



## **Bridging State and Civil Society: Informal Organizations in Tajik/Afghan Badakhshan**

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**Bridging State and Civil Society: Informal Organizations in Tajik/Afghan Badakhshan.**

By Suzanne Levi-Sanchez. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021. 362p. \$85.00 cloth.

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“Negotiations continued after the protesters returned to their homes. This went on for a number of weeks, then months, with the outcome of the talks never publicly shared and an agreement never reached, but violence remained limited and only minor protests occurred” (p. 96). Drawing on her first-hand experience, Levi-Sanchez describes the aftermath of a violent incident in Khorog in Tajikistan’s Gorno-Badakhshan in 2014, right at the border of Afghanistan, which was ultimately settled, not through any formal process, but through informal organizations within the community.

In her book, *Bridging State and Civil Society*, Suzanne Levi-Sanchez takes us onto a journey to Badakhshan in the Tajik-Afghan borderlands, where the author spent many years investigating informal organizations from the ground up. The book uses the lens of informal organization to study various types of actors and practices as distinct case studies that Levi-Sanchez encountered in Badakhshan, ranging from violent incidents to female governance, and from trafficking in the borderlands to international development initiatives. Each of these unique case studies are explored in detail in the book’s chapters. Through her study, Levi-Sanchez illustrates the power of informal organizations, which act, as the title of the book suggests, as bridges between the state and civil society.

The book makes several important contributions to our understanding of the Tajik-Afghan borderlands, especially with regard to informal organizations. Crucially, Levi-Sanchez's analysis sheds light on the relationship between the state and informal organizations, which she defines as "a governing body that works outside the formal state," but that "is formal in and of itself to the people who belong to it, meaning that it has a clear order and set of rules" (p. 10). The book illustrates that such organizations can operate as mediators, buffers, and connectors between state and civil society. Especially in the case of Tajikistan, informal organizations provide a pathway for people to pursue collective action and engage with an authoritarian state.

Levi-Sanchez's book is grounded in a transparent and well developed methodology. The author bases her analysis on a discussion of her ontology and epistemology – drawing on constructivism and applying an interpretative research design that rests on ethnographic methods. She convincingly explains the need for ethnography to study informal organizations in a meaningful way. The research design is implemented with excellence, building on participatory research in a range of roles, including working as an instructor in the Khorog English Preparatory Program and as an interpreter for the French ambassador. The comparative set-up, based on the study of two neighboring regions in two different countries that are often even studied by different communities – with Afghanistan often being looked at in the context of South Asian and Tajikistan being usually studied through a Central Asian lens – allows for strong analysis.

The careful analysis of the book illustrates several ways in which informal organizations matter and connect the state with civil society in the region. First, the book shows that informal organizations enable people to go beyond their immediate networks, allowing them to access

resources from the state and to even collaborate with the state when necessary, such as in the case of the introduction vignette, where a conflict was mediated through informal organizations. Second, the book illustrates that informal organizations adapt to the needs of people and that this, often more horizontal function, can have a democratizing effect on the state. For example, according to her study of *mahalla* community structures in Tajikistan's Khorog, these bodies do not only organize street repairs and conflict mediation, but they also created security teams to protect people from arrests through the state security forces following the above-mentioned incident.

Meanwhile, Levi-Sanchez demonstrates that attempts of formalizing informal organizations or of making their structures more transparent often undermine them. Accordingly, the book argues that “projects that seek to formalize them [informal organizations] or co-opt them under the purview of the state only serve to erode the delicate balance between people and the informal arrangements they have come to accept” (p. 9). Such findings are important to consider in various strands of literature, including research on state building, sub-national governance, and informal economies. In addition, Levi-Sanchez should be read in the policy world before trying to strengthen local level governance, civilian protection, or community development, especially in a context in which the focus on ‘the informal’ is in vogue. For instance, in the Afghan context, state-led initiatives between 2001 and 2021 repeatedly tried to connect the ‘informal’ to the supposedly ‘formal,’ with initiatives such as the National Solidarity Programme and the Afghan Local Police, to increase the authority of the state.

A fascinating byproduct of Levi-Sanchez's study is how her work enhances our understanding of the border that separates Tajikistan from Afghanistan, providing nuanced insights into the dynamics of borderlands. Border regions are often also at the margins of the literature,

reflecting a wider state-centric perspective in political science. Levi-Sanchez's approach seriously counters this tendency by centering her study around what is often viewed as the periphery – the borderlands. Therefore, the book also sheds light on how smuggling networks that operate across the border developed and changed in the context of the Soviet Period and the Afghan and Tajik civil wars. It further shows how the supposedly remote drug trade in the borderlands is connected to the state and is shaped by regional and international politics.

*Bridging State and Civil Society* is a highly important and original contribution to the literature that is grounded in thorough ethnographic research and regional expertise. In this review, I engage with theoretical questions that arose while reading this rich work. These questions certainly do not diminish the value of the excellent study. Quite the opposite, I hope that they raise the deserved interest of a wider community of scholars in the book.

Adopting a political science perspective, the nuanced empirical study of Badakhshan encourages a further discussion of how the work informs theory of informal organization(s), beyond their crucial role as a bridge connecting state and society. In particular, the powerful research design applied by Levi-Sanchez invites reflections on theoretical conclusions that could be drawn by comparing the empirical dynamics on both sides of the border, in Tajikistan and Afghanistan, more systematically. Such a comparison might allow us to understand more about some of the secondary research questions raised by the author – such as, whether informal organizations vary depending on how they are embedded within the state and society. For instance, the empirical findings may enable theoretical conclusions on what groups of the population benefit more or less from informal organizations or on resilience strategies of informal organizations in light of attempts of state cooptation. Such conclusions would also be highly relevant in the context of an increasingly authoritarian Taliban-controlled Afghanistan.

More specifically, the book raises the question of a potentially negative side of informal organizations. The overall argument of the book that informal organizations are productive and, especially in an authoritarian context, are crucial for empowering people vis-à-vis the state is compelling. As the author points out, this finding is in line with the wider literature, which emphasizes the importance of civil society in general and informal organizations in particular. However, Levi-Sanchez's book also adds nuance to this broader argument, suggesting that informal organizations fill voids "sometimes constructively and other times destructively" (p. 275). Indeed, the case studies illustrate empirically that informal organizations are no panacea.

Going beyond the intended scope of this ethnographically grounded book, this quite naturally makes the reader wonder under what conditions informal organizations ultimately become constructive or destructive – and whether there are some lessons to be learned from the book about the conditions that need to apply to achieve the former. The book suggests that "disruption to informal organization... creates instability" (p. 263) – thereby raising the intriguing question whether undisrupted informal organizations usually develop to be constructive.

Ultimately, *Bridging State and Civil Society* is an essential reading for those interested in the dynamics in the Tajik-Afghan borderlands. Crucially, it is also an important resource for those grappling with questions relating to informal organization and those trying to gain an understanding of what shapes the relationship between civil society and the state.