inherited from Weber, the impartiality dimension (Rothstein and Teorell, 2008) and the dimension of capacity and autonomy (Fukuyama, 2013; Evans, 1995). The procedural aspects of impartiality in state institutions were developed in particular by Rothstein and Teorell, who proposed impartiality as an independent criterion of governance quality.

A key methodological requirement is to separate politics from administration. If politics is the state's activity in the sphere of general and global problems, administration is its activity in implementing concrete measures. To assess the quality of the executive branch objectively, parameters of political preference must be removed from the field of evaluation. Bluntschli, Weber and Woodrow Wilson repeatedly stressed the fundamental importance of this distinction: administration can be good or bad irrespective of the political context. In his lecture "Politics as a Vocation", Weber distinguishes the political leader, who is guided by conviction and takes sides, from the official, who is expected to administer impartially (Weber, 2004, p. 32). Wilson (1887) expressed the same position, treating the field of administration as removed from the hurry and strife of politics. "If I see a murderous fellow sharpening his knife cleverly," he wrote, "I can borrow his way of sharpening the knife without borrowing his probable intention to commit murder"; likewise, a monarchist who manages a public office well can teach methods of administration without changing the republican convictions of the learner (Wilson, 1887, pp. 220–221).

The theory of impartial state institutions, which emerged about a century later, is built on the same idea of a dichotomy in the democratic system, with two sides governed by opposing norms: the representative process, where partiality is legitimate, and the impartiality of executive power. Fukuyama adopts this theoretical basis as a starting point for describing the general features of a methodological framework for evaluating government. As an important feature of governance he treats the moment of not paying attention to the character of the authorities in a country, whether democratic or authoritarian (Fukuyama, 2013). The sense of this paradoxical and widely cited argument lies precisely in this nuance: some countries with authoritarian forms of government govern no worse than liberal democracies.

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Variables that reflect the procedural quality of the state do exist. We intuitively recognise them in the postindustrial countries with highly developed and effective state institutions, among which Denmark, Sweden and Singapore are commonly acknowledged; by effectiveness we understand not only social welfare but also qualitative aspects, including the absence of corruption.

This argument carries an important qualification. Administrative quality is not the same as legitimacy. Regimes that perform well administratively may still depend on repression and co-optation, which Gerschewski (2013) treats, together with legitimation, as the three pillars of stability in autocracies. The separation of governance quality from regime type is therefore an analytical device, and it should not be read as a claim that regime type is irrelevant to the sources of public consent.

4.3 The limits of external control and the problem of institutional sequencing

A modern political system is expected to rest on three pillars in stable equilibrium: a strong state, the rule of law and democratic accountability. Although most Western states have succeeded in achieving this balance, many developing countries still display divergent features along these vectors of development. Zakaria (1997) described the resulting imbalance between democratic development and the formation of liberal institutions in his work on the rise of illiberal democracy: political leaders who enjoy popular trust and sufficient legitimacy, who have come to power or have even been re-elected several times, are often inclined to act in violation of constitutional norms.

Fukuyama (2012), in turn, points to inconsistencies in the development of state institutions, to examples of what may be called institutions of "limited power", and to Isaiah Berlin's (1969) "negative liberty". Examples of discrepancy between the formation of modern government structures, on the one hand, and success in protecting civil liberties and democracy, on the other, are so clear that they can be found even in aggregated data of the kind compiled by the World Bank. These data show the absence of a strong causal link among the three variables concerned, and therefore democratic development cannot be regarded as a sufficient condition for creating mature state institutions. Building functioning bureaucratic structures proves to be a separate and extremely difficult task.

The concept of good governance, which first appeared in documents of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 1997), understood governance as a compromise between costs and results, alongside the effectiveness of the executive. It named civil-society institutions, democracy and the rule of law as the main criteria of "right" governance. On the one hand, this formula appears sufficiently plausible: in the modern world it is hard to deny the high hopes placed in civil-society institutions for raising the effectiveness of bureaucratic structures, combating corruption and monitoring the quality and availability of social services.

On the other hand, there are a number of reasons to doubt the effectiveness of such a broad approach to the choice of criteria. Leaving aside deviations, let us consider the fundamental limitations. Civic associations intended to oversee governments are sometimes established at the initiative of the authorities themselves as decorative or service structures and thus do not influence decision-making. More generally, external control, whatever form it takes, cannot by itself create effective institutions of executive power from nothing. Rather, a basic level of institutional quality is needed that exists independently of, and does not depend on, outside pressure. Moreover, control must be moderate: bureaucratic structures need sufficient autonomy and independence from a changing political environment and shifts in public opinion.

Evans's (1995) concept of embedded autonomy is based on keeping a balance between autonomy in decision-making and control over results. Executive agencies must retain a critical public gaze, but

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such attention does not in itself guarantee practical success and, if acceptable limits are exceeded, it may give rise to forms of political corruption such as corporate clientelism. For an objective assessment of governance quality it is therefore of fundamental importance to separate the activity of executive bodies and their apparatus from the institutions of democratic accountability and the rule of law. At the same time, while recognising the role of "negative liberty" institutions in improving the quality of state structures and ensuring the openness of decision-making, we should not overstate their importance for the quality of governance or build them into the evaluation system itself.

4.4 The separation of powers and the rule of law

In Uzbekistan, the executive branch is distinguished from the legislative and judicial branches by the following features: it operates independently of the legislative and judicial branches; it acts solely on the basis of laws, ensures their implementation and, for this purpose, develops and adopts subordinate legislation; and its activity is mainly organisational in character, with legal means of enforcement at its disposal for carrying out its tasks. In contrast to views that assert the supremacy of the legislature over other branches, the following ideas appear better justified. First, the principle of the rule of law should not be construed as an affirmation of legislative supremacy. As Uzbekistan's first President, Islam Karimov, put it: "Ensuring the rule of law, strengthening the protection of the rights and interests of the individual, the family, society and the state, raising the legal culture and legal consciousness of the population and educating citizens in the spirit of obedience to and respect for the law—this is not only the aim but also the means and the most important condition for building a genuinely democratic, law-based state and a free civil society founded on a developed market economy" (Karimov, 2002, p. 28; translated from Uzbek).

The principle of the rule of law is binding on all participants in legal relations, including the legislature itself, and it ensures that laws adopted by the legislature are observed. Studies of developed countries' experience show that the limits of parliamentary oversight are determined by two criteria or methods: first, by defining in law the objects of parliamentary oversight (the legal aspect); and second, by delimiting the scope of the executive's constitutional powers through the principle of separation of powers (the political and legal aspect). If a particular form of parliamentary oversight is entrenched in legislation without regard to its content and to the level of the parliament's development, this may lead to its ineffectiveness in practice or have a negative effect on the interaction between the legislative and executive branches. Although the general legal foundations of the institution of parliamentary oversight in Uzbekistan have been fully formed, the current legislation still contains legal gaps concerning its organisational and legal support. In particular, issues of ensuring the organisational and legal implementation of the forms of parliamentary oversight are not fully reflected in legislation.

The principle of the separation of powers presupposes the exercise of a single state power through its division into legislative, executive and judicial branches. A distinction needs to be drawn between "restraint" and "counterbalance". Restraint means that one state body is prohibited from taking certain actions against another or from adopting certain decisions; counterbalance means that a state body is able to act in response to a specific decision or action of another body. Put differently, restraint is the refusal to perform, or the obligation to refrain from performing, a particular act, while counterbalance means exerting influence within the framework of established legal powers and resisting certain actions.

The participation of the legislature in forming the executive branch does not signify the administrative subordination of the executive to the legislature. On the contrary, it is one of the

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specific instruments for securing balance among the branches of power. The legal status of executive authorities, like the legislation governing them, is defined differently in different states, and scholars express different opinions on the matter. Despite this divergence, the legal status can be observed to depend to a certain extent on the functions the executive performs. The executive branch is directly connected with the features that distinguish it from the legislative and judicial branches. Karimov (1996) emphasised: "The rule of law is the basic principle of a law-based state. It presupposes the strict dominance of law in all spheres of life. No state body, no economic entity or socio-political organisation, no official and no individual can be exempt from the duty to obey the law. All are equal before the law. The supremacy of law means that the main social, above all economic, relations are regulated only by law, and all participants in them bear responsibility for violating rights and norms without exception" (p. 321; translated from Uzbek).

5. Discussion: Implications for Uzbekistan

Read together, the theories reviewed above suggest that legitimacy is layered. Applying Beetham's (1991) model, the legality dimension depends on whether power is exercised within clear and consistently applied rules; the justification dimension depends on whether those rules correspond to shared beliefs about the proper purposes of state power; and the consent dimension depends on whether citizens can express their approval or disapproval in credible ways. A state may be strong on one dimension and weak on another, and the analysis above shows why none can be substituted for the others.

In Easton's terms, contemporary reform in Uzbekistan can be seen as an effort to build diffuse support by strengthening the legal foundations of state power. Reform documents such as the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022–2026 (Decree of the President, 2022) and the constitutional reform confirmed by referendum in 2023 stress the rule of law, accountability to citizens and the improvement of public administration. The expansion of electronic public services and of channels for citizens' complaints and appeals can likewise be interpreted as a source of output legitimacy in Scharpf's (1999) sense: it aims to demonstrate the state's effectiveness in everyday dealings with citizens. These are interpretive observations, and their weight should be tested against empirical evidence.

Two risks follow from the foregoing analysis. First, a legitimacy that rests mainly on performance is vulnerable: when the economy slows or services deteriorate, specific support falls, and without a sufficient reservoir of diffuse support there is little to cushion it. Second, the discussion of external control suggests that participation mechanisms will strengthen legitimacy only if they are real rather than decorative, that is, if they can influence decision-making. For this reason, the legal gaps in parliamentary oversight identified above matter a great deal: clearer organisational and legal arrangements for the forms of oversight would give the separation of powers practical force and thereby support all three dimensions of legitimacy.

The comparative lesson from developed countries is not that one institutional model should be copied. It is rather that high-quality governance, the rule of law and accountability reinforce each other but do not automatically follow from one another, so that their sequencing and mutual balance must be addressed deliberately. For researchers, the most promising next step is empirical: representative surveys of public attitudes towards state institutions, studies of trust in local and national bodies, and comparisons with other Central Asian states would make it possible to test the propositions advanced here.

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6. Conclusion

The article has argued that the legitimacy of state power is best understood as a multidimensional and layered phenomenon. Weber's three types of domination remain a useful point of departure, but they must be supplemented by concepts that capture support, consent and performance. The quality of governance should be assessed independently of the regime type because administration and politics follow different logics; yet governance quality does not by itself produce legitimacy, and it is sustained only where institutions of the rule of law and the separation of powers limit arbitrary action.

In essence, today the content of the principle of the separation of powers is expressed directly in the following: first, in the mechanism of forming the legislative, executive and judicial bodies; second, in the procedure for appointing the officials of the branches of power; third, in the scope of activity and powers of the branches of power and the manner of exercising them; and fourth, in ensuring the mechanism of "checks and balances" among the branches. In line with this approach, a democratic state that consistently observes human rights can exist only under the principle of the separation of powers.

The study has limitations. It is conceptual, relies on secondary sources, and does not measure citizens' perceptions. Future work should combine the framework developed here with survey data and with comparative case studies of Uzbekistan and its neighbours.

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