

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Institutional Role of Provincial Governorships in The Political Apprenticeship of The Heir Apparent in The Emirate of Bukhara

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Abstract

Objective: This study critically analyzes the systemic role of provincial governorships (bekliks) in managing succession and elite formation within the Emirate of Bukhara under the Manghit dynasty (1785–1920). It posits that the beklik was not merely an administrative unit but a de facto political institution designed to select, train, and test the heir apparent, while simultaneously managing rivals and structuring the contest for central power.

Methods: The research employs a synthesis of historical-comparative analysis, institutionalism, and critical source-criticism (hermeneutics). Primary sources, including the accounts of 19th-century European (A. Vamberi, A. Lehmann, H. Lansdell) and Russian (N. Khanikov) observers, alongside local chronicles (Mir Abd al-Karim Bukhari), are comparatively analyzed, accounting for potential biases such as the “colonial gaze” and official court narratives. Process-tracing is used to reconstruct the career paths of key princes and officials, thereby reverse-engineering the institution’s practical functions.

Results: The study demonstrates that strategic bekliks such as Qarshi, Karmana, and Charjuy held a special, albeit uncoded, status as “appanage domains.” Qarshi, as the dynasty’s ancestral heartland, served as the primary political academy and military-economic base for the heir apparent; its resources (loyal tribes, tax revenues) were decisive in succession struggles. Karmana, due to its proximity to the capital, functioned as a final staging ground for the favored successor, while peripheral bekliks like Hisar were used for the political isolation of potential rivals. This system extended beyond princes to shape the careers of high officials, such as Ostonqulbiy, functioning as a mechanism for elite formation.

Conclusion: The practice of appointing heirs to governorships was not a stochastic tradition but a sophisticated, rational institution of governance that ensured the stability of the Manghit dynasty within a patrimonial system. It simultaneously prepared successors for practical rule, tested their loyalty, and channeled the inherent conflict over succession into a managed, albeit often violent, contest, thereby preventing state collapse during interregna.

KEY WORDS

Emirate of Bukhara, Manghit Dynasty, Political Succession, Patrimonialism, State-Building, Elite Formation, Qarshi Beklik, Institutionalism, Central Asian History.

INTRODUCTION

The stability of any monarchical polity is fundamentally contingent on the institutionalization of succession – the transfer of power from one ruler to the next. In the Perso-Turkic and Turco-Mongol traditions of Central Asian statecraft, the absence of a fixed, codified rule of succession, such as primogeniture, frequently led to violent internecine struggles, political fragmentation, and state decline. The Emirate of Bukhara under the Manghit dynasty, which rose to power in the mid-18th century, was no exception to this structural challenge. Yet, paradoxically, the Manghits maintained their rule for nearly a century and a half – a remarkably long tenure compared to regional contemporaries. This longevity suggests that, despite the lack of formal rules, the Manghits developed a sophisticated, practical mechanism for managing the perennial crisis of succession.

Existing historiography has extensively covered the political history of the Emirate, its administrative structures, and its relations with the Russian Empire [1]. However, most studies treat the system of provincial governorships (*bekliks*) as primarily administrative-territorial units. While the appointment of princes to these governorships is a frequently noted fact in the sources, its systemic role in managing succession and shaping the political elite – its function as a coherent political institution – has not been the subject of a dedicated scholarly inquiry. This article seeks to fill this lacuna by addressing the following research question: Within the patrimonial framework of the Bukharan Emirate, what institutional role did the system of provincial governorships play in regulating political succession and ensuring dynastic stability?

This study is theoretically grounded in Max Weber's concept of patrimonial governance. In a patrimonial state, authority is personalized; the state is considered the personal domain (patrimony) of the ruler, and officials are his personal retainers. In such a system, personal loyalty and kinship ties supersede abstract, bureaucratic-rational rules. Our central thesis is that the system of provincial governorships in Bukhara was a *de facto* institution that evolved to manage the inherent contradictions of this patrimonial system. This institution served a dual function: it was both a «political academy» for training the heir apparent in the practical arts of statecraft and a «testing ground» where his loyalty and competence were evaluated, and where the central ruler could manage the threat posed by ambitious princes accumulating

personal power. This paper will first outline the study's sources and methodology, then analyze the practical functioning of the system through case studies of Qarshi, Karmana, and other *bekliks*, and finally, discuss its broader significance in a comparative-historical context.

METHODOLOGY

This research is based on a critical analysis of several categories of primary and secondary sources pertaining to the history of the Emirate of Bukhara. The first and largest group consists of the accounts of 19th-century European travelers, diplomats, and scholars, including Ármín Vámbéry [13], Alexander Lehmann [7, 8], Henry Lansdell [2, 3], and Joseph Wolff [12]. The value of these sources lies in their direct, often detailed observations of the political life of the Emirate, the status of the princes, and the situation in the *bekliks*. However, a critical approach is imperative. As external observers, their authors often failed to grasp the full complexity of internal court politics and frequently projected their own European-centric models of statecraft onto the Bukharan system, sometimes leading to biased assessments colored by a “colonial gaze” that framed local political structures as “despotic” or “chaotic.”

The second group of sources comprises the official reports and descriptions compiled by representatives of the Russian Empire, notably Nikolai Khanikov [11] and military officials. These sources are distinguished by their provision of more precise, often statistical, data regarding the Emirate's administrative, military, and economic structure. Yet, their primary purpose was to assess the Emirate from the perspective of Russia's strategic interests, and they must therefore be read with an awareness of their inherent political slant and potential for subjective intelligence analysis.

The third category consists of local court chronicles, such as the work of Mir Abd al-Karim Bukhari [9, 10]. As authors with insider knowledge, they provide invaluable details on the nuances of succession disputes, personal relationships, and court intrigues. Their main limitation is a tendency toward official panegyrics, often written with a clear bias in favor of the ruling emir, aiming to legitimize the official dynastic narrative rather than provide a dispassionate account of events.

The study's methodology is a synthesis of historical-comparative analysis and an institutionalist approach.

Through comparative analysis, the appointments of different princes to governorships in various periods (e.g., under Emirs Haydar, Nasrullah, Muzaffar, and Abd al-Ahad) are juxtaposed to identify patterns and variations. The institutionalist framework allows us to view the beklik system not as a mere collection of administrative posts, but as a political institution with unwritten rules, specific functions, and predictable outcomes. To enhance the reliability of our findings, we employ source triangulation (cross-verifying claims across the different source categories) and the method of process-tracing. This latter technique is used to reconstruct the step-by-step career trajectories of key figures like Emir Nasrullah and Emir Abd al-Ahad, allowing us to reverse-engineer the precise role the governorship institution played in their ascent to power.

RESULTS: The Institution of the Appanage in Practice

1. The Qarshi Beklik: Dynastic Legitimacy and the Military-Economic Foundation of Power

The preeminent position of the Qarshi beklik in the Emirate's political system stemmed from its dual role as a source of historical legitimacy and material power for the Manghit dynasty. It was in the Qarshi oasis that the Manghit tribe first consolidated its power in the 18th century, using it as a base to challenge and ultimately displace the Ashtarkhanid dynasty [2, 3]. This foundational history endowed the region with immense symbolic capital. Consequently, Manghit rulers not only settled their kinsmen in the area to ensure demographic dominance but also recruited their most formidable military units from the semi-nomadic Turkic and Manghit tribes of the region [4]. This transformed Qarshi into a reliable military and political fortress, distinct from other bekliks. Its economic potential was also substantial; tax revenues from the fertile lands of the Qashqadarya valley and control over trade routes leading south to Afghanistan and India constituted a vital source of income for the princely and, ultimately, the state treasury.

On this foundation, the Qarshi beklik evolved into the central institution for preparing the heir apparent. Sources indicate that it became an established norm for the designated successor to participate in the governance of Qarshi alongside the officially appointed bek [5, 6]. This was not a mere sinecure but a real apprenticeship in power. Here, the crown prince learned the practicalities of statecraft: tax collection, military command, judicial oversight, and negotiation with

tribal leaders. The fact that Alexander Lehmann, writing in the mid-19th century, mentioned Qarshi in the same breath as Bukhara and Samarkand [7], and that Russian officials undertook specific missions there [8], confirms its status as a secondary political center.

The institution's function was vividly demonstrated during several succession crises. Following the death of Emir Shahmurad, his heir Haydar was promptly summoned from Qarshi to the capital – a model of a peaceful power transition [9, 10]. The situation after Emir Haydar's death, however, revealed the institution's other crucial function. His son, Nasrullah, used his position in Qarshi to amass the necessary military (several thousand loyal troops) and financial resources to defeat his rivals in the capital and seize the throne [11, 12]. Later, Emir Nasrullah's own appointment of his son, Muzaffar, as governor of Qarshi shows the continuation of the tradition, while Muzaffar's subsequent removal on suspicion of conspiracy reveals the inherent risk this powerful governorship posed to the incumbent ruler [13].

2. A Crucible of Conflict: Qarshi as a Center of Rebellion

The strategic importance of the Qarshi beklik is powerfully underscored by its status as the primary target not only for legitimate heirs but also for rebellious princes challenging the central authority. In 1868, when Prince Abd al-Malik launched a major revolt against his father, Emir Muzaffar, he directed his first and main strike against Qarshi. His capture of the city and execution of the emir's loyalist bek was a deeply symbolic political act, not just a military maneuver [17]. By this action, Abd al-Malik demonstrated that he had severed the Emirate's most vital power base from his father's control and was converting it into his own new capital and military platform for a march on Bukhara [18]. This event proves that control over Qarshi's resources was considered a prerequisite for any serious claimant to the throne.

3. Karmana, Charjuy, and the Logic of Elite Formation

The system for managing succession was not limited to Qarshi. Other strategic bekliks performed distinct functions within this institutional logic. The Karmana beklik, due to its proximity to the capital, often served as the final «staging ground» for the heir apparent who was most trusted and deemed ready for rule. The fact that Emir Abd al-Ahad Khan was the governor of Karmana immediately before his accession and subsequently favored it as his main residence

is a clear illustration of this role [19, 20]. At the time of Emir Muzaffar's death in 1885, Abd al-Ahad's position in Karmana allowed him to reach Bukhara swiftly and secure the throne before other claimants could mobilize [21, 22]. Concurrently, the appointment of other princes, such as Abd al-Ahad's brother, to the distant beklik of Hisar demonstrates the system's function as a tool for politically marginalizing and geographically isolating potential rivals [23].

Furthermore, this system was instrumental in the formation of the broader political elite beyond the royal family. The career of Ostonqulbiy, a high-ranking official, serves as a prime example. Upon his accession, the new emir appointed Ostonqulbiy, one of his most trusted men, to the strategic governorship of Charjuy [24]. In this position, he gained significant administrative, financial, and military experience. Three years later, he was promoted to one of the highest posts in the Emirate, the Devonbegi (chief minister) [25]. This case confirms that the beklik system functioned as a veritable conveyor belt for selecting, training, and promoting the entire political elite of the Manghit state.

DISCUSSION

The evidence presented demonstrates that the system of provincial governorships in Bukhara was a complex mechanism for managing the central dilemma of patrimonial rule: the tension between the need to delegate authority and the risk of that delegated authority turning into a challenge to the center. On one hand, sending princes to the provinces reduced the risk of conspiracies in the capital and allowed them to acquire essential governance skills. On the other, it created the potential for powerful governors to accumulate resources and rebel, as the cases of Nasrullah and Abd al-Malik illustrate. The Manghit emirs attempted to balance this dilemma through a sophisticated, informal set of rules: appointing the trusted heir to the nearby Karmana, exiling potential rivals to the remote Hisar, and monitoring the crown prince's activities in Qarshi through loyal beks [16].

It is illuminating to compare this Bukharan system with succession practices in other Turco-Islamic states. The early Ottoman Empire also practiced a form of provincial apprenticeship, with princes governing sanjaks. However, this was later replaced by the "cage system" (kafes), where princes were confined to the palace. While the kafes successfully prevented civil wars, it also produced a series of rulers with no practical experience in statecraft. The Mughal

Empire in India saw princes govern major provinces (subahs), but this often led to large-scale rebellions, as in the case of Aurangzeb. The Manghit system differs from both in its institutionalization of a specific beklik, Qarshi, as the primary appanage domain for the heir. This innovation structured the inevitable conflict over succession, making it more predictable. Claimants knew the "rules of the game": power was to be won not through a palace coup, but by first securing control of the Qarshi power base.

From this perspective, the institution of provincial governorship can be seen as a key factor in the relative longevity of the Manghit dynasty. It provided a mechanism for ensuring that the strongest, most capable, and best-supported candidate would ultimately ascend the throne. While the system did not eliminate violent conflict, it channeled it, preventing the kind of chaotic, state-shattering civil wars that plagued earlier dynasties. The system's primary dysfunction, however, was that it incentivized centrifugal forces and the diversion of provincial resources toward personal political ambitions rather than integrated state development.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued that the system of provincial governorships in the Emirate of Bukhara functioned as an integral part of the institution of succession. The main conclusions are as follows:

1. The beklik system was not a mere tradition but a political institution with clear, albeit unwritten, rules for selecting, training, and testing heirs, as well as for managing rivals.
2. Due to its unique historical, demographic, and strategic importance, the Qarshi beklik was the nexus of this institution, serving as both a «political academy» and a «military platform» for aspiring rulers.
3. The institution was highly adaptive, utilizing a network of bekliks (Qarshi, Karmana, Hisar) to respond to different political exigencies, whether it was promoting a favored heir, isolating a rival, or training a loyal administrator.

This institution, while breeding conflict, ultimately contributed to the political stability of the Manghit dynasty by ensuring that the process of succession, however violent, would result in a capable ruler and would not lead to the complete disintegration of the state. Future research could deepen this analysis by conducting a quantitative study of the economic

output of these beklis based on archival materials, or by undertaking an anthropological investigation of the social and cultural environment of the princely courts in the provinces.

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