Violence and Regimes in Asia: Capable States and Durable Settlements

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It is common in academic and policymaking circles to argue or assume that democracy should be correlated with positive outcomes, such as peace, development, rule of law, and equality, while authoritarianism should be associated with all their negative opposites. But no serious observer of Asian politics—whether East, Southeast, South, or Central—would ever propose such a blunt causal connection, especially with regard to the outcomes that occupy our attention in this volume: peace and violence. Examples abound in Asia of countries where democratization has appeared to be associated with an increase in violence, as well as dictatorships that have at least seemed adept at fulfilling basic human desires for physical security, if not individual and collective freedoms. Trumpeted as they always are by autocrats and their most vocal champions, such examples give rise to the opposite conclusion: authoritarianism generally fosters peace, while democracy—especially the rocky process of democratization itself—tends to increase violence, at least until democracy ages, consolidates, and matures.

The fact that both of these opposing perspectives can plausibly coexist suggests that no definitive, absolute correlation between regime type and violence actually exists. Nevertheless, one can still discern some striking patterns linking regimes and violence across Asia. First, as a matter of *regime type*, democracies and dictatorships can both be either peaceful or violent, but for different reasons. Most simply put, authoritarian peace rests on *capable states*, while democratic peace rests on *durable settlements*. The greatest dangers therefore lie where state incapacity is married to authoritarianism—as in the Philippines under the Ferdinand Marcos regime and potentially again under Rodrigo Duterte—and where political settlements break down in a democracy, whether a democracy as old as India or as young as Timor-Leste.

Second, *regime transitions* can create a range of outcomes with regards to large-scale violence. As predicted in the literature, political liberalization in Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Pakistan, and Nepal has been accompanied by the escalation of large-scale violence. However, the roots of these conflicts and the initial formation of the rebel organizations at the center of contemporary violence can be traced back to authoritarian rule that preceded democratic change. Furthermore, Asian countries show that transitions to democracy provide exceptional

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opportunities for negotiated settlement of these conflicts. Such opportunities for peace may not be perceived as readily available in long-standing democracies such as India and Sri Lanka.

Finally, *regime evolution* over time affects the forms of violence that predominate, particularly in maturing democracies. Counterintuitively, a higher level of democratic consolidation does not necessarily lead to lower levels of violence. However, it is often accompanied by a shift in the form of violence, especially with regards to communal conflict. Evidence from India, Bangladesh, and Indonesia shows that democratic consolidation is associated with a concurrent decrease in large-scale riots and a rise in localized vigilante violence. Affirming the key lesson that peaceful democracies rest on durable settlements, vigilantism is typically directed against those minorities whose standing in a nation's foundational political settlement is least secure.

Regime type and violence

The great variation in regime type and violence within Asia provides an ideal setting for engaging with competing theoretical claims. Proponents of the "domestic democratic peace" theory argue that democratic institutions tend to reduce violent conflict in diverse societies by structuring fair contestation over diverse preferences through inclusive participation. Commitment to representative institutions can incentivize political elites to resolve their differences through negotiation and compromise by allowing for wider participation in the decision-making processes.[1] Others claim that electoral competition can generate deep contention over distribution of resources, leading to mobilization of nationalist sentiment that increases the likelihood of armed conflict in democracies.[2] Especially in ethnically diverse and economically less developed societies, it has been suggested that authoritarian rule can bring the institutional strength necessary for economic growth and social stability.[3]

Empirical evidence from Asia does not lend consistent support to either of these claims. Table 1 compiles and color-codes the conflict outcomes discussed in this volume's country chapters, and correlates them with each country's Polity score.[4] If democracies were systematically more violent than dictatorships, or vice versa, a clear pattern would be visible in which lighter (less violent) cells would separate from darker (more violent) cells along the vertical axis. One need not employ sophisticated estimation techniques to see that in the 14 Asian cases covered here, no clear association between regime type and violence—even when we disaggregate violence into its many different types—can be ascertained.

Table 1 also presents some clear surprises for perspectives that link regime *quality* with violence. Some have argued that semidemocracies, or "anocracies," are most likely to experience violence compared to harsh autocracies or consolidated democracies.[5] A glance at Table 1 casts doubt on this claim. Two of the region's oldest democracies, India and Sri Lanka, are quite similar to their younger counterparts such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Bangladesh in both levels

Regime type is not a good predictor of violence in Asia

and varieties of violence. Intriguingly, Timor-Leste and Mongolia are new democracies that are more peaceful than countries with far more experience in democratic governance.

Even when we compare two countries that have experienced the most regime instability in the region, Pakistan and Thailand, it is clear that they differ vastly in their experience of violence. Despite having undergone similar regime cycling between military-led interventions and short periods of democratic rule, Pakistan fares much worse than Thailand on virtually all categories of armed conflict, including terrorism, national political conflict, and sectarian violence.

The argument that authoritarianism helps cement societal peace and political order is also belied by the fact that some of the worst acts of mass violence in the world have been committed by autocrats in Asia. The Khmer Rouge's systematic genocide led to the death of at least a million people, while Indonesia's New Order regime came to power on the back of a massive anticommunist campaign in which the military and citizen militias killed perhaps half a million people. Even where authoritarian regimes manage to avoid committing mass violence, they engage in high levels of state repression characterized by arrests, assassinations, torture, and forced displacements.[6] Although autocracies tend to be most violent during their founding years—as arguably is true of democracies as well—this does not mean that the long-term consolidation of authoritarian regimes necessarily yields increasingly peaceful outcomes. To the contrary, repressive measures may cumulatively result in rising national tensions, as currently observed in Cambodia and Malaysia, both of which have been consistently dominated by an authoritarian ruling party for decades.

Regime type is thus not a good predictor of violence in Asia. What then explains the observed variation in violent conflict across cases compiled in this volume? In any political system, levels of violence are a function of *state capacity* more than regime type. It is no coincidence that this volume, focused on analyzing violence across the region, sees no need to cover either Asian democracies such as South Korea and Taiwan or authoritarian regimes like Singapore that have historically possessed highly capable states.

Recent research suggests that authoritarianism is no panacea for social violence. Dictatorships with fragmented and poorly organized coercive apparatuses engage in more "high-intensity violence" than stronger authoritarian states that can target their enemies more precisely and, in many cases, legally and without bloodshed.[7] Among cases considered here, the Philippines under Marcos and Myanmar under military rule serve as examples of authoritarian regimes with fragmented coercive capacity that deployed high levels of violence to subdue multiple popular challenges.[8] In contrast, the New Order regime in Indonesia developed highly sophisticated mass-surveillance systems that could engage in more targeted repression of dissidents, reducing the likelihood of violent counter-mobilization.[9] All else equal, the Philippines should enduringly provide more sites of stateless sanctuary for sympathizers of transnational terrorist organizations such as Islamic State (IS) than will Indonesia.

This does not mean, however, that high state capacity is the only route to peace *in democracies*. Statebuilding does not have to precede democratization for peace and stability to take hold.[10] Authoritarian regimes indeed require state capacity to maintain order in a setting of relatively limited electoral consent. However, democracies can forge peaceful settlements across groups even when state capacity is unimpressive, as has been the case in Mongolia and Timor-Leste. In Pakistan and Sri Lanka, on the other hand, the state has developed higher levels of coercive

capacity after fighting external and internal foes for decades. Yet democratic politics in both of these countries have been marred by turmoil due to a lack of durable settlements on fundamental features of the polity. Although it might flirt with tautology to say that democratic peace is a result of political settlements, it is an improvement on existing perspectives that portray levels of violence as a direct product of regime type or as a predictable side effect of economic underdevelopment or inequality.

Regime change and violence

Let us now turn our attention to another common claim: one that depicts vulnerability to armed conflict as a temporally bounded feature of regime *change*. This largely quantitative literature assesses the likelihood of armed conflict onset with respect to the timing of transitions to and from democratic rule.[11] As noted above, transitions to new authoritarian regimes in Cambodia and Indonesia produced some of the deadliest mass violence Asia has ever witnessed. This section focuses on violence in transitions to democracy, not because they tend to be more violent than transitions to authoritarianism, but simply because Asia has experienced more democratic transitions than breakdowns in recent years. When a region births more democracies, naturally it experiences more cases where democracy and violence coincide.

On the surface, several countries discussed in this volume correspond with the finding that periods immediately following democratization are moments of high risk for mass violence. In Indonesia, for example, momentous political change has always coincided with extraordinary periods of violence. Multiple rebellions erupted across the archipelago soon after a newly independent Indonesia convened its first democratically elected parliament in 1955. Indonesia's most recent democratization process was also beset with escalation of three preexisting insurgencies, in Aceh, Papua, and East Timor, as well as communal violence across multiple parts of the country that collectively claimed an estimated 22,552 lives between 1998 and 2003.[12]

Pakistan's turbulent history follows a similar trajectory. The country's two, short-lived experiments with democratic governance were marked by a separatist war that resulted in Bangladesh's independence in 1971, and then by a surge in sectarian violence since 1989 that continues to this day. Even the current regime transition that commenced in 2009 has been met with an increase in terrorist-related attacks and escalation of separatist violence in the restive Balochistan province (see country chapter in this volume).

While most of the literature emphasizes the risk of violence *after* a regime transition has taken place, evidence from two additional Asian countries shows that initial attempts at political liberalization can also trigger violent mobilization. In Nepal, the Maoist insurgency only gained ground after the *Jana Andolan* movement successfully managed to place constitutional constraints on the country's powerful monarchy. Similarly, ethnic and separatist violence in Myanmar began to escalate in some long-standing trouble zones in 2011. This was before fully competitive elections were held, but after political prisoners were freed and the regime softened restrictions on public gatherings and the media, signaling deeper democratic reforms.

Transitions to new authoritarian regimes have produced some of the deadliest mass violence

Asia's two oldest and least interrupted democracies, India and Sri Lanka, have most consistently sought military solutions to settle their internal conflicts

These cases support the claim that the risk of armed conflict can rise in periods of political liberalization. Yet they also challenge the most commonly proposed causal link between democratization and violence. Scholars have often claimed that transitions to democracy create incentives for political elites to fan nationalist sentiments. By defining a clear "other" in ethnic terms, elites can improve their chances of gathering popular support needed to win elections. Stoking communal hatred for instrumental reasons after a transition can also lead to mass mobilization for armed conflicts.[13] The history of armed conflicts across Asia problematizes this purely instrumentalist perspective. While violence may have escalated in the immediate aftermath of political liberalization, the actual grievances at the heart of these conflicts and the initial formation of rebel organizations long predate democratic transitions.

For example, the causes of three separatist civil wars in Indonesia can be located in the way that resource-rich provinces of Aceh, Papua, and East Timor were integrated into the nation-state, as well as the discriminative social and economic policies adopted by the New Order regime. The Acehnese played a pivotal role in the Indonesian nationalist struggle, but disagreements about the role of Islam in the newly independent state prompted a nationalist movement in the province that evolved into the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) in 1976.[14] Long before the democratic transition in 1998, GAM had waged two unsuccessful guerilla wars in the province during the '70s and the '80s. Similarly, armed rebellions in Papua and East Timor were launched after these provinces were forcefully annexed to the Indonesian state under authoritarian rule. This initial elite discontent with Jakarta's domination in these provinces took on a more popular character when the New Order regime developed a highly centralized governance strategy that shifted a large proportion of natural resources from these regions to the densely populated island of Java.[15] As in Indonesia, regional rebellions in Thailand, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Myanmar typically began during, continued throughout, and persisted after protracted periods of authoritarian rule.

The fact that the intensity of violence in these conflicts only escalated during the democratization process is not entirely surprising given that, by definition, authoritarian regimes are able to mobilize high levels of repression to suppress challengers. The process of democratization, on the other hand, often occurs in the context of the state's coercive retreat.[16] This can reduce the perceived risk of the use of violence by rebels, who have amassed the necessary organizational infrastructure under authoritarian rule. More than instrumental instigation by electoral elites, escalation of violence in these separatist conflicts indicates rebels' increased ability to fight back as violent state repression abates following a democratic transition.

Moments of democratization also provide opportunities to renegotiate structural features of the polity, such as the influence of the armed forces, center-periphery relations, and the state's redistributive policies. These structural openings appear to have a dual effect. First, they can incentivize preexisting rebel organizations to use violence in order to obtain more favorable concessions from the process. Because opportunities for this kind of renegotiation are more limited during transitions to authoritarian rule and the risk of state repression is higher—and because coup-makers try to time their intervention for when they expect resistance to be limited—popular mobilization after military coups, such as those observed frequently in Pakistan and Thailand, is relatively rare. Instead, authoritarian takeovers often correspond with state-led crackdowns on rebel groups and political dissidents.

While democratic openings can provide incentives for escalation of violence in long-standing conflicts, they also appear to provide unique opportunities for reaching negotiated settlements with rebel groups. Indeed, transition cases with long-standing separatist movements, most notably Nepal and Indonesia (Aceh), have made concerted efforts to resolve these conflicts through negotiated peace agreements that include extraordinary autonomy concessions, guarantees of free political participation of former rebels, and even full-blown federalism (in Nepal). Even where separatist conflict has not been fully resolved, such as the Philippine island of Mindanao and Indonesia's restive Papua province, a series of local-autonomy and revenue-sharing concessions after the democratic transition have prevented a serious escalation of the conflict by undercutting elite support for rebel organizations. Although it is quite early in the process, Myanmar appears to be navigating a similar path towards regional autonomy in a fledgling electoral democracy. In contrast, it is striking that Asia's two oldest and least interrupted democracies, India and Sri Lanka, have most consistently sought military solutions to settle their internal conflicts.

Democratization processes in Asia have clearly opened opportunities for arriving at political agreements with rebels. They also heighten the risk of violence in the short term, however, as both sides use more force while they can to help them establish a more favorable fait accompli for the negotiations. More research is needed to understand why transitioning democracies in Asia have been more effective at negotiating peace agreements with rebel groups than have long-standing democracies, and whether it is the case in other regions as well.

As a starting point, here are three preliminary thoughts. First, a behavioral explanation is that older democracies have little practice in negotiating with rivals who refuse to follow the rules of constitutional order. As a consequence, they have sought outright military victory over rebel groups, and with very violent consequences. In contrast, elites in transitioning democracies accumulate the necessary negotiation experience to engage in dialogue on difficult issues to reach a mutually agreeable settlement.

Second, the structural environment also matters. Moments of democratic transition put fundamental questions about political life on the table. As such, they provide opportunities for horse-trading of concessions between different parties[17] in ways that may not be available in long-standing democracies, where fundamental features of the polity are no longer up for renegotiation.

Third and finally, the most reliable political pathway for reaching peace settlements in new democracies may very well run through decentralization. Political leaders are more likely to seek a negotiated settlement for protracted armed conflicts once they are sure that their "reputation" for making concessions to one rebel group will not encourage other groups to make similar demands.[18] Given that it often goes hand in hand with democratic reform, devolution of power may serve to reduce the overall perceived risk of future separatist demands. This makes leaders more likely to reduce military deployment and seek a negotiated settlement for preexisting conflicts.

Regime evolution and violence

Overall, neither regime type nor regime transitions in Asia have a direct bearing on levels of violence. However, democratic consolidation appears to create a perceptible shift over time in the particular *forms* of violence used in these conflicts. Although ethnocommunal fault lines run through virtually all Asian countries, the mode in which they are expressed seems to evolve with the level of democratic competition.

In developing democracies, where electoral competition is beginning to open up, communal conflicts often take the form of riots that cause large-scale loss of human life, economic damage,

and displacement. In its early transition period, Indonesia experienced multiple communal riots against the ethnic Chinese minority in its urban centers. Christian-Muslim riots that lasted for months in the country's eastern provinces were very much rooted in local anxieties about how the advent of free elections for the first time in three decades might reshuffle the deck of political power.[19] Likewise in India, Hindu-Muslim riots peaked during the mid-to-late '90s when the country was transitioning from decades of Congress Party dominance towards a genuine multiparty democracy. In India as in Indonesia, local electoral considerations played a key role in determining subnational patterns of violence.[20]

The consolidation of competitive, multiparty democracy in these cases corresponds with a gradual decline in the incidence and impact of riots. But it is also correlated with the emergence of vigilantism as a more prominent form of communal violence. In India, vigilante attacks on individuals accused of eating beef by members of "cow protection groups" have been on the rise since 2010.[21] Although the immediate issue in these attacks is to prevent the consumption of beef and the sale of cows for slaughter, in effect most of its victims have been members of India's vulnerable Muslim minority.

This trend is mirrored in Muslim-majority Indonesia, where vigilante groups have increasingly sought to police communal boundaries through violent attacks on non-Muslim houses of worship and deadly crackdowns on activities of sects within Islam that they deem "deviant." Criminal suspects, alleged sorcerers, and homosexuals are also frequent targets of vigilante violence. During Indonesia's current democratic consolidation phase, the number of victims of vigilante violence is estimated to be three times higher than casualties from other forms of large-scale violence such as riots and group clashes.[22]

Vigilantism in these consolidating democracies is similar to riots in the sense that both target groups that lack clear political standing in foundational political settlements.[23] Even though Hindu nationalists in India did not win their initial constitutional battle against secularists in the Congress Party, they have continually and vociferously called into question the "loyalty" of Indian Muslims with reference to the protracted insurgency in Kashmir and during multiple military confrontations with Pakistan.[24] Indonesia's Christian and Chinese minorities have faced similar stigmas. Despite being guaranteed equal constitutional rights in the Muslim-majority country, these groups are often denounced as colonial accomplices and beneficiaries of the repressive New Order regime.[25] Riots contest these political settlements by eliminating or displacing minority groups as a collective, as most tragically seen in recent pogroms against Myanmar's Muslim-minority Rohingya population. Vigilantism, on the other hand, forces minorities to adjust their behavior, by punishing individual infractions of a dominant communal order.

Democratic consolidation produces two sets of changes that explain this concurrent decline in riots and rise in vigilante violence. First, strengthening of democratic institutions brings about an improvement in the rights of ethnic and social minorities as well as a heightened level of accountability for government officials in terms of protecting vulnerable groups. This can, ironically, increase violence against these newly protected groups by conservative elements in the majority who resist and reject the extension of minority rights.[26] At the same time, these developments are associated with greater civil society scrutiny and growing judicial oversight of state agents, making large-scale riots a risky strategy for reasserting dominance.

Second, the increase in electoral competition can create incentives for using vigilantism as a form of violent lobbying to push back on some of these "liberal" reforms. This lobbying can work in two ways. In countries with a long history of communal violence, frequent episodes of religiously charged vigilantism create fears of escalation into larger conflagrations. State agents often manage these fears by appeasing vigilantes with stricter regulation and enforcement of those offenses that vigilantes seek to punish. Violent punishment of beef eaters in India has spurred

a host of local government regulations that ban the sale of cows for consumption. Similarly, in Indonesia, rising vigilante action has rolled back many of the key human rights achievements from the transition era, as both local and national politicians continue to issue legislation that restricts minorities' freedom to worship and regulates social behavior such as dress code and sexual preferences. Even in Bangladesh and Pakistan, recent attempts by democratically elected governments to reevaluate religious (*sharia*) regulations have triggered a spate of vigilante attacks against atheists and alleged blasphemers, making future reform difficult.[27]

Vigilante groups often lack the numerical strength to affect electoral outcomes, as they represent the extreme wing of a conservative voting bloc. However, in situations where multiple vigilante organizations exist and electoral competition is high, vigilantes can provide a coercive advantage to candidates from major, mainstream parties.[28] During election campaigns where religious identity is a factor, vigilante organizations can boost the credentials of certain candidates and damage others through mass mobilization on religious issues.[29] In others they can provide "insurance" against possible use of violence by other candidates. Maintaining strategic alliances with elected representatives, especially local chief executives, enables vigilante groups to access state resources. It also allows them to shape public policy in ways that serve their ideological agenda. This helps explain why a majority of new religious and moral regulations in Indonesia have been enacted by elected officials from mainstream rather than Islamist parties.[30]
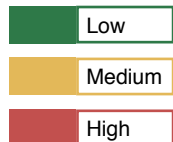
Conclusion

One of the most significant political features of any country is its regime type. It is therefore unthinkable that patterns of violence would not in some way be connected to regime features. In this report, we have argued that regime *types*, regime *transitions*, and regime *evolution* all have identifiable effects on patterns of violence. Yet these cannot be reduced to any simplistic correlation between levels of democracy and levels of conflict. Nor are these regime features the most important factors in shaping violent vs. peaceful outcomes.
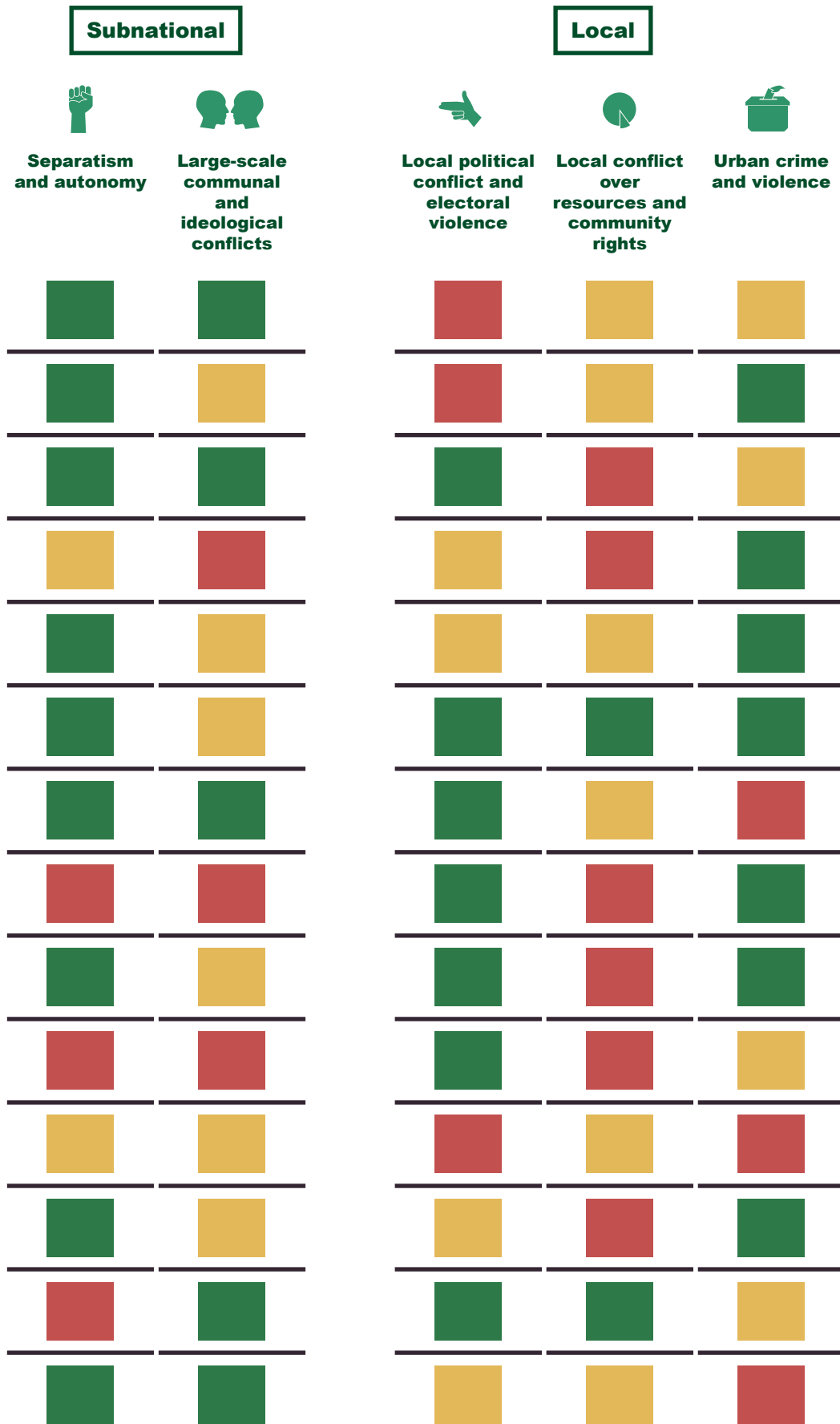
Democracies do not become violent because they are democracies per se, but because they are not always accompanied by the kind of political settlement necessary for establishing and sustaining peace. Similarly, dictatorships do not sometimes attain impressive stability because they are dictatorships per se, but because they have either built or inherited the kind of state capacity necessary to govern through a mix of performance and coercion instead of through freely given electoral consent. Furthermore, democratic transitions have double-edged implications for violence, opening opportunities both for new settlements and for violent tactics to shape those settlements' terms.

Finally, older democracies might, counterintuitively, become more violent over time due to a lack of recent experience at negotiating with rebels and bringing them out of the cold and into the aegis of a democratic constitution. As democracies consolidate, they also seem to become increasingly vulnerable to quotidian forms of violence such as vigilantism, even as large-scale riots become relatively rare.

Table 1. Regime types and levels of violence and conflict in Asia

Legend: 🟩 Low 🟨 Medium 🟥 High

	Regime characteristics		National/transnational		
	Recent PolityIV classification	**Type of authoritarian regime**	**National civil war**	**National political conflict**	**Trans-national terrorism**
Afghanistan	Open anocracy (2)	Soviet occupation-theocracy	High	Medium	High
Bangladesh	Democracy - open anocracy (6-4)	Military	Low	High	Medium
Cambodia	Open anocracy (2)	Single party	Low	Medium	Low
India	Democracy (9)	None	Low	Low	Medium
Indonesia	Democracy (8)	Military-dominant party-personalistic	Low	Low	Medium
Malaysia	Open anocracy (5)	Single party	Low	Medium	Medium
Mongolia	Full democracy (10)	Single party	Low	Low	Low
Myanmar	In transition (-88)	Military-dominant party	Low	Low	Low
Nepal	Democracy (6)	Monarchy	Low	Medium	Low
Pakistan	Democracy (6)	Military	Low	High	High
Philippines	Democracy (8)	Military-personalistic	Low	Low	Medium
Sri Lanka	Democracy - open anocracy (6-4)	None	Low	Medium	Low
Thailand	Democracy- open anocracy (6-4)	Military	Low	Medium	Low
Timor-Leste	Democracy (8)	None since independence	Low	Low	Low

Subnational

Local

Separatism and autonomy	Large-scale communal and ideological conflicts	Local political conflict and electoral violence	Local conflict over resources and community rights	Urban crime and violence

Rankings are based on the last 15 years and are relative to other Asian countries.

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    where the province's first non-Muslim, ethnic-Chinese,
    Christian governor was indicted on blasphemy charges
    after months of vigilante-led mobilization that pres-
    sured law-enforcement officials, including the police
    and the judiciary. For more information, see Joe
    Cochrane, "Jakarta Governor Concedes Defeat in Re-
    ligiously Tinged Election," *New York Times*, April 19,
    2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/19/world/
    asia/jakarta-election-ahok-anies-baswedan-indonesia.
    html?mcubz=1.

30 Michael Buehler, *The Politics of Shari'a Law: Islamist
    Activists and the State in Democratizing Indonesia*
    (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016).