

# The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia

How do conflict and violence affect Asia? What are their roots, and how have they evolved within countries over time? And what countries are particularly prone to different forms of conflict and violence?

*The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia* contains accessible, up-to-date, data-driven analyses of historical patterns and current trends in conflict and violence in 14 Asian countries. Designed for government officials and diplomats, scholars, aid and development professionals, business leaders, international affairs and security analysts, and activists, this volume presents a concise overview of the diversity and complexity of conflict and violence in Asia today.

Each chapter considers conflict and violence and their impacts in one Asian country. Each assesses the post-World War II roots of contestation and how current political, economic, and social conditions shape patterns of conflict and violence today. The chapters use a common framework, examining nine types of contestation at the transnational, national, subnational, and local levels: national civil war, national political conflict, transnational terrorism, separatism and autonomy, communal and ideological conflict, local political and electoral violence, local resource conflict, urban crime and violence, and domestic and gender-based violence. Countries are ranked for each type of conflict and violence, allowing for easy comparison. Five thematic, expert essays—focusing on the links between conflict and regime type, intercommunal violence, cross-border insurgency and terrorism, gender-based violence, and land and natural resource conflicts—draw out broader findings and implications.

*The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia* fills critical gaps in the understanding of conflict in Asia. International violence datasets are unreliable and often massively underreport levels of violence. Solid data on local forms of violence is often non-existent. Many reports provide data and comparative analysis of violence, in Asia and beyond, but these reports tend to focus on just one type of violence, such as civil war violence, political violence, or terrorism.<sup>1</sup> Looking in isolation at civil war violence—or at electoral violence, urban crime, or domestic violence—means that the links to other forms cannot be untangled, and little is understood about how they relate, i.e. whether countries that experience one type of violence (say, transnational terrorism) are also prone to other types (such as national political contestation). On the other hand, homicide datasets that aggregate all forms into one measure can obscure the causes of conflict and violence.<sup>2</sup> Are most of the homicides a result of interpersonal violence, or are they the result of larger outbursts of collective violence, such as ethnic riots? *The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia* considers a wide range of types of conflict and violence, clarifying which predominate in different locales, and allowing for a finer-grained analysis of what drives each type. This can help policymakers and others in planning and prioritizing how to address conflict and violence most effectively.

Each chapter draws on a broad range of sources, including official data, survey evidence, and academic studies and policy analyses, weaving them together to provide an accurate picture of

conflict and violence in Asia today. Drawing on The Asia Foundation's own long-standing experience in each country, the chapters combine analysis of published materials with in-depth knowledge and nuanced understanding of local politics and power, including in some of the most entrenched conflict zones and challenging geographic locales in the world.

## Five emerging patterns

### #1. Conflict and violence affect every country in Asia, not just those often thought of as conflict-ridden.

This volume highlights just how widespread and serious conflict and violence are in Asia, a region typically thought of as a rare bastion of peace in a troubled world. Large-scale violence is not confined to Afghanistan; many other countries are deeply affected by subnational conflicts and large-scale intercommunal violence. Localized violence is present everywhere—often with dramatic cumulative impacts. In Indonesia, almost 2,500 people were killed from 2005 to 2014 in violence related to local issues, including land conflicts and vigilante justice attacks. Table 1 provides a comparative overview of the different forms of conflict and violence occurring in each country in the last 15 years. It shows that all countries are significantly affected by at least one type of conflict or violence. Mongolia, for example, has low levels of most types of conflict, but it has particularly high levels of violent crime. There has been relatively little conflict or violence in Cambodia in recent years, but land and natural-resource conflict is a significant problem, and there is the potential for electoral violence to increase. Across the spectrum, it becomes clear that conflict and violence are an issue everywhere, not just in countries typically thought of as being affected by conflict.

### #2. Asian countries have been relatively successful at managing national contestation, but often at the price of significant subnational and local violence.

Since the end of Nepal's war in 2006, nationwide civil war has been absent from Asia, with the exception of Afghanistan. In Bangladesh, Thailand, and Pakistan, national political conflicts have been particularly bloody, but have not led to large-scale, sustained civil war in recent decades. Yet the strategies used to achieve such relative national stability have often inadvertently led to other forms of conflict and violence. Subnational conflicts in the peripheries of many Asian states, highlighted throughout the volume, are a consequence of national statebuilding strategies that consolidate central power and maintain territorial integrity at the expense of recognizing the immense local diversity within Asian countries and the desire of borderland areas for sufficient autonomy to protect their customs and local values. The use of patronage to bind competing national elites to the prevailing political settlement undermines the rule of law, providing space for violence to be used as a political and economic strategy. These conflicts, such as those in Myanmar and Thailand's borderlands, have been more frequent and enduring in Asia than anywhere else in the world.<sup>3</sup>

### #3. The politicization of ethnic and religious identities has frequently led to violence and creates major risks for the future.

Powerful political elites across Asia have increasingly emphasized exclusive ethnic or religious identities as they bid to win or maintain power. This trend has become more marked

as nations in the region have democratized and politics have become more competitive. The Malaysia chapter, for example, shows how politicians have increasingly utilized the Malay-Muslim card to fend off allegations of corruption. In Indonesia, local elites in a range of outlying, religiously balanced provinces emphasized threats to confessional identities as a way to rally voters; recent elections in the capital, Jakarta, have seen the same tactics at play. Identity politics have often led to violence, which has sometimes spun out of control. In India, for example, instigating religious riots has been a strategy for politicians to win elections, but these riots have led to thousands of deaths. Violence in turn has deepened the cleavages between ethnic and religious groups.

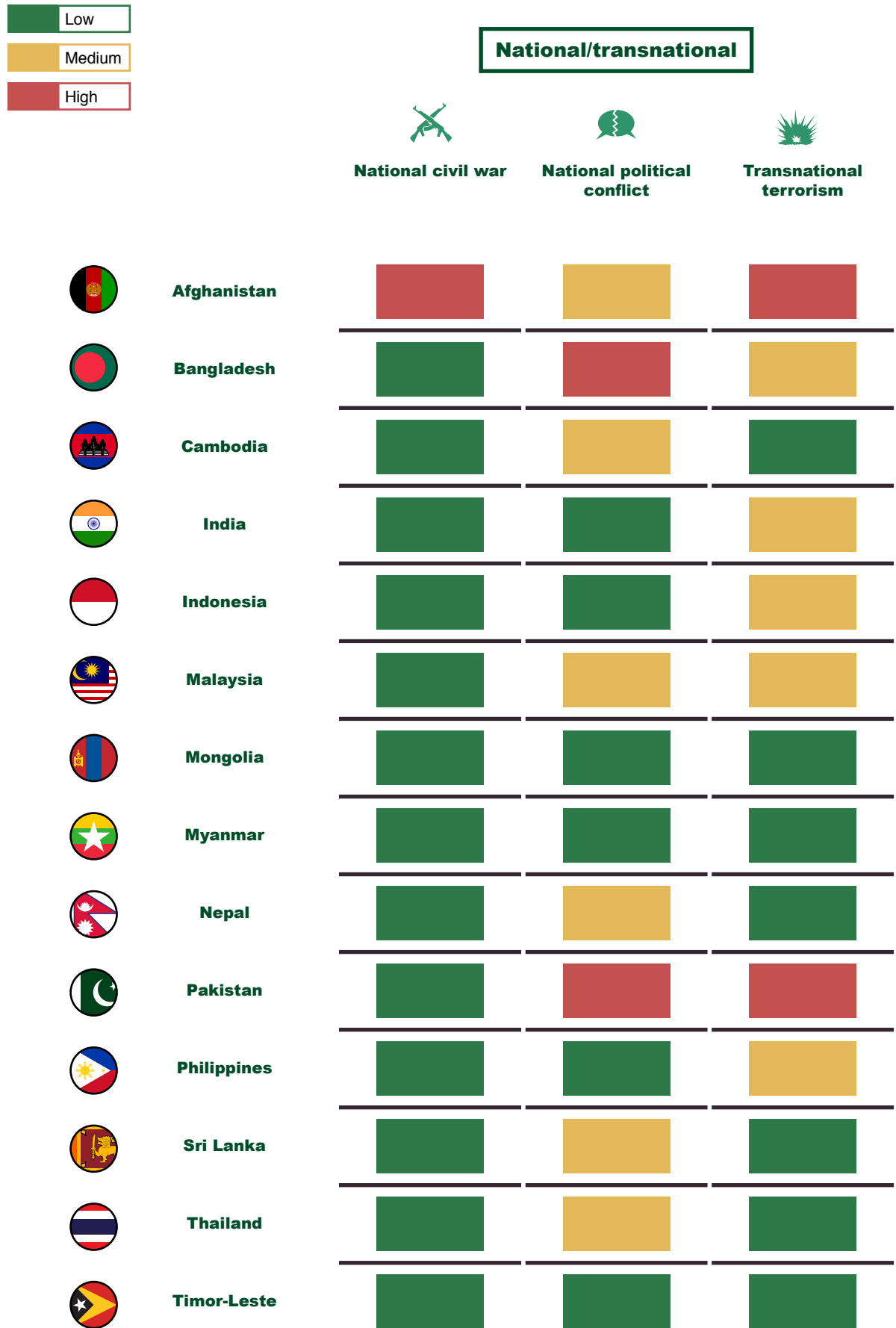
#### **#4. Development and urbanization will likely increase rather than decrease violence in the coming decade.**

Asia's economic rise has been momentous. Since the early 1960s, it has grown richer faster than any other region in the world. In 1990, 60 percent of people in East Asia and 45 percent in South Asia lived on less than USD 1.90 a day (PPP).<sup>4</sup> By 2013, these rates had fallen to under 4 percent and 15 percent, respectively. In 2013, East Asia grew by 7.1 percent and South Asia by 5.2 percent, far outpacing any other region.<sup>5</sup> This rapid development has improved the lives of many, but the chapters in this volume show that the forces it has unleashed have also commonly led to violence. One of those forces has been the rise of inequality and regional disparities. In places like Thailand and the Philippines, subnational conflicts have intensified even as growth has accelerated. In Cambodia, rapid economic expansion has reduced the security of land tenure for many, and protests have been met with violent crackdowns. In India, large-scale development schemes have contributed to the rise of the Naxalite movement. In Mongolia, where two-thirds of the population now live in Ulaanbaatar, rapid urbanization has helped push the capital to the highest homicide rate of any Asian city—11.9 deaths per 100,000 people.

#### **#5. Gender-based violence is widespread in Asia, and its impacts are greater than previously understood.**

The chapters in this volume point to the overwhelming pervasiveness of gender-based violence in most Asian countries. In Timor-Leste, for example, 14 percent of all women between the ages of 15 and 49 report being raped. In India, there were 8,342 rapes reported per year between 2009 and 2013, which averages out to roughly 23 women raped every day. Nepal has seen a sharp increase in reported violence against women. Yet the full range and impact of such violence is still unexplored and little understood. Survey data is inconsistent within and between countries,<sup>6</sup> and cultural factors lead to widespread underreporting. As a result, the country chapters do not classify countries by their levels of gender-based violence, although they do suggest countries that deserve particular attention. Better research and data are clearly needed.

**Table 1. Levels of violence and conflict in Asia**



**Subnational**

**Local**



**Separatism and autonomy**



**Large-scale communal and ideological conflicts**



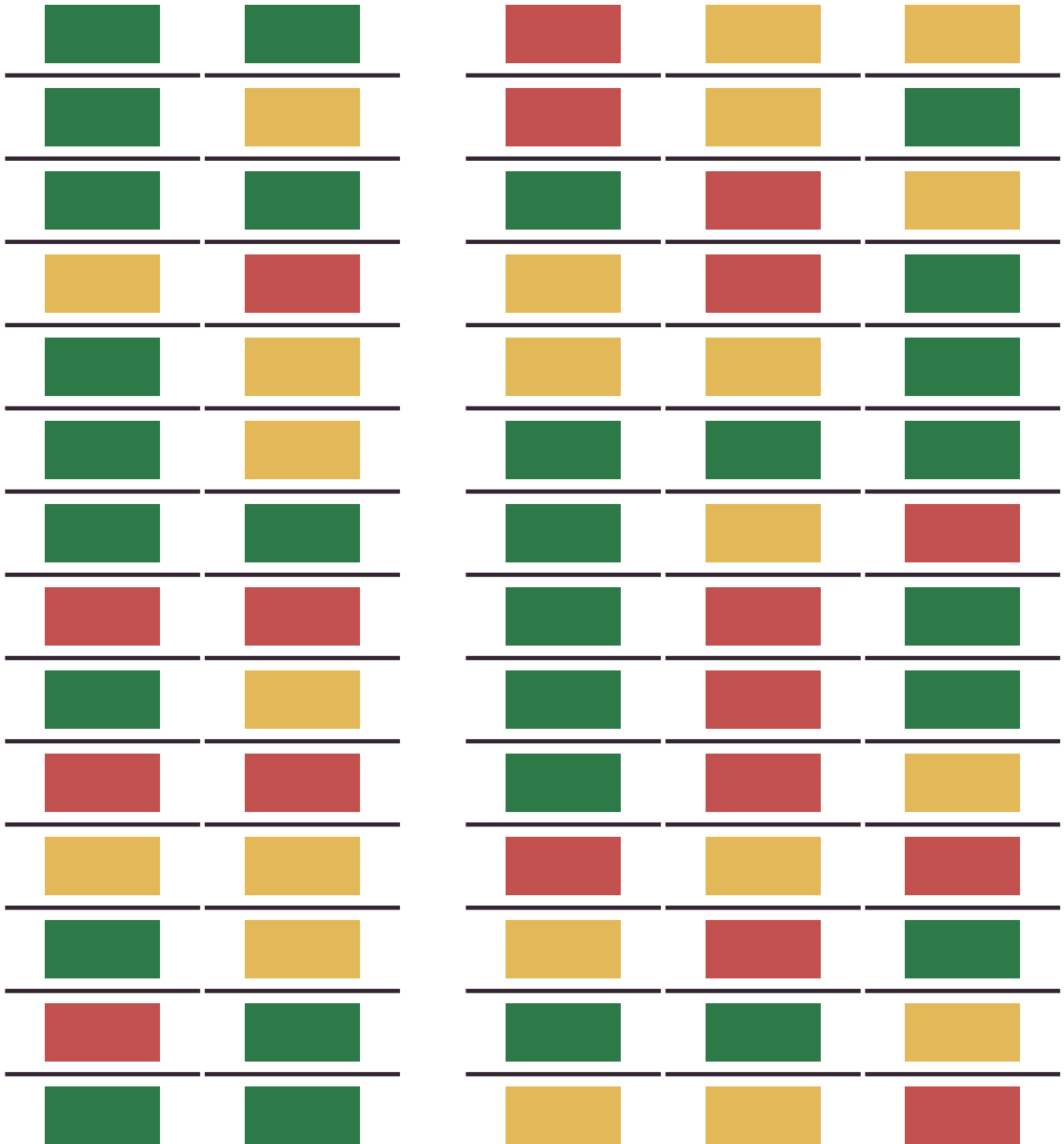
**Local political conflict and electoral violence**



**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.

## Five critical implications

### #1. Target hot spots with conflict programming, but remain alert to risks elsewhere.

There are conflict hot spots in Asia, as elsewhere: most of Afghanistan; zones of active sub-national conflict in the Philippines, Myanmar, Thailand, and Indonesia; border zones between Bangladesh and Myanmar and between Pakistan and Afghanistan. These areas require the continuing attention of policymakers and peacebuilders. Yet, looking back over time, conflict and violence have ebbed and flowed in most Asian countries. Twenty years ago, Timor-Leste was in the midst of violent resistance to an illegal occupation. Fifteen years ago, Nepal was wracked by a bloody civil war. Less than a decade ago, horrific violence affected Sri Lanka's northern and eastern provinces. Each is now firmly "postconflict": current levels of most types of violence are lower than in many other countries in the region. Yet old conflicts have a habit of resurfacing, and peace should never be taken for granted. Other relatively peaceful countries in Asia, such as Malaysia and Cambodia, exhibit strong risk factors.

### #2. Understand the history and the politics.

Today's conflicts and violence are often the product of historical trends and events that have defined relations between groups, between society and the state, and between neighboring countries, and that have shaped the way that institutions function. The legacy of the South Asian subcontinent's two great Partitions still greatly impacts internal politics in India, Pakistan, and especially Bangladesh. Choices made by colonial powers and the first generation of postcolonial leaders in the Philippines, Indonesia, and Myanmar have directly determined the conflict cleavages that drive violence today. These cleavages are often exploited, and further solidified, by elites. Understanding this political-economy, and how history has shaped it, is key to developing effective strategies.

### #3. Focus on building the rule of law.

Peacebuilding work—facilitating and supporting peace processes, building local conflict-resolution mechanisms, promoting intercommunal tolerance—is vital in many areas of Asia. Yet it is just as crucial to develop effective and legitimate institutions to manage political and economic competition in nonviolent ways. In many of the countries considered in this volume, conflict and violence occur because institutions do not uphold the rule of law. Elite impunity leads to local grievances and sometimes violent resistance. Crimes go unpunished, fostering resentments. Weak institutions create space for elites to use violence as a political strategy. Promoting good governance is not just important for improving service delivery or enhancing growth; it is also a key preemptive strategy to ensure that human rights are respected and security is provided for all.

### #4. Deal with cross-border drivers of conflict and violence, and promote country-to-country learning.

The chapters in this volume show that conflict and violence in one country often affect other countries in the region. Guns, people, goods, and ideologies cross national borders, spawning transnational jihadi networks and strengthening insurgent movements. Governments and development agencies have often coped less effectively with these cross-border dynamics than with the

local drivers of violence. Multi-country approaches are needed to bolster security in the region. Increased cooperation in sharing lessons learned could also be fruitful. India has reduced the violence in its Northeast. Indonesia managed to negotiate a peace settlement that has stuck in Aceh Province. At the local level in many countries, civil society organizations have developed effective strategies to reduce ethnic or religious tensions and detect emerging problems. Finding ways to share positive lessons such as these can help other governments and civil society organizations promote peace at home.

## #5. Support locally owned violence monitoring systems to generate better data.

It was clear when producing this volume that available data on the impact and incidence of conflict and violence is still of limited quality. International violence datasets often massively underreport levels of violence.<sup>7</sup> It is extremely hard to find reliable data for many forms of conflict and violence for many countries. As noted above, global datasets tend to focus on just a few types of violence or to aggregate all violence together. Solid data on localized forms of violence, and especially gender-based violence, is often missing. The Asia Foundation has been promoting the development of locally owned violent incident monitoring systems in Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Nepal, and Bangladesh, and data from these is cited throughout this volume. Developing similar systems across the region would contribute to a more accurate and comprehensive picture of the conflict and violence issues discussed here.

### Notes

- 1 See, for example, the data produced by ACLED (<http://www.acleddata.com/>), Uppsala University (<http://ucdp.uu.se/>), and the Institute for Economics and Peace's Global Terrorism Index (<http://visionofhumanity.org/indexes/terrorism-index/>).
- 2 World Health Organization (WHO), *Global Status Report on Violence Prevention 2014* (Geneva: WHO, 2014), [http://www.who.int/violence\\_injury\\_prevention/violence/status\\_report/2014/en/](http://www.who.int/violence_injury_prevention/violence/status_report/2014/en/); and United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Global Study on Homicide 2013: Trends, Contexts, Data* (Vienna: UNODC, 2014), <http://www.unodc.org/gsh/>.
- 3 Thomas Parks, Nat Colletta, and Ben Oppenheim, *The Contested Corners of Asia: Subnational Conflict and International Development Assistance* (Bangkok and San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, 2013).
- 4 "Poverty headcount ratio at \$1.90 a day," World Bank website, accessed August 21, 2017, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.DDAY>
- 5 "Poverty & Equity Regional Dashboard: East Asia & Pacific," World Bank website, accessed August 17, 2017, <http://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/region/EAP>
- 6 A major World Health Organization study from 2013 used a more rigorous methodology; however, it only uses information on seven Asian countries, and reports results at the regional rather than the country level. World Health Organization (WHO), *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence* (Geneva: WHO, 2013), <http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/violence/9789241564625/en/>.
- 7 Patrick Barron, Anders Engvall, and Adrian Morel, *Understanding Violence in Southeast Asia* (San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, 2016).