

# POLITICAL VIOLENCE in South and Southeast Asia

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES



EDITED BY

Itty Abraham • Edward Newman • Meredith L. Weiss

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# Political violence in South and Southeast Asia: Critical perspectives

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Meredith L. Weiss

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## 1

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# Introduction – The politics of violence: Modalities, frames and functions

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*Meredith L. Weiss, Edward Newman and Itty Abraham*

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In these days when terrorists, insurgents and militants have replaced freedom fighters, *jacqueries* and anarchists among the first order of public enemies, when wars on all kinds of terror have become ubiquitous elements of everyday political life, it is worth taking a step back to consider and evaluate the nature, roots, meanings and consequences of political violence. As the chapters that follow show, we do not seek in this volume to “explain” political violence, but to understand it better: when, where and why it is found, and the interaction between violent and non-violent politics. A consciously interdisciplinary framework enables this wide-ranging sweep, even if empirically our coverage cannot possibly be fully comprehensive. Understanding or evaluating political violence requires diverse methods and lenses, from close ethnographic readings to more macro-level historical and social scientific analyses. A deep debate among anthropologists, political scientists and historians has been fundamental to this project: over the course of two workshops and many discussions, different approaches have informed our reading of the nature, practice and victims of violence, the role of “scientific” approaches to understanding conflict and the institutional and cultural legacy of past experience of political violence. Most importantly, we analyse state and non-state actors together, and include external and subnational actors within the same frame.

Political violence is hardly a new phenomenon, however novel the public and media attention to certain of its forms makes it appear. Nor has it ever been one-sided or singular in scope: political violence has multiple

forms, perpetrators, victims and purposes. It transpires alongside and interlaces with non-violent politics and multiple struggles for peace and justice; it is habitually a part of modern political life but never the whole story. The category of political violence, as understood in this volume, includes state and non-state behaviours; it may originate from internal or external sponsors, and takes forms that range from terrorism and guerrilla warfare to sectarian violence, police actions, riots and assassinations. Histories, memories, strategies, outcomes and effects of political violence leave powerful legacies, both as repertoires and as wounds that continue to shape the political landscape long after their immediate expression. Our hope is, in the short run, to offer a tempering corrective to the one-sided and instrumental use of the “war on terror” mindset and its underlying assumptions, and in the long run to encourage non-violent forms of conflict resolution and the pursuit of just and stable political arrangements. It is therefore crucial that we first understand where these violent strategies come from, why they recur and why political actors so often prefer them to other forms of political behaviour. In this discussion of “political violence”, we consider a wide range of actions and agents distributed across an uneven and shifting topology of power. What unifies the varieties of political violence discussed here is our understanding that what we mean by political violence is both strategic and consequential: violence is a technology of modern politics.<sup>1</sup>

*Political violence* can only be defined through disaggregation. The *political* nature of the violence we are interested in may variously centre on object, location, justification, purpose or effect. The field of the political goes well beyond the formal institutions of collective public representation and executive action (such as elections and governments); it includes all arenas of social relations connected with struggles for political power, voice and rights, and that engender political subjectivities. Moreover, histories and memories of past violence, whether perpetrated directly or by external agencies, as well as indirect forms of subjugation may play into the ongoing formation of violence and political repertoires. In countries where contenders replay both the mythic and the not-so-recent past for political and instrumental purposes (for instance, the alleged destruction of Hindu temples by marauding Muslim invaders in India), political violence may take on a retributive aspect by invoking the collective loss of putative cultural identity and unity.

The kinds of *violence* we are interested in range from structural conditions of state violence against politically weak communities and citizens, often in marginal and contested sites such as border regions, to deliberate, state-sponsored, extra-legal strikes against political enemies, such as sanctioning unregulated violence against militant “extremists” and other over-identified anti-state collectives. Political violence also includes soci-

etal actions aimed at the state and the institutional mechanisms of organized governance, for instance acts of pure terror such as exploding bombs in public settings, assassinations, the execution of state officials and violent attacks on state symbols and institutions. Still other types of political violence include intra-social actions using tactics beyond those of legal and civil engagement, such as community-on-community (communal) violence, riots and pogroms against minority populations.

This collection aims to capture in the same frame both state-derived and non-state violence, as structure and as event. By doing so, we intend not to propose that these forms of violence are equal in origin, (il)legitimacy or effect, but to recognize that, taken collectively, both state and non-state actions constitute the landscape of political violence and thereby influence and shape each other and the relevant political environment.<sup>2</sup> We understand political violence as *consequential* and *strategic*. Hence, for instance, we take issue with conceptualizations of political violence as episodic, spontaneous or “irrational”. There is no denying that unplanned, contingent violence *does* occasionally break out – riots over food prices, perceived injustices and accidental deaths, for example, which may also reflect deep-rooted grievances and anger. But in nearly every other case the riot, as the empirically robust work of Paul Brass and others has shown, is an act of targeted, staged and planned violence, with discrete ends. It is clearly, in a narrow sense, strategic. By the same token, the presumption of violence as an episodic event with a marked beginning and end works reflexively to help create the comforting illusion that a state of non-violence is the norm. Acts of violence then seem mere temporary ruptures. Accounts of violence that are structured around an action-reaction model may not be inaccurate from a narrowly empirical point of view, but the logic undergirding such an account bears examination. When we find it natural or unexceptional that an action such as the killing of a cow in India produces a collective social response that requires mass violence for its closure, we have essentialized culture in our explanation: we have fallen back on uncritical stereotypes of communities, their collective logic and the place of violence in their cultural repertoires of action. We fail to ask ourselves why every killing of a cow does not produce this “natural” response; we fail to consider whether the act of cow-killing was itself a provocation to legitimize such a response; we fail to consider the history and context within which this action may be part of an ongoing play of events; and we fail to consider the calculus of multiple interests that may be invested in this staging.

Falling back on familiar culturalist explanations for political violence reinscribes temporal and spatial boundaries around the violent event.<sup>3</sup> Instead, in this volume we acknowledge the co-presence of violence and its non-expression as historically produced, structuring conditions of

modern political life. Hence we speak of “everyday” structural violence: a state of violence that is constant and even normalized, punctuated by incidents of especial ferocity. Such a view presents political violence as strategic in a much more profound way, by acknowledging the centrality of the state and processes of its formation, even when that same state seeks to regulate violence in the public sphere.<sup>4</sup> The breakdown of public order apparent in an act of spectacular political violence then seems not such an aberration: it cannot be separated from the state’s desire to monopolize the production of social violence as a condition of its own maintenance, expressed as public order, the rule of law and other conditions of “normal” state behaviour.

Political violence carries a symbolic loading and set of effects quite apart from the actual pain, intimidation and deprivation it causes. It is those consequences – violence’s potential to effect transformation of socio-political worlds – that make it irreversible and an appealing political strategy, and not, generally speaking, mere sadism on the part of its perpetrators. Like any other means of political engagement, violent contention requires mobilization, resources, supporters and opponents. Even when its perpetrators or targets are individuals, political violence produces a collective and public effect. Moreover, particular techniques for the practice and suppression of violence become modular, mobile political forms, caught up in contemporary global flows of experience and learning. For example, counterinsurgency strategies developed at troublesome borders drift inwards or are carried across and beyond empires, as with the origin of the concentration camp. And new, or newly popular, forms of violence emerge over time, as with the contemporary frequency of suicide bombings in contrast with earlier forms such as assassination or execution. Hence violent political strategies are dynamic and mobile: perpetrators, both state and non-state, adapt to changing resources and circumstances.

Understanding violence as we do throughout this volume – as a strategic, purposive technology of modern politics, available to state agents and opponents alike – offers insights into its temporality and spatiality. While recourse to deliberate acts of political violence is, for the most part, uncommon and never inevitable, it is both irreversible and aggregative. Forms of political contestation always feed into repertoires and memories, building up knowledge of how to perform politics and the pay-offs or costs attached to particular strategies.<sup>5</sup> The presence of violent action in those legacies invariably reframes the context and consequences of political engagement, even after the relationships in question have been substantially repaired. Whether as protest or its suppression, political violence offers a unique form of voice, out-shouting less spectacular forms of articulation and transforming the field of who speaks and for whom.



Violence, once enacted, shifts the parameters of the debate and the political stakes; it constitutes a message and a distinct form of expression, and engenders new terms of material discourse.

## Theories of armed conflict

The approach we take here stands in marked epistemological and ontological contrast to familiar (to political scientists) and ubiquitous studies of “armed conflict”. At the epistemological level, the world-view of armed-conflict approaches takes the contemporary territorial state as a given, fixed and internationally recognized agent: as a result, these approaches identify and define all opponents of the state primarily by their opposition to the status quo. These approaches, too, take the outbreak of violence as an aberration in the normal condition of social life and privilege the analysis of armed violence against the state rather than other forms and targets of violence. At the ontological level, armed-conflict approaches are unable to see violence as a structuring condition of social existence at the macro level, or in manifested states of pain, suffering, trauma or loss at the individual level. Instead, these approaches understand violence in terms of morbidity statistics. Given no character or form other than its aftermath, violence becomes mystical and inexplicable: in a word, unreasonable. It becomes a proxy for the breakdown of “normal” politics, rather than representing a feature intrinsic to everyday forms of politics. What normal politics may be is never clear, nor is it conceivable that everyday forms of politics might include violent tactics. Even though driven by the policy imperative of identifying causal factors that might prevent or stop violence, “empirical” approaches to armed conflict are unable to see the constitutive condition of violence in the long making of the modern state, to recognize violence as a social moment with its own phenomenology or to understand a state of political violence in the absence of dead bodies. We believe such a framing impoverishes any understanding of both violence and non-violence in political life. Nevertheless, this literature offers useful insights at least into the *why*, if not the *how*, of political violence.

Since the end of the Cold War, scholars have stepped up their efforts to identify the factors behind the onset, nature and termination of armed conflict, especially as general phenomena, and particularly based on positivist methodologies, from sophisticated econometric tools to more intuitive approaches. This scholarship has generated a range of propositions regarding the causes and sources of conflict, the relationship between natural resources and conflict, the political economy of conflict and the role and potential of external actors in resolving conflict and building

peace.<sup>6</sup> We can easily summarize the limitations of this literature, taken on its own terms. No single independent variable or set of variables has been successful in explaining the onset or durability of conflict in general terms. Social cleavages, political institutions, globalization and natural resources all offer inadequate and incomplete explanations: for every case that fits a given theory, others can be found that do not. Yet even setting aside our broader epistemological and ontological concerns, we take issue with the dominant positivist method of the armed-conflict literature for overly privileging parsimony and linear causality in seeking to explain why conflicts start, continue and stop – the key research questions guiding this approach. While these theories offer food for thought, none presents a compelling explanation, and all downplay or disregard the strategic calculations we see as central to a political violence approach. Hence the present volume takes a very different approach to understanding political violence and the social relations that produce it and in which it is embedded. We summarize the key findings of prominent theories in the well-known “armed conflict” genre and identify the points of tension among them in order to highlight what the dominant approaches *cannot* explain, the better to clarify our own approach.

### *Economic “greed” and globalization theories*

Theories of greed suggest that economic motives are the primary driver of violent conflict. Many of these theories focus on lootable resources: economic factors are central to combatants’ pursuit of war or peace; the personal greed of rebels is the major cause of conflict; resource-rich countries are more prone to armed conflict than others; and links with global commodity and financial markets influence war economies and conflict.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, violence itself creates opportunities for entrepreneurship and profit, as internal and transnational war economies develop.<sup>8</sup> Seen through these lenses, the continuation of violence rather than political “victory” is often the objective. Globalization represents two processes in these greed theories. It underpins changes in the state – particularly an erosion of state authority and public goods – which can make societies vulnerable to conflict, and also generates increased opportunities for transborder trade, both legal and illegal. As a result, greed theorists propose, many civil wars are caused and fuelled not by poverty but by a “resource curse”.<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, their emphasis on a rigorous, “scientific” logic of explanation represents a distinctive feature of a number of economic theories of armed conflict. Collier and Hoeffler, for example, employ econometric methods to argue for the primacy of lootable resources among drivers of

armed conflict.<sup>10</sup> Other scholars use similar methods to focus on, for instance, access to specific natural resources or other sources of finance.<sup>11</sup>

Common to all these theories is the idea that economic agendas and opportunities offer the most salient lens on the emergence and persistence of conflict. Indeed, data from Southeast Asia in particular (especially from the Philippines and Indonesia) suggest that even those conflicts often categorized as “separatist”, “communal”, “ethnic” or “ideological” do have a clear element of “greed” to them. The exploitation of mining opportunities in the Philippines has come into conflict with indigenous land rights and competition over resources, for instance, while ongoing violence in Papua, Sulawesi and Maluku in Indonesia is not just religious or ethnic in character but also understood as competition for land and resources, exacerbated by environmental degradation, settler movements and increasing intrusion of business interests. And yet critics of greed theories contest the manner in which the latter oversimplify to downplay or dismiss social and political grievances.<sup>12</sup> Even those who initiated the “greed versus grievance” debate have suggested that this dichotomy is no longer helpful: one must consider greed and grievance as fused motives.<sup>13</sup>

A related set of theories applies the greed motive not to rebel groups but to governments, arguing that corrupt governments engage in rent seeking and predation in order to enrich themselves, repay the support of allies and pay off potential adversaries. In the process, they weaken the legitimacy of the state by degrading its capacity to fulfil public service requirements and alienate groups that are not receiving the fruits of the government’s corruption. As a result, groups on the periphery, if not the general citizenry, mobilize in violent opposition to the government. These studies may link state predation with more specific factors, too, such as mismanagement of resource wealth,<sup>14</sup> or demographic or environmental stress.<sup>15</sup>

Still other scholars have associated certain types of conflict with the instabilities that arise from social changes in an increasingly globalized world. Value systems have increasingly come into contact and in some cases into tension, creating the perception or fear of cultural imperialism and hegemony. Barber, for instance, notes violent resistance to modernity and the socio-economic disruption and loss of sovereignty that globalization entails.<sup>16</sup> Cognate theorists focus more on economic instabilities with increasing marketization rather than changes in culture and aesthetics. Amy Chua and Michael Mousseau, for instance, both see the market not as neutral but as bringing fundamental change and violent opposition.<sup>17</sup> All these basically economics-driven theories, however, fall short, in our view, by their substantially monocausal and episodic emphasis, as well as

their inability to specify *how* political violence emerges and with what longer-term legacies.

### *Regime-type theories*

Far more political in their focus are those theories that hypothesize regime type as the most significant explanatory variable for the onset of armed conflict. Most prominent among these studies is the work of the Political Instability Task Force.<sup>18</sup> This large-*N*, econometric work finds the risk of conflict highest in partially democratic or transitional states, especially when factionalism is present – as is often the case in new democracies.<sup>19</sup> As a corollary, the study finds that fully democratized states and fully autocratic states are generally the most stable and peaceful and least likely to experience instability. A number of other studies, too, have found that states in the process of democratizing are vulnerable to armed conflict:<sup>20</sup> catalysed by political liberalization and still-unmet demands, such vulnerabilities as ethnic heterogeneity, social inequalities, weak state capacity and low levels of human rights give rise to armed conflict. Other scholars have used case studies to illustrate that differences in leadership, institutional choice and economic structure explain why some democratic experiments are successful while others degenerate into civil war.<sup>21</sup> In other words, violence is not inevitable even in these transitioning democracies, suggesting the need for more complex understandings.

### *Grievance theories*

A competing set of theories homes in not on economic or regime factors, but more on society – particularly on issues of minority rights, discrimination and separatism. Political grievances remain important, even if not sole, sources of violent conflict: armed conflicts in Nepal, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, the Philippines, India and Pakistan, among others, cannot be understood without reference to political grievances. Edward Azar, for instance, has argued that civil wars generally arise out of communal groups' collective struggle "for such basic needs as security, recognition and acceptance, fair access to political institutions and economic participation".<sup>22</sup> Other analysts, too, have found that political factors, from weak state capacity to the denial of human needs, are central to many contemporary conflicts, often in conjunction with economic motives.<sup>23</sup> Such theories suggest that sustainable peace requires addressing underlying grievances, yet problematically they still fundamentally conceptualize violence as an aberration, and as "politics" primarily through its engagement with the state.

A prominent subset of grievance theories focus specifically on identity-based conflict, especially amid a perceived post-Cold War “surge” in civil wars. This period saw the general decline of national ideological unity as communism became discredited, formerly authoritarian political systems opened up and developing states lost superpower support for “national” projects, apparently opening the door for resurgent ethnic antagonisms. The result was increasing polarization and an acute “ethnic security dilemma” in which ethnic groups sought to protect only their own interests.<sup>24</sup> Gurr, Woodward and Marshall, for example, see ethnic and religious competition as especially salient catalysts for violent conflict since the 1980s.<sup>25</sup> Drawing upon Political Instability Task Force data, they suggest that ethnic wars are more likely to occur when the state actively and systematically discriminates against one or more minority groups in larger countries with medium to high ethnic diversity, when the country is a partial democracy with factionalism, when the country’s neighbours are already embroiled in a civil war or ethnic conflict, when a country has experienced an ethnic conflict or genocide in the previous 15 years and when a country has a large youth population (a “bulge”).<sup>26</sup> A number of scholars – most famously Samuel Huntington – focus specifically on religion and culture.<sup>27</sup> Huntington stressed the threat from countries and cultures that base their traditions on religious faith and dogma, identifying geopolitical fault-lines between “civilizations” defined primarily in terms of religious identity.

And yet most scholars challenge the thesis that “ancient ethnic tensions” stoke armed conflict, and a number of studies have found the correlation between ethnic heterogeneity and civil war weak.<sup>28</sup> Some studies find ethnic and religious diversity problematic only in conjunction with such factors as high levels of poverty, failed political institutions and economic dependence on natural resources, while others argue that where ethnicity has been important to the onset of armed conflict, it is the result of elite manipulation: extremist political leaders exploit the insecurities felt by people in divided societies in situations of political volatility.<sup>29</sup> We find ample evidence that elite construction or manipulation of identity is a key, and sometimes a necessary, factor in so-called ethnic and religious violence, especially in conjunction with social and economic deprivation.<sup>30</sup> In short, identity alone – even understood as constructed and manipulated rather than primordial – does not spark violence, but concatenates with other factors as actors decide whether to adopt violent strategies.

One set of theories that attempt to tease out these connections are those focused on the specific forms that inequality may take. Though analysts have suggested that underdevelopment is an underlying cause of violent conflict<sup>31</sup> – that relative deprivation sparks political grievances and

violent mobilization, or that poorer countries are more likely to suffer from corrupt and poor governance and to lack capacity to address instability and militant challenges – at least as many poor countries do *not* experience violent conflict; thus poverty does not present a satisfactory explanation. Economic *inequality* within a society, however, especially across distinct identity groups or communities, may foment conflict. These “horizontal inequalities” appear to be linked particularly with conflict at moments of economic change, sometimes extending to armed conflict.<sup>32</sup> Not only the most deprived groups may initiate conflict, but also the relatively more privileged, who fear the loss of their position.<sup>33</sup> Researchers at the Centre on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity at the University of Oxford have found that horizontal inequalities are more likely to provoke conflict when inequalities are sustained and widen over time, boundaries between different identity groups are relatively impermeable, there are fairly large numbers in the different groups, horizontal inequalities are consistent across dimensions (that is, lack of political access combined with economic inequalities), aggregate incomes show little or no improvement in absolute terms, new leaders are not coopted into the ruling system and the government is not responsive to social grievances.<sup>34</sup> Horizontal inequality, then, is not inherently conflict inducing, but may exacerbate a tense state and societal context.

### *State collapse and the post-colonial predicament*

Zeroing in on just one part of that equation are theories that point to the weakness or decline of the modern state as a key factor in the onset of violent conflict.<sup>35</sup> In the context of economic forces and policies which erode state capacity, authority and public goods, a pattern of violence by private, often criminal, groups emerges to fill a vacuum of state authority and power, often associated with ethnic allegiances and vying over natural resources or criminal opportunities. Per this view, violence is characteristic of social and political change in a context of state failure and the breakdown of public authority. Globalization is an important component, as it erodes state authority and fosters war economies and socio-economic dislocation.<sup>36</sup> The post-colonial state appears to be especially vulnerable to crisis and fragmentation, often related to vagaries of the colonial legacy: arbitrary territorial borders; insecure ethnic, religious or national minorities; and post-independence nationalist movements that deepen, rather than transcend, divisions.<sup>37</sup> Yet theories that focus so firmly on the state are as incomplete as those faulting only pathologies of society. We strive here for a more holistic view – one able to move beyond questions of *why* to *how*, and that sees violence not as an episodic

aberration to be sidestepped or corrected, but as constitutive of and shaped by the polity, and thus far harder to evade or overcome.

## Political violence, power and legitimacy

At the heart of most theories of armed conflict is a Weberian assumption that the state monopolizes the legitimate use of violence – however such legitimacy is understood. Hannah Arendt, for instance, saw recourse to violence as a symptom of the loss of power. Since, in her terms, legitimate power requires the consent of the governed, violence can only destroy, not bolster, power, even if commanding obedience.<sup>38</sup> Where, however, the state's grasp on legitimate power based on popular consent has always been fragile and incomplete, acts of violence shift away from being merely symptoms of the loss of power to becoming characteristic features of the political field. Violence, in other words, becomes a form of politics by other means.

We focus here on South and Southeast Asia for just this reason: in this region, incomplete legitimacy of the modern state is a structuring condition of contemporary politics, across a broad, contiguous swathe. This incompleteness stems partly from the aftermath of historical and geopolitical struggles, expressed most vividly in the mass violence that accompanied independence in most states of this region. We note foundational moments of mass violence, of which the partition of India and Pakistan stands as the extreme example, also the bitter struggle by Indonesians against Dutch efforts to reclaim their colony after the Second World War and the decades-long insurgency and war by the Vietnamese to free their country from foreign rule and influence. A state born in violence, and the society that is its product, cannot but remain marked by that experience, even when the violence is justified and celebrated as a historic victory of anti-colonial nationalism. With formal independence, normalized practices of domestic governance and the combined pressures of “geoeconomics and geopolitics” build upon and exacerbate the condition of already existing violence. Among these practices and pressures are institutions such as democratic elections, the limits of official ideologies of national belonging and the terms of modern sovereignty. Under such conditions, political violence, whether perpetrated by the state or by other political entities, can no longer be thought of as episodic, rare, random, localized or irrational. Rather, as the contributions to this volume will demonstrate, political violence in contemporary South and Southeast Asia is everyday, commonplace, strategic, widespread and instrumental. Not surprisingly, given this affective range, political violence is hardly a

mute instrument: it is deeply imbued with political meanings, even if those meanings change over time and for different audiences. Political violence in this sense is *constitutive* of the political field rather than anomalous, as so much of the armed-conflict literature supposes.

To consider violence productive, in the sense we intend here, is not in any way to celebrate political violence or its effects. It is, however, to acknowledge that we cannot wall off the violence of politics in this part of the world from everyday political life. We can only partly glimpse the character of this violence in empirical body counts of victims of riots or the trial testimonies of and court evidence against perpetrators of targeted killings. However difficult the task of drawing lessons or abstracting from brutality and pain, we need not get caught up in a “pornography” of violence.<sup>39</sup> Analysing political violence as a set of practices and implications helps to illuminate why people collude or participate in these campaigns, what roles the state and its agents play in perpetrating or perpetuating violence, and why contenders prefer violent strategies to alternatives in some contexts and not in others. This exploration delves, too, into the lead-up to violence or its renunciation and the interpretation of bouts of violence; it is these interpretations that lay the ground for the next round. This volume thus contributes to ongoing debates not so much on what *causes* political violence, but on the purposes, aims, approaches, staging and short- and long-term consequences of such acts. Violence is never “senseless”: it is one set of political strategies among others. Our purpose is less to apply labels and blame than to examine contexts and processes – including the reflexive function of labelling or defining political violence at the stage of interpretation. By way of both case studies and structured comparative approaches, the chapters that follow explore political violence in terms of how we conceptualize that violence – its modes and scale; structural factors, including organizational dimensions and facilitating conditions; and the ideology and objectives behind or invoked by political violence.

### *Conceptual dimensions: Modes and scales*

A relatively straightforward approach to the study of political violence is through a demarcation of scales of violence, albeit with careful attention to the meanings violence invokes and creates, the participants involved, the range of political options available, the organizational strategies selected and the implicit histories at stake, privileging neither state nor non-state actors. Here *scale* does not mean simply the numbers killed or maimed as a result of political violence, but rather the nature of the central event of violence. Two seemingly polar modes of political violence



are assassinations and riots. Assassination is among the oldest forms of political violence. While usually an isolated event, the assassination of a leading political figure – whether of the government or opposition – dramatically recasts political opportunity structures and often becomes a turning point in domestic political development. These acts may be highly stylized yet complex in their symbolism: consider what a difference it makes if a political figure is killed by a beheading, a bomb or a bullet, or by torture in a jail or while trying to escape from custody. The implications of assassination, too, may be complex, whether in terms of who succeeds this person in their political role or in the introduction of a new act into existing repertoires of violence. The impact of this killing may reverberate for a generation or more, or be forgotten almost at once. Moreover, although assassinations may appear to be clinically precise by their very nature, we find that the meanings generated by the killing occupy a far more ambiguous interpretive place, whether or not the perpetrator claims responsibility and seeks to make the intended meanings transparent. Assassination is also among the most widespread of violent political strategies, having been carried out by religious and secular actors, liberation movements, right- and left-wing extremists, military officers and civilian government officials alike.

Understanding the mode of political violence captured by assassination – the targeted killing of an individual political figure – appears to be both direct and uncomplicated. A simple understanding of the assassination puts the burden of explanation on the behaviour of the perpetrator. The narrative of the political figure's death is structured around a presumed relation between political (in)action and violent response. The reasons for the homicide are variously described in terms of revenge, punishment or retribution; the motives of the killer are understood to be sufficient explanation for the event; the only open question is how many beside the attacker were involved in the conspiracy. The chain of explanation is linear and closed, even when the attacker is found to have an unstable mental condition. In other words, even being “unreasonable” offers an adequate reason for why the assassination took place.

The chapter here by Sankaran Krishna makes this apparent clarity far more complex. Through his analysis of emblematic political assassinations in South Asia, Krishna is able to highlight a political culture – a moral economy, as he puts it – that has been entirely transformed in four decades. He argues that the worlds inhabited by Mohandas Gandhi and former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi are marked by very different moral economies. The same event is unrecognizable across these two time periods and produces entirely different meanings and effects. Krishna's argument depends on seeing assassination as an act of political communication. He posits, “In earlier times, a political assassination was

carried out . . . in the name of a larger cause or principle which was explicitly articulated . . . that was recognized, if not agreed with, by a politically attendant public.” By contrast, “contemporary assassinations in South Asia wish to close the book on debate rather than inaugurating one”. In 1948 Gandhi was undoubtedly India’s most important political figure, yet he held no official office. Indeed, he was celebrated for his ability to operate beyond the boundaries of normal and everyday politics, leading his assassin, as Krishna shows, also to turn to “supra-legal” means. Seen in this light, Gandhi’s death was the opening statement in a political debate on the constitution of the newly independent Indian state. Ironically, according to Krishna, it was precisely Gandhi’s assassination that set back this debate by decades. The killing of Rajiv Gandhi by Dhanu, a Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) suicide bomber, took place in a very different communicative universe. To begin with, the perpetrator died in the act of homicide, silently. Moreover, the judicial inquiries that followed unwittingly produced an extensive critique of Indian foreign policy – which by the late 1980s was no longer bounded by the actions of the foreign ministry. We know now that the early viability of the LTTE was in no small part a product of Indian covert operations aimed at destabilizing Sri Lanka. If Rajiv’s death was a result of “blow-back”, Krishna concludes provocatively, the victim of the attack could be said to have killed himself: Rajiv Gandhi’s assassination was a suicide, in other words. Even as assassination must now be recognized as an all-too-familiar mode of political transition across South Asia, the political violence of assassination becomes, in this chapter, a way of seeing the modern history of the post-colonial state in an entirely new way.

Equally long-standing phenomena, but very different in their methods and meanings, are riots and pogroms. Riots and other forms of collective, mass violence are nearly always planned and purposeful. The extent of bloodshed involved may vary dramatically. In some cases fewer than a hundred people may die or be injured; other incidents count thousands of victims. Riots may entail not only the death of individuals caught up in the violence, but also the destruction of property and communally important symbols, and the “cleansing” of areas to rid them of particular inhabitants for political and economic reasons. The nature of riots precludes easy analysis: aggregating the accounts of perpetrators and victims usually produces wildly discrepant accounts of the meanings and reasons for mass violence, yet, at the same time, the riot is among the most heavily narrativized actions of political violence. It is also among the most fraught of modern political acts. Whether or not the state was directly involved in a riot, such an event strikes at the heart of *raison d’état*. For a state to be directly involved in the killing of its citizens indicates a form of rule that is clearly illegitimate and contested: a civil war is in the

offing. If, on the other hand, the state stands mute and inactive as its citizens kill their compatriots, it is equally culpable for not interceding to prevent or stop this deadly process. Riots yield not only death, injury and destruction of property, but also a culture of terror and mistrust that influences political actions long into the future.

Notwithstanding its material and symbolic importance, it is surprising how poorly the process of the riot is understood. All too often, as Paul Brass points out in his chapter, the riot is construed and explained away as an expression of spontaneous violence. The reasons for this are a combination of purposive efforts at mystification, to obscure both instigators and substantive meanings, and uninformed analysis following the event. Brass's chapter offers a comprehensive account of the process by which a riot takes place, drawing attention to the variety and diversity of actors involved. The institutionalized riot system (IRS), as he terms it, consists of three phases: rehearsal, production and post-production interpretation. The rehearsal stage involves a variety of bit players, from fire tenders who stoke the passions of a community to scouts and informants who keep higher-level actors informed on the state of collective thinking in various neighbourhoods. These are the individuals who provide the raw material of the potential riot to the directors of this violent drama; the latter decide when the production should come into effect, at a time and place of their choosing. The enactment of the riot is the most deliberate and strategic stage of the IRS. Again, a variety of diverse actors have specific roles to play to ensure the success of the production, from criminal elements who carry out much of the actual violence to communications specialists who fan the flames and print inflammatory accounts of the events taking place. The state now also makes an explicit appearance, via the police, whose actions or inactions are crucial to the final outcome. In most of South Asia the government's law-and-order machinery *can* stop a riot, once begun, and can usually prevent one from taking place. If a riot breaks out, in other words, it is almost always because the state has let it happen. The third stage in this process is interpretation, which Brass describes as divided between those seeking to absolve responsible parties from any blame and those uninvolved with the riot, often social scientists and academics, who offer explanations that work to reproduce the conventional wisdom of cultural difference. Reflecting on the progression of mass violence in India since independence, Brass notes that the scale of violence has increased with time. Escalation in the degree and brutality of violence, he argues, leads eventually to the physical displacement of minority populations. The sheer brutality of the riot might suggest the cowering of civil society in the face of untrammelled violence. Brass ends, however, on a positive note by highlighting the many civil society groups and collective actions that actively contest the IRS, especially by refusing

to back away from attributing responsibility to its perpetrators and directors. Careful documentation, citizen tribunals and other forms of truth-telling of thousands of citizens and experts who refuse to allow the standard narrative to stand unchallenged have accompanied the rise of the riot as a strategic political instrument.

Broadening the conceptual frame, Geoffrey Robinson's contribution captures well the immense diversity of shapes and styles of "mass violence" to which Brass's lens might be applied. Assaying a range of violent forms, from riots to genocide, perpetrated by state and non-state actors alike, Robinson homes in on the variations in patterns of violence found across Southeast Asia. He finds the greatest explanatory leverage in a syndrome of broad historical conditions. The first is patterns and changes in local-level social, economic and political relations, particularly conflicts over material resources and political power, as well as the first-hand or inherited memory of past violence. For instance, clashes read commonly as cultural may be more usefully understood as linked to disputes over land or relative deprivation. The presence of exploitable resources such as oil may substantially raise the stakes, and hence the intensity of conflict. Configurations of local-level political power – from domination by key families to central state efforts to consolidate control and local bosses' perception of opportunities and threats – likewise help to shape the incidence and extent of political violence. This genealogy of political violence, and especially lived experience of it in any capacity, amplifies other local-level factors, honing resentments, reshaping loyalties and offering ballast for subsequent violent overtures: violence itself may be (though is not necessarily) self-perpetuating, and it is as much a part of how identities, loyalties and enmities form as it is an outcome of these forces. The second factor is the character of national states: states in the region have shaped and engaged in or with mass violence in ways conditioned in part by regime type (particularly the role the military plays in politics) and transitions. States in the region have at times drastically outpaced other social forces as perpetrators, instigators or facilitators of mass violence, in line with state-supporting strategic calculations. Finally, the third factor Robinson identifies is aspects of the international political, moral and legal contexts that mould the timing, scope and repertoires of mass violence in the region. These norms range from turning a blind eye to obvious predations to support for direct armed intervention and validation for both mass violence in particular circumstances and alternative structures and models for conflict de-escalation.

Robinson's chapter forces us to look closely not just at the sort of tensions or cleavages that *could* result in mass violence, but at when and how those fault-lines do turn violent. Like Brass, he finds nothing accidental or incidental in the outbreak of riots and other mass political vio-

lence: while it is impossible to rank contributing factors in a timeless way, and no outburst has a single cause, lessons of the past do suggest when state and non-state actors might resort to violence, and the forms that onslaught might assume. Moreover, no set of actors or conditions can be taken in isolation or out of context; interactions, memories, claims and contests at all levels come simultaneously into play in sparking and spreading these egregious episodes, mandating an inclusive conceptualization.

### *Structural dimensions*

A related but differently centred approach to the study of political violence adopted in this volume is attention to more structural factors, including organizational dimensions and facilitating conditions. The primary structural feature considered here is the border, the territorial limit of the state. The colonial history of this region, in which European powers divided up land among themselves based on local administrative convenience, military victory, tussles and their resolution back in Europe, and strategic needs, paid little attention to the lived environment of peoples and communities. Territorial boundaries trumped social ones in the colonial period, fostering an understanding of national community through geography. As a result, the presence of ethnic, linguistic and kin communities divided by political boundaries is almost the norm in South and Southeast Asia. Amid the modern regime of territorially delimited political entities – the state as “container”, as John Agnew and Stuart Corbridge put it<sup>40</sup> – control of the border defines state power. The border is among the most militarized of political spaces, a space which subjects normal rules of civic engagement to entirely different logics of control. Under these conditions, any community that violates the reach of the state by extending into another national community engenders a degree of state paranoia on either side of this cartographic excision, rendering the structural position of the borderland community extremely dangerous. Not surprisingly, border areas in South and Southeast Asia are often rife with secessionist and recidivist nationalist movements, both within and across state boundaries. Such anti-state contests may take the form of ethnic and minority struggles for autonomy or be subsumed into low-intensity inter-state conflicts, and are increasingly influenced by diasporic communities and international human rights campaigns.

The structural position of borders in a world defined by territorial division cannot be overstated. For the states produced by the defeat and withdrawal of colonial empires, national borders are relatively recent, often arbitrary and usually porous. For these reasons territorial borders

become even more important to anxious and insecure successor states. In South and Southeast Asia, the region of the world that saw the presence of more colonial empires than any other, the location of contemporary borders is among the most visible legacies of the colonial experience – and yet these also demarcate important moments of post-colonial assertion. In her chapter, Naureen Chowdhury Fink explores the implications of independence in Bangladesh, the only self-defined nation-state in South Asia, created out of a struggle for ethno-linguistic identity. As Fink describes, Bangladesh continues to demarcate itself specifically in opposition to its neighbours: as Bengali/Muslim, which they are not. Yet this framing marginalizes the 15 per cent of the population who are *not* Muslim, as well as all non-Bengali ethnic groups. The state, then, is still a “container”, but its walls are consciously built and actively, even violently, contested. Fink traces the rise of religious extremism and militancy in Bangladesh. Political violence, in this context, represents an option just as in and out of bounds as so many of its perpetrators and victims: it represents the assumption of non-negotiability and absolutism, yet also the recourse of those without other legitimate voice.

Yet not only the state frames the political violence within. External sponsors or supporters change the structural context and offer new facilitating conditions for political violence. The availability of such resources may indeed be decisive in some contexts. Patterns, forms, resources for and repertoires of political violence are neither static nor legible in isolation from outside influences. The pervasive effects of the “global war on terror” today, whether in the form of new international norms more tolerant of state repression or the valorization of brutal methods among non-state contenders, are only the most recent exemplar; the four-decade-long Cold War (and its specific manifestations, as across Indochina), the anti-Soviet Afghan resistance in the 1980s and the very fact of colonialism, decolonization and diaspora have all similarly affected the calculations and strategies of local political actors. Whatever their intended consequences, interventions by external agents (superpowers, regional powers, multilateral development agencies or others) may destabilize conditions and foster a culture of violence – or, more rarely, may tilt the balance in favour of state and non-state actors adopting non-violent strategies. Even so, the local remains key: who is making political demands and of whom, and what those demands are. Furthermore, resources matter only in connection with ideology, as the specific aims, constituencies and opponents of a given movement affect its choice of strategies – and if violent strategies seem most promising, the form that violence takes.

In her chapter, Natasha Hamilton-Hart pieces together the ways external forces may influence the incidence and character of political violence.

Southeast Asia has been deeply enmeshed in transnational networks and the logic of geopolitics throughout the post-war period, from its central position as a key set of “dominos” in Cold War jostling to frenzied manoeuvrings over possible links with al-Qaeda and terrorist webs today. Hamilton-Hart adopts a comparative approach to tease out issues of relative agency and efficacy, reveal alternate explanations and pose counterfactuals. The external influences she considers range from personally involved foreign actors, whether engaged in violence or (less often) in reducing it, to foreign provision of material support, including arms, and external provision of non-lethal aid, intended for non-violent purposes, to recipients who are engaged in political violence. Surveying *material* support, Hamilton-Hart finds overall that the role and influence of foreign state actors in producing political violence are significantly greater than those of non-state external actors; that external support for political violence is far more substantial when the perpetrators are state rather than non-state actors; and that external support is more likely to escalate than to reduce political violence, whether in its immediate effects or via longer-term destabilization and disruption. When it comes to *less tangible* support, however – from ideological legitimation to dissemination of texts supporting violence and confidence-building or other conflict resolution initiatives – state and non-state actors are more nearly equal in their involvement and influence. Direct external involvement in political violence across Southeast Asia stepped up in the immediate post-war period, as nationalist and anti-capitalist stirrings grew more aggressive, then as local communist movements matured and the region became a key front in the Cold War. As first the war in Vietnam, then the Cold War more broadly, waned, the nature of external involvement with political violence in the region shifted. External state support for brutal states continued, for instance Chinese assistance to the Burmese junta and American acquiescence in the violations of Indonesia’s “New Order” regime and aid to harsh counterinsurgency measures in the Philippines and Thailand. Non-lethal external aid also continued to play a role in such conflicts, complementing or counteracting material support from the same or other actors, though still directed largely at state rather than non-state perpetrators. However, external actors also adopted new roles in reducing political violence (though many would have claimed such objectives all along); key examples include peacemaking and peacekeeping initiatives in Cambodia, East Timor and Aceh. Ideational influences, though – for instance the much-vaunted transmission of Islamist ideas and literature from the Middle East to Southeast Asia – seem tenuous; organic domestic factors appear clearly prevalent, for instance in Aceh and Mindanao, notwithstanding the flow of interpretive frameworks, educational opportunities, resources and inflammatory material. In short,

Hamilton-Hart argues for the very real prevalence and impact of a range of external influences on episodes of political violence in Southeast Asia, but also for the deep complexity, inconsistency and contingency of those influences.

### *Ideological aims and attributes*

However distinct these conceptual and structural lenses, they do not tell the full story. A third and final approach explores the place less of repertoires and resources than of ideology and objectives. Ideologically driven aspirants to power, for instance, may seek material support from like-minded comrades abroad; contests or clashes in one corner of the polity may be read with a distinctive gloss in another. Moreover, the specific forms of violence its perpetrators choose carry more than symbolic value; these forms reflect not only the resources and options available, but also these actors' specific aspirations and interpretive frames. Just as non-violent politics is too complex to be boiled down to a list of "root causes", the same is true of violent forms: both causes and consequences are complex, dynamic and varied.

Taking this complexity as a starting point, Vince Boudreau essays a typology of collective political violence in his chapter. Focusing less on the state than on politically oriented movements, he explores the ways in which collective political violence is embedded in a broader context of repression, opportunities and openings, cultural frameworks and potential allies and opponents. In line with other scholars of contentious politics, Boudreau considers violent and non-violent modes as analytically comparable. Importantly, though, while recruitment is key to mobilization in any movement, it is particularly tricky for those adopting violent methods, lest potential supporters be scared off or caught in the cross-fire. Bystanders are not only potential recruits, but also potential targets for state or non-state forces to brand as collaborators, outsider "others" or purported traitors and attack. What shape patterns of collective violence, Boudreau suggests, are trade-offs between movement goals of recruiting new members and projecting power, and the spatial distribution of targets for enlistment and attack. At the same time, conventional factors such as distance from decision-makers, regime accessibility and past experience also inform movements' strategic choices. Boudreau proposes – and his evidence largely confirms – that the physical segregation or intermingling of the populations from which a movement recruits and which it attacks helps to determine how compelled movement strategists feel to moderate their methods or at least offer clear explanations for



their strikes. He specifies such rigidity in terms of “catness”, or groups’ internal cohesion, and ethnic differentials (how far majority and minority communities diverge in language, culture and belief). Moreover, Boudreau highlights the specific choices, objectives and risks among particular forms of violent struggle. For instance, bombs detonated by someone on the scene and bombs triggered by a timing device are not equally discriminating; where actors deploy these tools (in a marketplace, in an official’s car) matters too. He thus codes violent events across Southeast Asia in terms of whether the technology of violence involved was individual (such as guns or knives) or mass (such as explosives), as well as by targeting strategy: whether the attack was in a segregated or heterogeneous site, whether it targeted members of a particular socio-cultural category or in certain occupational or political roles, or whether the target was either a specific individual or property rather than lives. Boudreau combines data from several large-scale monitoring projects and media keyword searches for an intrinsically comparative, structured, qualitative analysis, intended both to disaggregate the concept of collective political violence and to uncover its broad patterns in Southeast Asia. In actual practice, of course, the distinctions Boudreau lays out are far from tidy, even if the general patterns hold – yet the larger analytical project offers a lever on the diversity and complexity of violent political strategies.

Focusing upon state violence in South Asia, Sahni and Tharu argue that no matter how we define or classify subversive or secessionist groups, or indeed how they classify themselves, the state responds in a similar manner to all of them. The state, it appears, tends to adopt the same approach to all insurgencies: it calls in the military. Faced with a perceived threat to its sovereignty, the state knows only how to respond with force. Only when the military strength of the insurgent group is defeated or considerably weakened does the state begin to negotiate or consider non-violent approaches. The small number of cases of armed insurgency that ended with negotiated settlements before military defeat – the Mizos, Gorkhas (India) and Chittagong Hill Tracts (Bangladesh) – is testament to this argument. The authors weigh in, too, on variations in the quantum of force used by the state (secessionist ethno-cultural groups face the most violence) and the limits of state violence (of which the formation of Bangladesh in 1971 stands as the most singular example). Finally, in considering the relative importance of the form of government in dealing with violent insurgency, Sahni and Tharu note that while both democratic and non-democratic governments respond with force, all cases of successful negotiated settlements have involved democratic governments. Democratic states, it would seem, may be more likely to “end the cycle of violence”, as they put it.

## Conclusion

Taken together, the analyses collected here offer an understanding of political violence as a strategic and consequential technology of modern politics. We have seen that most often the state is the greatest source of political violence in both South Asia and Southeast Asia; nevertheless, it has not been able to maintain or establish a monopoly of legitimate force. Where the roots of political violence are structural, geopolitical and linked to international norms, easy solutions for amelioration are implausible. Where, however, the roots of political violence are tied to local political cultures and moral economies, change is possible and has occurred. In other words, this volume offers an understanding of political violence that helps explain its persistence in certain cases in spite of considerable evidence that the use of force is counterproductive in the long run. Such lessons are germane for state and non-state actors, for promoters and opponents of “wars on terror” and cognate interventions, and for students of states and societies alike. Forms of struggle and resistance based in modes of engagement that eschew political violence do have real power. It is sobering to realize, however, that the value of altering some actors’ strategic calculus to favour non-violent means will always come up against the real benefits of a strategy of violence for others. The cumulative histories of political violence in South and Southeast Asia will not be easy to transcend.

## Notes

1. What is excluded from this analysis, for reasons of convenience, is collective political action that relates to national defence and anti-colonial resistance. Even this seemingly unproblematic exclusion produces indeterminate conditions. Consider acts of violence against individuals who have been identified as foreign, illegal or undocumented aliens, in a context in which the alien is represented as a threatening and dangerous political subject. Under such conditions, it is sensible to consider this violence against unrecognized strangers as inherently political. The distinction between internal conflict and civil war presents another grey area. This endeavour has been popular of late, if largely analytically fruitless, given its emphasis on using the quantifiable outcome of violence: the rate of killing or the numbers of dead and killed in a certain period of time. Rather than focus on the violence itself, the emphasis turns to the viability of the label. Such an exercise, in our view, marginalizes the condition of violence as a purposive act, as well as failing to recognize it for its effect (in some cases) in structuring the field of the political.
2. What we do not consider political violence here are legally constituted and judicially sanctioned forms of state violence that punish convicted criminals, or varieties of individual self-protection that may involve the application of deadly force in response to threats to self and property. On the boundary of our interests, however, are those forms of state action (and their social reactions) that may deploy violence for ends deemed in

the public interest – for instance the forced relocation of communities for purposes of development (dams, highways, etc.), or the inoculation of populations to prevent the spread of communicable disease. It is impossible to determine the character of the political violence entailed in these liminal situations a priori, without understanding the power relations underlying conceptions of that public interest.

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# Political Violence in South and Southeast Asia: Critical Perspectives

Edited by Itty Abraham, Edward Newman and Meredith L. Weiss

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This volume explores the sources and manifestations of political violence in South and Southeast Asia and the myriad roles that it plays in everyday life and as a part of historical narrative. It considers and critiques the manner in which political violence is understood and constructed, and the common assumptions that prevail regarding the causes, victims and perpetrators of this violence. By focusing on the social and political context of these regions the volume presents a critical understanding of the nature of political violence and provides an alternative narrative to that found in mainstream analysis of "terrorism".

*Political Violence in South and Southeast Asia* brings together political scientists and anthropologists with intimate knowledge of the politics and society of these regions. They present unique perspectives on topics including assassinations, riots, state violence, the significance of geographic borders, external influences and intervention, and patterns of recruitment and rebellion.

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