How do Uzbeks conceive of authority, power, and politics over the three decades after Uzbekistan’s post-Soviet independence in 1991? What happens when the people’s daily experience of getting things done (through patronage and “corruption”) continues to be at variance from cherished ideals about how state and society ought to function? How is the tension between practical and ideal expectations expressed, and does this tension create new ways of thinking about good governance? This talk describes the changing field of differing opinions and stances that Uzbek citizens have taken toward political power. Postures of acquiescence and resignation stand in persistent tension with yearnings for moral authority and societal justice. The logic of patronage relations operate in tension with other ways of reckoning with obligation, such as notions of impartial fairness and the communal good found in ideals about elders and social relations within residential neighborhoods (mahallas). These analyses aim to yield insight into Uzbek notions of political legitimacy and desired futures. Given the difficulty in conducting meaningful fieldwork in Uzbekistan since 2005, this talk synthesizes fieldwork conducted before 2005, among Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan, and from other sources.

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Sponsored by the Inner Asian and Uralic National Resource Center, Islamic Studies Program, Department of Anthropology, Sinor Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, Russian and East European Institute.