

# THE STATE OF CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE IN ASIA 2021

## IDENTITY-BASED CONFLICT AND EXTREMISM



## The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia 2021: Identity-based Conflict and Extremism

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# Preface

This second edition of The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia report, published by The Asia Foundation, presents a contemporary assessment of conflict trends. Intended as a tool for international institutions, researchers and others seeking a concise and accessible resource, and focusing primarily on South and Southeast Asia, it offers evidence-based information and identifies the patterns and root causes of conflict concerns.

Since the first State of Conflict and Violence in Asia report was launched in 2017, political tensions have risen globally and in response this second edition focuses on the associated threats of identity-based conflict and violent extremism. It explains the patterns of polarizing politics, international influences, and local grievances that lie behind recent high-profile violent incidents in the region. In Part One of the report, keynote essays by two eminent commentators, Sidney Jones and Michael Vatikiotis, are followed by a compilation of interviews on the impact of online media. In Part Two, ten country summary chapters offer further insight and information.

This new edition seeks to explain how trends of violence and conflict have been affected by rising prosperity alongside growing inequalities, by the wide reach of online social media, by the destabilizing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, and by many locally specific causes. The new edition maintains the original report's conviction that studying patterns of violent conflict in isolation neglects the multiple, intersecting dimensions of these urgent problems. In addition to increased concerns over identity-based tensions and extremism, subnational conflicts also remain a long-term problem in many countries, while political disputes have led to armed confrontation on city streets in several countries. Gender-based violence continues to be a grave universal concern.

Although Afghanistan remains deeply affected by extensive violent conflict, the rest of South and Southeast Asia has seen an overall reduction in conflict casualties in recent years. Consolidating this positive trend in a complex and sometimes adverse global environment is an ongoing challenge. It will be still harder to ensure that peace is achieved by building common ground and meeting shared aspirations, rather than imposed by strengthening central authority and applying tools of repression.

The Asia Foundation remains committed to working with Asian governments, local partners and populations to reduce and prevent conflict through a range of approaches, from support for peace dialogue through to enabling measures such as community-level forums, improved incident monitoring, and policy-based research. The Asia Foundation also seeks to address the root causes of conflict at all levels by supporting reforms and locally led efforts to promote accountability and access to justice.



**David D. Arnold President,**  
The Asia Foundation, September 2021

# Table of Contents

Preface	1
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## Part One Overview

The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia, 2021	6
Polarization, Power, and the Pandemic – New Drivers of Conflict in Asia	20
Identity Conflicts in Southeast Asia – an Overview	31
How Does Social Media Affect Conflict in Asia? Expert Views	39

## Part Two Country Summaries

Afghanistan	51
Bangladesh	65
Malaysia	77
Myanmar	89
Nepal	101
Pakistan	113
The Philippines	125
Sri Lanka	139
Thailand	151
Timor-Leste	163

# Table of Figures

Figure 1:	Geographical Concentration of State-based violence in South and Southeast Asia, 2010–2020	7
Figure 2:	Fatalities in Asia since 2010, including Afghanistan	8
Figure 3:	Fatalities in Asia since 2010, excluding Afghanistan	9
Figure 4:	Conflict fatalities in Afghanistan since 2020	52
Figure 5:	Geographical spread of violence in Afghanistan, 2010–2020 (Afghanistan)	53
Figure 6:	Types of crime and violence, rural and urban, 2019 (Afghanistan)	58
Figure 7:	Acceptable places for women to work outside the home (Afghanistan)	59
Figure 8:	Violent incidents involving ISIS and Al-Qaeda (Bangladesh)	67
Figure 9:	Violence against minorities (Bangladesh)	69
Figure 10:	Rape cases in Bangladesh (2004–2020)	70
Figure 11:	Dhaka crime statistics 2010–2019	71
Figure 12:	Religious makeup of Malaysia	81
Figure 13:	Domestic violence cases (2007–2018) (Malaysia)	84
Figure 14:	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement signatories and nonsignatories (Myanmar)	92
Figure 15:	Conflict deaths by state/region (2018 and 2019) (Myanmar)	93
Figure 16:	Conflict deaths in Shan State, by month (2018–2019)	93
Figure 17:	Crimes in Yangon 2017–2019	96
Figure 18:	Reported gender-based crimes in Nepal	106
Figure 19:	Main ethnic groups in Pakistan	115
Figure 20:	Sectarian violence in Pakistan (2010–2018)	115
Figure 21:	Total reported crime Sindh Province	120
Figure 22:	Number of conflict incidents and fatalities in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao	128
Figure 23:	Reported rape cases (2011–2017) (The Philippines)	132
Figure 24:	The religious composition of Sri Lanka’s population	143
Figure 25:	Serious crimes reported in Sri Lanka (2015–2020)	145
Figure 26:	Yearly incidents, deaths, and injuries in Thailand’s southernmost provinces, 2004–2020	154
Figure 27:	Local attitudes to prevailing conflict conditions (Thailand)	154
Figure 28:	Motivations among those desiring greater transfer of authority from the center to the southernmost provinces (Thailand)	154
Figure 29:	Reported cases of crimes concerning life and bodily harm, 2007–2017 (Thailand)	157
Figure 30:	Disputes in the neighborhood (Timor Leste)	168
Figure 31:	Perceptions of local security (Timor Leste)	168
Figure 32:	Reported crime cases per 100,000 people (Timor Leste)	169
Figure 33:	Experience or reports of crimes (Timor Leste)	170



# **PART ONE OVERVIEW**

## SUMMARY

# THE STATE OF CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE IN ASIA, 2021

The world has endured a tumultuous few years. Disenchantment with the political mainstream and economic stagnation facilitated the emergence of controversial leaders, identity politics rose to the fore, and public debate grew increasingly polarized. Global power struggles returned as China gained in confidence and stature, while violence and long-term fragility remained widespread in parts of the Middle East and Africa. The Covid-19 pandemic swept across this tense and confrontational terrain, adding fear and misery to an unstable setting.

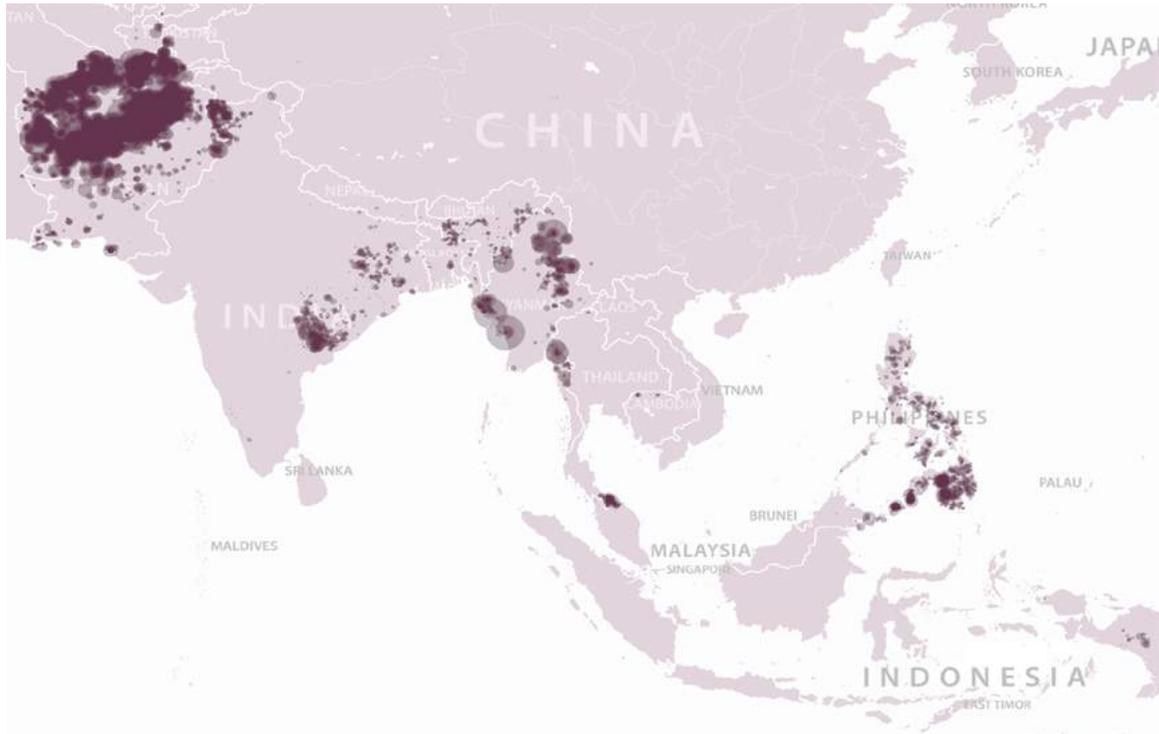
Today, across Asia, political violence and organized conflicts persist.<sup>1</sup> The war in Afghanistan continues to cause more fatalities than all other conflicts on the continent. Elsewhere, violence is less intense, but high-profile incidents and entrenched local tensions continue to affect several nations. In Myanmar, the military takeover of February 1, 2021, demonstrated the fragility of that country's new democracy. The 2019 elections in Thailand controversially offered some legitimacy to the leadership installed by the 2014 military coup, while Hun Sen's largely unopposed election victory in Cambodia extended his period of power beyond 35 years.

The trend towards more authoritarian governance, even in established democracies, is well established in many Asian countries, and indicators such as The *Economist's* Democracy Index show a significant decline. The deterioration of political rights and civil liberties is reflected in the diminishing space for free media and growing restrictions on civil society.<sup>2</sup>

Political leaders have appeared increasingly willing to tolerate or even encourage a resurgence of identity-based tensions in order to build support. Most Asian countries have diverse populations, and their governments continue to grapple with the enduring challenge of maintaining stability across ethnic or religious divides. Growing expressions of ethnic nationalism are evident in many countries as majoritarian political forces have both aggravated divisions and eroded democratic institutions.<sup>3</sup> These trends, usually associated with each country's dominant religion and with efforts to manipulate sentiments of group identity for electoral support, have repeatedly affected the rights of minorities. The most prominent and extreme example is the violent displacement of some 700,000 Rohingya from Myanmar to Bangladesh, while deadly majoritarian violence perpetrated mainly by organized, and often politically connected, mobs has broken out in several countries.

Violent extremism also persists. In the Siege of Marawi, in the Philippines, militants seized the heart of a city renowned for Islamic faith and unique local traditions, precipitating a five-month-long bombardment, over 1,100 deaths, and the displacement of 350,000 people from their homes.<sup>4</sup> While the greatest fears of security agencies over the uncontrolled spread of jihadist ideologies from the Middle East have not been realized, the interplay of international influences and local grievances remains a concern.

In Asia, as elsewhere, the term *violent extremism* is no longer applied solely to jihadist movements. Polarizing politics are associated with a growth in extremist perspectives and overt violence carried out by a radical fringe among Buddhist and Hindu as well as Muslim populations.



**Figure 1:** Geographical Concentration of State-based violence in South and Southeast Asia, 2010–2020  
 Source: *Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)*

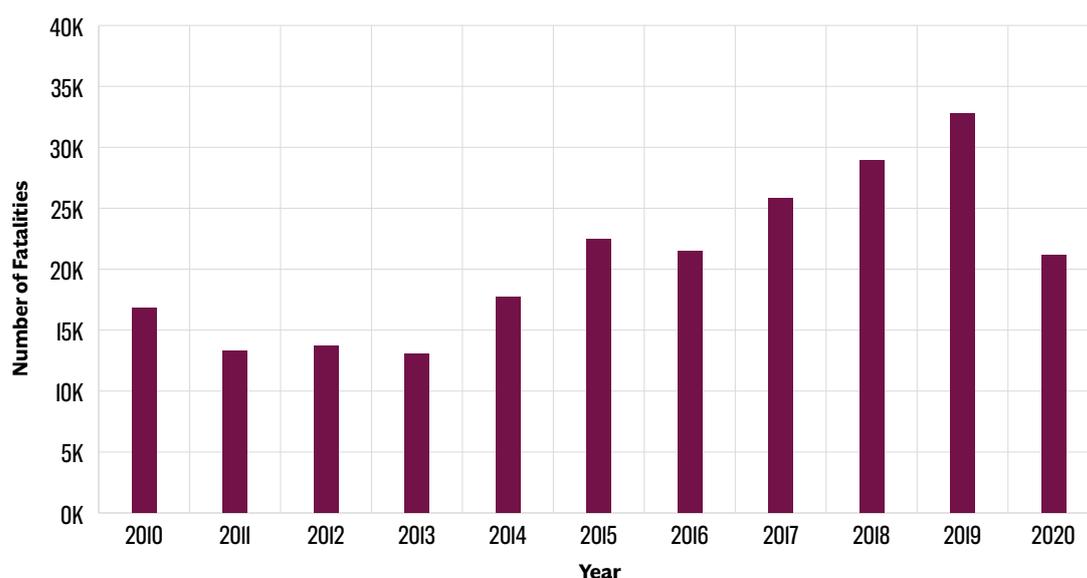
These trends have been fueled by online disinformation sponsored by extremists and at times by political leaders.

The contraction of democratic space has generated mass protests. Intense and persistent demonstrations in Hong Kong and Thailand led to strong security responses and, on occasion, to violence. In Myanmar, the military takeover unleashed a wave of popular protest and a protracted, bloody crackdown. New technologies—especially smartphones—have changed how protesters organize and how governments try to maintain public order.

This second edition of The Asia Foundation's *State of Conflict and Violence in Asia* explores recent events and patterns of events through regional assessments and country-specific overviews, in particular addressing contemporary concerns over political polarization and identity-based tensions. Following this introductory chapter, three keynote essays, featuring regional experts, offer closer assessments of recent conflict trends. Ten concise country summaries then present greater detail. Data is drawn from a range of primary and secondary sources, including country-level and regional datasets on violence and conflict, academic analyses, reporting on contemporary events, and other research conducted by The Asia Foundation.

## Conflict Trends: What Does the Data Show?

The world saw a major rise in conflict around the middle of the last decade, driven mainly by instability in the Middle East and Africa. The Global Peace Index, a broad indicator of overall trends, found that the deterioration continued in 2020, the ninth such annual deterioration in the last twelve years.<sup>5</sup> An initial glance at data from across South and Southeast Asia appears to indicate a general trend of rising levels of conflict, up to at least 2020 (Figure 2).<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 2:** Fatalities in Asia since 2010, including Afghanistan

Source: UCDP<sup>7</sup>

Once Afghanistan is excluded from the data, however, a very different pattern emerges (Figure 3). Between 2010 and 2020, conflicts elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia generally declined in number and intensity. The dataset of the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) shows that fatalities from organized violence in Asian countries (excluding Afghanistan) dropped to fewer than 2,000 deaths in 2020 compared to almost 10,000 deaths in 2010.<sup>8</sup>

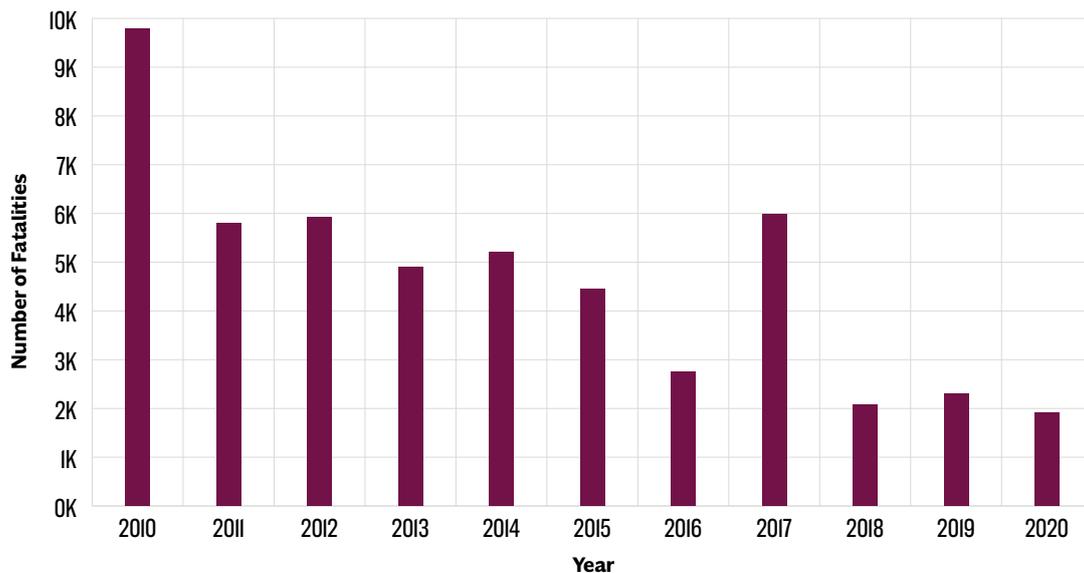
Between 2010 and the end of 2020, there were 36 active state-based conflicts (meaning conflicts involving at least one state actor) in South and Southeast Asia. The number of active conflicts declined after 2018, and in 2020 only 14 state-based conflicts were still active. Most of these conflicts occurred within, rather than between, states, affecting Afghanistan, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, and Myanmar. Two cases of violent incidents between states were recorded, between India and Pakistan, and India and China. The data shows a spike in 2017, attributable to the Siege of Marawi in the Philippines and the violence against Rohingya in Myanmar.

Conflicts that do not directly involve state actors also declined in number and intensity over time, despite sporadic events such as communal violence in India during 2020. One-sided violence—the deliberate use of armed force against civilians by the government of a state or by a formally organized group—also appeared to follow a general downward trend.

Afghanistan follows a different path. In 2019, Afghanistan sustained 31,200 fatalities, 40 percent of the total fatalities from organized violence worldwide, according to the Uppsala data.<sup>9</sup> Conflict escalated sharply from 2017 to 2019, before dropping slightly in 2020.

One reason for the apparent decline in conflict casualties across Asia (except Afghanistan) is the reduced intensity of several particularly violent confrontations: fatalities from conflict in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir dropped greatly from 2010 to 2020, as they did in northern Pakistan. Other, lower-profile conflicts have also become less violent over time, such as the insurgency in Thailand’s southernmost provinces, Maoist (or Naxalite) unrest in India, and ongoing tensions in Mindanao, the Philippines.<sup>10</sup>

High-casualty conflicts across Asia typically occur within, rather than between, countries. Aside from Afghanistan, these conflicts have tended to happen within confined areas, most often zones



**Figure 3:** Fatalities in Asia since 2010, excluding Afghanistan

Source: UCDP<sup>11</sup>

distant from the capital where the local population is considered distinct from the national majority.<sup>12</sup> Many of these subnational conflicts, which usually pit a government against one or more nonstate groups, appear to have waned in severity as governments have managed violence in various ways. In at least one country, Sri Lanka, hostilities ended through military victory. In at least one case, in the Philippines, a political settlement was negotiated between the government and the armed opposition. Most other cases lie between these two extremes, as states have gradually exerted stronger control, sometimes accompanied by changes to local political systems, without fully ending armed resistance (for example, in southern Thailand and in northern Pakistan).

Overall, the capacity of states to reduce levels of violence appears to have grown. Over a period of continued economic growth across most of Asia, governments have expanded their reach. New roads, improved services, and more functional bureaucracies have increased the scope for quelling violence in restive areas. Perhaps still more importantly, military expenditures have increased broadly in line with economic growth across smaller countries and regional powers alike. Between 2010 and 2019, military expenditures increased 41 percent in South Asia and 34 percent in Southeast Asia in real terms.<sup>13</sup>

Yet, reducing levels of violence without significant reforms or political changes often amounts to a partial, temporary, and imposed form of peace.<sup>14</sup> Tensions may remain, and persistent instability can be expected where state authority is enforced rather than established through a locally acceptable political settlement. In the often-remote areas that host Asia's longest-lasting violent conflicts, development has tended to increase wealth disparities and fuel overt cronyism or corruption, generating fertile conditions for further unrest.<sup>15</sup>

In Myanmar, for example, the state has gradually increased the area under its authority by harnessing both military power and development schemes. New infrastructure such as lucrative mining operations, dams, roads, and plantations often displace the local population while serving to impose authority.<sup>16</sup> These processes, backed by military power, have gradually increased the land area under state control but have not achieved any form of lasting peace.

Conflict data can mask such underlying risks and fragilities. Events that have major political consequences while leading to relatively few casualties, such as major protests in Bangkok and in Hong Kong or communal violence in Sri Lanka and India, are also overshadowed by bloodier conflicts

elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> Other forms of violence and conflict deserve closer attention, too. Violent crime can have a devastating impact on societies, particularly in disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, and its many victims are only sometimes included in conflict statistics. Government-sanctioned violent acts such as the thousands of people killed in the war on drugs in the Philippines are also hard to classify and may not be counted. Gender-based violence is also largely absent from conflict databases despite its prevalence in all countries. Finally, if current predictions of dramatic climate change hold true, new conflict stresses will be generated by the widespread loss of irrigated agricultural land, salination of water supplies, and potential mass migration.

## Conflict Trends: Keynote Essays in Brief

### I. Polarization, power, and the pandemic

Understanding what drives conflict involves identifying the causes of recent patterns and highlighting what the statistics fail to show. In his essay *Polarization, Power, and the Pandemic: New Drivers of Conflict in Asia*, Michael Vatikiotis views rising identity politics from a global and historical perspective. The end of the Cold War led to great optimism that an era of peace and prosperity would unfold. Instead, a global war against terror followed the 9/11 attacks in the United States. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan dragged on and expanded into other fields.

Overall, with the exception of Afghanistan, Asia has seen levels of violent conflict decline as wars in Nepal, Indonesia, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines ended or became less intense. However, recent years have seen greater assertion of group identities, as deeply rooted fault lines have come to the fore.

A principal driver of conflict this century has been exclusionary political systems and the persistence of conflict rooted in identity and religious dogma that afflicts more than half the globe, from the pastoral scrublands of sub-Saharan Africa to the jungles of Sulu in the southern Philippines.

Vatikiotis finds that competitive domestic politics repeatedly play to and exacerbate ethnic and religious tensions, enabling the spread of traditional ideas of nationalism and identity. Simultaneously, complex factors in Europe and the United States have eroded support for liberal activism and intervention overseas, while China, increasingly affluent and active, offers an alternative approach and a ready source of funding.

Amid rising majoritarian tendencies that feed off deep-seated social divides, Vatikiotis finds that long-established norms and institutions of political pluralism have been undermined by the populist assertion of ethnic and religious primacy and by authoritarian leadership. In South Asian countries, the drift into identity politics has stemmed from popular dissatisfaction with more liberal, inclusive leadership that failed to deliver reform and prosperity. Across much of Asia, there has been a rise in religious fervor among those of all faiths, stemming from greater social and economic inequality or insecurity and aided by the retreat or defeat of secular ideologies other than nationalism.

### 2. Identity conflicts in Southeast Asia

In this regional overview, Sidney Jones flags three contemporary factors behind the rise in tensions. First, the role of violent religious extremism. The Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS) inspired a small yet significant minority of Muslims in Southeast Asia to back movements towards Islamic forms of government, either by joining the fight in the Middle East or by pursuing hybrid domestic versions of the cause which fuse religious extremism with secular struggles against governments. The attraction of ISIS has waned, but its regional legacy altered the dynamics of violent extremism, increased anti-Muslim sentiments among some non-Muslim communities, changed security policies, and shifted foreign aid priorities.

Second, the rise of populist, majoritarian movements in Southeast Asia. Deeply nationalist, they have been driven by a fear that the majority's privileged position was under threat from minorities—religious, ethnic, and sometimes sexual. These movements have been particularly lethal when backed by governments or influential political parties. Jones stresses the critical role of the state, and especially the military, in stoking or curtailing discrimination against Muslim minorities.

Third, Jones identifies long-term and growing strains between migrants and “indigenous” peoples, particularly over land and resource issues. Domestic migrants are often seen by host populations as a feature of central domination, especially in areas where the state is already resented. Tensions can come to a head over the use of resources, from large mines to land settlement schemes. Variants of this pattern are seen across the region where conflict has been exacerbated by hardening divides along identity lines.

### 3. How does social media affect conflict in Asia?

The final keynote essay is a summary of interviews with three regional specialists on the impact of online technology. Maria Ressa, Sanjana Hattotuwa, and Sarah Oh all see social media as a major factor behind deepening polarization and authoritarianism. These trends are fed by a combination of algorithms that maximize advertising revenues and push users towards “echo chambers,” the relative ease with which social media can be accessed by people seeking to promote a message, and tools or methods that can be extensively employed to game the system.

The three interviewees explain how governance and legal frameworks are no longer able to manage the ways in which news and information are spread and consumed. The problem is compounded in countries where regulation and oversight are weak or captured by powerful interests and political leadership. Maria Ressa refers to Chris Wylie, the whistleblower from the discredited company Cambridge Analytica, who described the Philippines as a petri dish for companies experimenting with tactics of mass manipulation. Evidence from many Asian countries points towards intense government involvement in manipulating social media through a range of strategies, from legal restrictions and blocked access to false posts and bogus content. Malevolent nonstate groups also employ disinformation, subterfuge, and evasion to further their aims.

Addressing this protracted crisis involves action at several levels to build mass online literacy and foster local responses. Both offline action and online responses are needed, while improved regulation of social media typically requires many different stakeholders, from international organizations to the grassroots.

## A Perennial Crisis: Gender-Based Violence

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a pervasive problem in all societies. Multidimensional and deeply rooted in inequitable societal norms and power relations, its overall effects weaken governance structures and systems. Most GBV is perpetrated against women, girls, and LGBTI persons.<sup>18</sup> Beyond its direct physical impact, GBV undermines individual well-being and perpetuates structures of oppression, contributing to psychological trauma and generational cycles of violence.

In Asia as across the world, women are disproportionately affected by the wider occurrence of conflict and violence. Armed conflict can result in higher levels of violence against women and girls, including arbitrary killings, human trafficking, torture, sexual violence, and forced marriage. Violence against women has been used as a political and military strategy by conflict actors in Myanmar, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines. In some cases, the targeting of women's bodies during war and conflict has been employed as a systemic strategy designed to humiliate communities and assert power.<sup>19</sup> This militarization of gender relations and escalation of GBV often increases on the domestic front after peace has been formally declared or conflict de-escalated. Women and girls are the primary concern, but men and boys are also victims of sexual violence, especially in contexts of detention.<sup>20</sup>

## “Violence against women has been used as a political and military strategy...”

Violence against women most commonly occurs within intimate relationships. In many societies, some level of intimate partner or family violence against women is considered justifiable by both women and men in some circumstances. The proportion of women who report having experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime varies greatly by country across Asia: while it is 15 percent in the Philippines and 17 percent in Myanmar, the proportion reaches 54 percent in Bangladesh and 59 percent in Timor-Leste.<sup>21</sup>

Some strides have been made in recent years, and in November 2015, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member states adopted a Regional Plan of Action.<sup>22</sup> The evidence base is growing, and at least one prevalence survey on violence against women had been completed in 31 out of 37 countries in the Indo-Pacific region as of 2019.<sup>23</sup> Yet the data remains patchy. Underreporting of GBV is universally understood to be significant—in Thailand it was assessed at 90 percent of actual cases. Stigma, a lack of trust in police, low prosecution numbers, and fear of retribution contributed to the problem, and in many places only a fraction of victims sought help.

Women who are disadvantaged or come from ethnic minority backgrounds are consistently more likely to experience violence.<sup>24</sup> Available data also reveals that minors make up a significant proportion of victims of sexual violence in many if not all countries. For example, records indicate that half or more of all victims of rape in Bangladesh and Nepal are under 18.<sup>25</sup>

Governments across Asia have legislated to improve the protection of women, but either through poor enforcement or entrenched cultural norms, progress has been slow. In Thailand, Nepal, and India, increased penalties for perpetrators of violence against women have not led to a significant reduction in reported incidences.

Customary practices that have harmful impacts on women and girls, such as child marriage, dowry payments, and honor killings, largely continue, even where regulated or banned. Despite bans on child marriage, significant numbers of women marry as minors. Identified cases of honor killings in Pakistan increased after the government passed laws to tackle the practice in 2016. While illegal in both countries, dowry is still common in India and in Bangladesh. Female genital circumcision/mutilation remains widespread in many Southeast Asian countries despite some government efforts to contain or restrict the practice.<sup>26</sup> Research indicates that it can be eliminated rapidly if practicing communities themselves decide to abandon the practice.<sup>27</sup>

There have been a few gains and many setbacks for LGBTI rights across the region. In Malaysia, the government has introduced restrictive legislation, and in Indonesia, groups that advocate against LGBTI equality have grown in popularity.<sup>28</sup> In India, the supreme court overturned legislation criminalizing same-sex relationships, while in Sri Lanka same-sex relations remain illegal.<sup>29</sup>

**Table I:** Summary of key issues relating to gender and conflict<sup>30</sup>

Afghanistan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Afghanistan has seen steady improvements in community attitudes towards women on issues such as inheritance, education and the role of women in public domains, although the number of women in public leadership has dropped.</li> <li>• The role of women in public domains has been contested in peace negotiations.</li> <li>• Violence against women is prevalent, and options for women seeking justice are few.</li> <li>• Women suffer disproportionately from ongoing conflict, and progress on women's rights has slowed as armed conflict has increased.</li> </ul>
Bangladesh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recent years have seen modest improvements. Reports of violence against women decreased in 2018, and the government enacted legislation to restrict child marriage.</li> <li>• Domestic violence remains widespread, and ethnic minority women experience higher rates of sexual violence. In Dhaka, violence against women was the most prevalent crime, overshadowing theft and burglary.</li> <li>• Despite a ban on dowries, the tradition was still practiced in around 15 percent of marriages in 2018 and resulted in 142 cases of reported dowry-related violence against women.</li> </ul>
Malaysia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• From 2010 to 2017, reports of rape halved while reports of domestic violence almost doubled. Underreporting remains significant, and marital rape is not criminalized.</li> <li>• The government introduced measures to curb LGBTI rights, and senior politicians decried the presence of LGBTI groups at a march celebrating International Women's Day.</li> </ul>
Myanmar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women are particularly vulnerable in conflict-affected areas. Governmental and other security agencies have used sexual violence as an intimidation strategy.</li> <li>• A recent report found that hundreds of Rohingya women in Rakhine State were raped in 2016 and 2017 during military operations, mostly by gangs of soldiers.</li> </ul>
Nepal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The government has legislated against sexual harassment in the workplace and criminalized marital rape. Yet reports of rape doubled from 2016 to 2019, more than half the victims being minors. Women in disadvantaged groups, indigenous groups, or ethnic minorities are more likely to be sexually assaulted.</li> <li>• Domestic violence rates have risen. Fewer than one in four victims seeks help.</li> <li>• Despite longstanding bans and recent tightening of the laws, child marriage is still common, with 37 percent of girls married as minors.</li> <li>• In 2019, 46 women were reported to have been harmed or killed for practicing witchcraft.</li> </ul>
Pakistan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The government has taken steps to address gender-based violence, including laws in 2016 to tackle both honor crimes and rape.</li> <li>• Around 27 percent of women have experienced intimate partner violence. Reports of honor crimes have increased. Many more such crimes are believed to be unreported.</li> <li>• In 2019, the Supreme Court moved to establish one thousand courts specifically to try cases of violence against women and to encourage victims to testify in a safer environment.</li> </ul>

Philippines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violence in intimate relationships is the most common form of violence against women. One-quarter of women aged 15–49 are reported to have experienced intimate partner violence.</li> <li>• The government has partnered with civil society to reduce stigma and improve services for victims of sexual and domestic violence. The program supported 13,000 cases of violence against women and children in 2017. Women and girls are particularly vulnerable during armed conflict.</li> </ul>
Sri Lanka	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In 2019, a total of 1,779 women and girls were recorded as victims of rape in Sri Lanka, of which 1,490 were children. Successful convictions on charges relating to rape and gender-based violence are rare.</li> <li>• Female voters and candidates have been targeted in election-related violence.</li> <li>• There are reports of sexual violence being used in recent years as a way to intimidate communities.</li> <li>• Incidents of attacks on women wearing headscarves were recorded in a significant uptick in violence against minority Muslim Sri Lankans since the 2019 Easter bombings.</li> </ul>
Thailand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Domestic violence remains a key challenge, with around half of all recorded victims being children. Roughly one in six women has experienced intimate partner violence in their lifetime.</li> <li>• In May 2019, legislation was passed to increase penalties for sexual offenders. Between 2007 and 2017, rape cases reported to police dropped by around half. According to some estimates, over 90 percent of cases go unreported due to stigma and low trust in the justice system.</li> </ul>
Timor-Leste	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both women and men view some violence as acceptable in intimate relationships. Fifty-nine percent of women aged 15–49 have experienced violence by a partner. Reported domestic violence is higher in urban locations than in rural areas.</li> <li>• Despite the high rates of violence, women’s sense of security has increased, particularly among women outside Dili, as concern over violence against women has dropped compared to other concerns.</li> </ul>

## The Covid-19 Pandemic and Conflict in Asia

Major shocks—natural disasters, revolutions, economic crashes, or pandemics—tend to worsen existing strains and longstanding tensions. The tragedy of the Covid-19 pandemic has shifted conflict dynamics across Asia without radically changing underlying trends. Five patterns are highlighted here.

### I. Some reduction in levels of conflict, but formal ceasefires failed to materialize.

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called for a global ceasefire in response to the pandemic on March 23, 2020.<sup>31</sup> By June, a UN resolution backing the call, led by Malaysia, had gained unanimous support.<sup>32</sup> But while there was an initial surge in ceasefire announcements globally as the pandemic intensified, many of the calls either went unheeded or failed to end hostilities.<sup>33</sup>

In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte declared a ceasefire with communist insurgents effective from March 2020, allowing a focus on Covid-19 prevention measures.<sup>34</sup> By mid-April, as both sides accused one another of continuing military operations, the ceasefire ended. Elsewhere, conflict actors cynically looked to gain strategic advantage from the health crisis. In Afghanistan, ceasefires were proposed by the government but were not reciprocated, and military action continued. The government of Myanmar responded to calls for a ceasefire in May 2020, yet its application was partial, and fighting continued in many areas.<sup>35</sup>

Ceasefires were more likely to hold when they were aligned with an existing interest in reducing levels of violence. In the far south of Thailand, the main rebel armed group announced a ceasefire until the Covid-19 crisis abated and offered their support for the public health response. While this gesture was not reciprocated in full by the government, it reduced levels of violence and set a promising precedent for further progress towards peace.<sup>36</sup>

Despite the mixed experience of ceasefires, overall levels of violent conflict dropped significantly across Asia in 2020. Both conflict events and fatalities dropped by around 30 percent from 2019 to 2020 across South, Southeast, and East Asia.<sup>37</sup> It is likely that the pandemic hampered the operational capacity of some conflict actors and led to reduced activity at ground level. However, tensions stoked by the wider impact of the health crisis generate little confidence that gains are sustainable.

## **2. Asian countries saw an expansion of emergency powers and other decrees that strengthen state authority.**

Governments implemented emergency powers or new measures to control the pandemic. While steps such as limits on public gatherings, greater regulation of social media, and tight border controls are all necessary public health responses, many of them were implemented without a sunset clause attached, and others risk setting new precedents.<sup>38</sup> Covid-19 has acted as an accelerant, compounding ongoing trends of democratic regression and increasing authoritarianism.

In Cambodia, the Law on Governing the Country in a State of Emergency features provisions that allow the government to censor all media and social media, as well as monitor telephones.<sup>39</sup> In Myanmar the government expanded information censorship and blocked hundreds of websites in the name of combatting disinformation.<sup>40</sup> While the Malaysian government stated that an eight-month state of emergency announced in early 2021 would galvanize a common health response, critics saw it as a political ploy to postpone parliamentary accountability.<sup>41</sup> Military capacity has supported effective responses to the pandemic in many countries, but concerns have been raised in the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere over military influence in traditionally civilian fields of decision-making.<sup>42</sup> In the long term, the grave economic impact of the pandemic is likely to lead to greater instability.

## **3. The pandemic has exacerbated tensions surrounding ethnic and religious identities.**

The pandemic's first waves exposed prejudices and weaknesses affecting many marginal or conflict-affected populations. Existing tensions, often fueled by the intentional use of social media to spread fear, increased during the initial waves of infection as minorities or migrants were perceived to be spreading the virus. Researchers have identified hate speech related to Covid-19 as especially spontaneous and reactionary, in line with previous studies showing that marginalized minority groups are often blamed for epidemics.<sup>43</sup> In Thailand, an outbreak in December of 2020 led to social media posts advocating violence, such as "wherever you see Myanmar people, shoot them down."<sup>44</sup>

In some countries, politicians and officials issued xenophobic statements that at times led to actual violence, building on specific events to justify a wider narrative. In India, for instance, sectarian friction was stoked by reports of "human bombs" and "corona jihad" after early transmission of the virus was traced to mass meetings at an Islamic seminary.<sup>45</sup> In many cases, influential voices have looked to stem divisive sentiment before it leads to violence. In Pakistan, concerns over the spread of the virus from neighboring Iran led to hostile, sectarian social media campaigns against returning Shia pilgrims. Fortunately, independent media and government officials responded effectively before tensions escalated further.<sup>46</sup>

## **4. Initial stages of lockdown saw a substantial increase in gender-based violence.**

While more research is needed to understand the full extent of the pandemic's impact on women across Asia, many of the measures taken to control the spread of the disease appear to have had

“ Covid-19 has acted as an accelerant, compounding ongoing trends of democratic regression and increasing authoritarianism. ”

damaging effects. Within the first couple of months of the pandemic, reported levels of gender-based violence increased substantially. Mongolia reported a nearly 50 percent increase in domestic violence cases during the first quarter of 2020 compared to the first quarter of 2019.<sup>47</sup> In Nepal, the Nepal Women’s Commission received 885 calls related to domestic violence from April to June 2020, over twice the number of calls received in the three months before lockdown.<sup>48</sup>

Protection spaces, support systems, and other services have been weakened or disrupted. Women’s organizations in Pakistan, for instance, were unable to take new residents into their facilities.<sup>49</sup> As the economic effects of the pandemic took hold, women continued to be disproportionately affected.

#### **5. Regional institutions throughout Asia have proven resilient.**

Optimism that the pandemic could bring together regional political rivals has partly been justified, demonstrating the potential of Asian countries to work together and mitigate the impact of crisis. In March 2020, Indian prime minister Narendra Modi organized a videoconference on Covid-19 with the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).<sup>50</sup> Of the eight countries involved, the leaders of seven participated, and Pakistan was represented by its health minister. The unofficial summit was the first high-level meeting of the SAARC since 2014. Likewise, ASEAN, to international acclaim, has showcased the benefits of managing a public health crisis in cooperation with nearby countries, although logistical capacities have limited its effectiveness.<sup>51</sup>

### **Peacebuilding: Responding to the Challenge**

The case for integrating conflict prevention goals into policymaking is strong, and yet despite increased attention to instability and conflict, prevention measures represent just a fraction of the amount that the international community spends on crisis responses and reconstruction.<sup>52</sup> Once cycles of conflict are established, narratives harden and incentives become entrenched, making lasting peace still more elusive.

Many of Asia’s conflict cycles stem from perceptions of exclusion related to inequalities among groups, and so finding ways to tackle these structural fault lines is a critical step. Inspiration for action can be drawn from some of Asia’s many successes over recent decades. Where governments have kept a strong resolve to reduce identity-based tensions, at times through fear of losing authority or even of national disintegration, action has been taken and institutions established to manage tensions. Many positive examples exist of regulations governing political action and incitement to violence, checks and balances to counter authoritarianism, and political structures designed to balance competing claims between interest groups at the national level or to enable minority representation through special dispensation or devolved authority.

In some cases, approaches close to international models are followed, for instance by adopting elements of federalism, enabling minority quotas or reserved budgets, or tackling grievances over perceived economic inequalities and biases. On other occasions, responses are explicitly molded around local needs and specific circumstances. Examples include the long-term maintenance of relative peace in Malaysia through political agreement and compromise between leaders representing different ethnic and religious populations, and the recent merger in Pakistan of the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas with the adjacent state of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These approaches are not a panacea—solving deep-rooted tensions requires many steps and a long-term outlook—but they demonstrate the scope for contextually grounded measures that generate workable solutions.

Negotiated settlements to ongoing conflicts in Asia have been found. Sustained improvements have been achieved in Aceh, Indonesia, through a facilitated dialogue process following 30 years of conflict. The protracted peace talks that led to a partial yet significant settlement in Mindanao, the Philippines, offer another positive if flawed example. One of the main keys to successful dialogue is a strong understanding of the causes and individual motivations behind ongoing conflicts. When seeking common ground across conflict lines, a strong understanding of the ideology and motivations driving ethno-nationalism or majoritarian movements can be as important as a grasp of economic interests and security imperatives.

Successful peace processes typically include a combination of strong local or national leadership alongside measured international involvement. Foreign organizations offer a range of peace support roles, normally defined by specific context and circumstance: advisory committees, peace-talk hosts, facilitators, mediators, initiators, or monitors. Nongovernmental organizations and individuals, as well as Asian governments and regional bodies, have played valuable supporting roles in behind-the-scenes dialogue and formal negotiations. Effective international involvement can foster incentives for peace while avoiding concerns over infringements of sovereignty. Achieving such inputs demands experience and knowledge, emphasizing the importance of investing in research and in institutions that can remain involved for the long term.

Global trends and influences deeply affect all societies, so conflict prevention needs international as well as national commitment to build political consensus and tackle emerging challenges. In particular, social media has become a tool for reinforcing identities, a phenomenon that is beyond the capacities of governments alone to control. It is increasingly apparent that the simple promotion of democratic elections can further elected authoritarianism and majoritarian chauvinism in the absence of wider norms and rules to moderate behavior. The promotion of a wider set of values remains challenging without more concerted international demonstrations and promotion of tolerance and respect for difference, along with the promotion of universal human rights, a regulated yet independent media, and the myriad mechanisms that serve to balance interests.

Local action remains just as important as global commitment. Many interventions have worked with some success to incrementally build peace from the grass roots. While ending conflict ultimately depends on wider political change, small-scale measures can gradually improve how governments operate and generate incentives to end conflict while reducing the damaging impact on civilians in the interim. For its part, The Asia Foundation supports many local initiatives: peace committees in rural Nepal, access to justice in Pakistan, community policing in Timor-Leste, and others. Mainstream development programming can also help tackle the causes of conflict, for example through adapting the education curriculum, assuring land rights, or promoting more diverse engagement in economic policymaking. Increasing the involvement of women in peace processes and in society more widely not only promotes equality but is also likely to build a stronger foundation for peace. After decades of efforts to resolve conflict, there is extensive knowledge of what works. Tapping this experience and effectively applying it to promote peace remains a challenge.

## Notes

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- 7 UCDP data. 2010–2019 estimates based on UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset 20.I. 2020, <https://ucdp.uu.se/>.
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## KEYNOTE ESSAY | MICHAEL VATIKIOTIS

# Polarization, Power, and the Pandemic – New Drivers of Conflict in Asia



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With the end of the Cold War in 1989, the world enjoyed a brief and rather hallucinatory moment of hope for a future of freedom without conflict. Weapons of mass destruction were locked down and big powers set about designing a world of partnership and cooperation governed by democratic systems.

The optimism persisted even as wars raged in the Balkans, in the Middle East, and across Africa, for the 1990s was one of the great eras of peacemaking, starting with the 1993 Oslo Agreement, which inaugurated a decade of stability in the Middle East, and the Dayton Accords, which ended the ferocious Balkan Wars of the mid-1990s. By the end of the 1990s, despite ongoing conflicts, there was relative peace and prosperity, and also a dizzying degree of optimism stemming from technological advances that brought the world together rather than forcing it apart.

Three decades on from the fall of the Berlin Wall, it is worth reflecting on the fractured, squandered legacy of that fleeting, end-of-history moment. The peace and prosperity of the 1990s segued into the fearsome global war against terror in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York and Washington by the Islamic terrorist group Al Qaeda. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have dragged on ever since. A principal driver of conflict in this century has been exclusionary political systems and the persistence of conflict rooted in identity and religious dogma that afflicts more than half the globe, from the pastoral scrublands of sub-Saharan Africa to the jungles of Sulu in the southern Philippines.

By the start of the third decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these prolonged identity wars had generated the world's largest outflow of refugees since the end of the Second World War, and a dangerous level of proxy conflict that allowed larger powers to pursue their geopolitical interests under cover of regional and internal conflicts.

On the whole, Asia has weathered the ups and downs of global security rather well. Half a century of war in Indochina ended in 1991 with one of the most comprehensive peace agreements the world has seen in modern times, in Cambodia. Building on this preference for “jaw jaw” rather than “war war,” internal conflicts in the Philippines and Indonesia were successfully negotiated to an end. These agreements are holding, even as residual conflict persists in Papua and elsewhere in the Philippines.

In South Asia, a comprehensive peace agreement in Nepal brought an end to a long-running civil war, and even in war-torn Sri Lanka there was a measure of hope for stability, if not accountability, after the brutal end to civil war between the Tamil minority and the Sinhala majority. The nuclear-tipped standoff between India and Pakistan lay dormant, even if hopes for a more constructive cross-border relationship remained unfulfilled and tensions over disputed claims on Kashmir rumbled on.

Meanwhile, democratic transitions across Southeast Asia were accompanied by political stability and economic growth. Despite the dividends, not all of these transitions were enduring. Indonesia's democracy has stood the test of time despite concerns about shrinking space for civil society. Thailand was buffeted by two military coups, which resulted in a decade of polarization and violent protest. Cambodia's strongman leader, Hun Sen, banned opposition parties and hounded their leadership. After two reasonably free and fair elections in Myanmar, the army launched a coup on February 1, 2021.

“A principal driver of conflict in this century has been exclusionary political systems and the persistence of conflict rooted in identity and religious dogma that afflicts more than half the globe.”

Even as democracy faced setbacks in Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand, China's rise helped consolidate economic gains by providing jobs and a market for goods. One of the significant shifts of the past half century has been that trade, as opposed to aid, became the major driver of economic growth in Asia. Following a swift recovery from the 1997 Asia Financial Crisis, and another from the wider global recession in 2008, Asia's generally well-managed economies demonstrated a resilience that helped keep widespread social instability at bay.

However, as the new decade got underway, it was clear that Asia was not immune to some of the trends evident in other parts of the world. Identity politics was on the rise, fueling greater intolerance and sparking communal conflict, especially around elections. There were geopolitical tensions between a United States struggling to maintain its global primacy and a rising China determined to assert itself as a new global power. As the global Covid-19 pandemic unfolded in 2020, these fault lines widened and accelerated instability.

The data points supporting this view include the rise of communal tensions between Muslims and Hindus across India, similar assertions of religious primacy in diverse societies like Indonesia and Myanmar, and the possibility that violent extremist groups being flushed out of the Middle East found fertile ground in remote areas of Southeast Asia.

Competitive politics, normally a healthy sign of democratic pluralism, has generated less-healthy social side effects such as racial and religious tension, especially in an environment less tolerant of universal liberal norms. Just as elsewhere in the world, illiberalism is infecting ostensibly democratic countries such as India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines.

In these countries, norms and institutions of political pluralism, often long established, have been undermined—by the populist assertion of ethnic and religious primacy in the case of India and Sri

Lanka, and by authoritarian leadership in Thailand, Cambodia, and the Philippines. One of the saddest examples of this has been Myanmar, where both of these trends are on full display: the assertion of exclusive Buddhist and majority Bamar identity, married to the cult of leadership dressed in ostensibly democratic garb.

Illiberal democracy is in the ascendant and fueling identity-based conflict, but there is limited international pressure against the trend. A complex interplay of social and economic factors in Europe and the United States has eroded support for liberal activism and intervention overseas. At the same time, China has increasingly offered an alternative approach and a ready source of funding.

Just as the Covid-19 pandemic has further constrained global cooperation and advocacy, so, great-power competition between the United States and China is starting to provoke tensions in the region, as was the case during the Cold War era of the 1950s and 60s.

Finally, over the horizon and in the not too distant future, there is the prospect of additional sources of conflict stemming from the effects of climate change, a possibility brought into sharper focus by fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic.

## Identity Politics: The New Normal

On a scorching April mid-morning in 2019, people streamed into an open playing field on the side of the small Indonesian town of Ciamis in West Java. The crowd of several thousand, most of them women wearing the Muslim hijab, waited under limp flags and bunting for presidential candidate Prabowo Subianto to arrive. Meanwhile, a group of young men took to the stage: “We are the Two-One-Two Mujahideen,” one of them cried. “Under our command, God willing, we will pursue our goal of the caliphate.”

It was hard that day to find anyone who didn’t equate their decision on whom to vote for in Indonesia’s presidential election with their faith and vision of the role of Islam in daily life. At a nearby Islamic religious school, a youthful religious scholar stressed that their rules stipulated no involvement in politics, but their students had participated in antigovernment rallies and demonstrations in droves.

Indonesia’s presidential election on April 17, 2019, resulted in a decisive victory for the incumbent, President Joko Widodo. But the campaign was bruising and divisive and fought mainly on the issue of religious identity. Prabowo, a former army general who entered politics in 2009, built his campaign on promises to support a conservative Islamic agenda that reaches back to the birth of the Indonesian republic in 1945, and on arguments over whether the Muslim-majority nation should become an Islamic State.

The vote tally was surprisingly close, given incumbent President Joko’s popularity. Joko Widodo won around 55 percent of the votes and Prabowo around 45 percent. More concerning was the new electoral map, which showed Prabowo winning majorities in conservative Muslim regions of the country—West Java, most of Sumatra, Sulawesi, and parts of Kalimantan. These were the same regions that supported a violent uprising in the 1950s led by the *Darul Islam* movement, which was eventually suppressed, and its leader executed, in 1965.

This left President Joko with the challenging task of uniting the country and shoring up defenses against conservative religious dogma. For Indonesia’s economic fortunes depend on how successfully it can continue to project itself as a moderate Muslim nation. Local autonomy allows parts of the country to effectively implement conservative Islamic law, as is already the case in Aceh, in North Sumatra. As the scholar Jamie Davidson argues in a new study of democracy in Indonesia, “pitched contestation of identity politics in the electoral sphere is the new normal.”<sup>11</sup>

The return of identity politics to the mainstream political arena in Indonesia is troubling but hardly surprising. It is part of a broader trend in South and Southeast Asia, in part related to the consolidation of democratic transitions that have opened the space for the spread of illiberal ideas of nationalism and identity.

The ten countries of Southeast Asia are among the most diverse in the world in terms of ethnic and religious identity. Broadly speaking, half the region's population of 640 million professes the Islamic faith, and the other half is mainly Buddhist. There is a sizable Christian minority spread across the region.

Democratic transitions have gained traction in societies that were long accustomed to managed forms of pluralism, under either absolute monarchies or powerful colonial regimes. As a result, most modern bodies of law, including constitutions, ensure equality of citizenship and tolerance of religious freedom in plural contexts such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. Even in Malaysia, where the majority Malay and Muslim population enjoys economic and political privileges, there is no law denying the freedom of non-Muslims.

However, competitive politics have started to erode these institutional safeguards for ethnic and religious harmony. In part, this is the product of imperfect or flawed election processes that fail to genuinely reflect popular sovereignty. They only mimic liberal democratic norms, and as a result are prone to elite manipulation. More frequently held elections drive politicians to look for votes by appealing to lowest-common-denominator factors such as race and religion, which tug at fragile communal boundaries. Indonesia's twenty years of democratic transition have been accompanied by a palpable rise of religious conflict, as measured by the Setara Institute in Jakarta.<sup>2</sup>

Majoritarianism is increasingly evident. In Indonesia, there have been calls for the implementation of Shariah law and the denial of high office to non-Muslims. In Thailand, for the first time, the Buddhist hierarchy has sounded the alarm about the threat from the Muslim minority in the deep south of the country after Buddhist monks were killed in retaliation for the slaying of Muslim preachers.

In Malaysia, the decline and eventual defeat in 2018 of the ruling United Malays National Organization, which had a monopoly on power for six decades, has been accompanied by efforts to salvage support in the Muslim Malay community using racial and religious attacks on the opposition. And in Buddhist-majority Myanmar, the transition away from military rule towards elected government saw a sharp rise in anti-Muslim sentiment and overt violence, fueled by political forces bent on delegitimizing popularly elected leadership.

This is not to say that the majority of people in these countries necessarily subscribe to messages of hate or notions of majoritarianism. Often these views are not even shaped around specific party platforms or political movements. Thus, in Indonesia, support for enshrining Islamic Shariah law and other legislative moves to appease conservative Muslim mores emanates from parties that don't ostensibly have Islamic identities. Islamic parties in both Indonesia and Malaysia remain small and relatively powerless.

In South Asia, the drift into identity politics has stemmed from popular dissatisfaction with more liberal, inclusive leadership that failed to deliver reform and prosperity. As one commentator put it: "Political parties with more liberal visions have come sadly to be associated with corruption, drift, and inaction." In Sri Lanka, the harshly Sinhala-nationalist regime of Mahindra Rajapaksa gave way to a more liberal and inclusive government that soon foundered on the rock of economic stagnation and was unable to curb religious extremism. The 2019 Easter bombings, carried out by an Islamic extremist cell, helped galvanize popular support for Rajapaksa's brand of Sinhala nationalist populism. Elections in November 2019 brought former president Mahindra Rajapaksa's brother Gotabaya to power as president.<sup>3</sup>

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's reelection in India in May 2019 gave his Bharatiya Janata Party a green light to ramp up its Hindu nationalist agenda. About 80 percent of Indians profess the Hindu faith, but a sizable Muslim minority, making up about 15 percent of the population, and pronounced regional attitudes towards language, faith, and caste make it hard to impose rigid religious or ethnic uniformity on the country's 1.3 billion people. Yet that's what Modi and his allies have tried to do.

India was lucky to avoid major upheavals after the government in 2019 proceeded to schedule the rebuilding of a Hindu temple on the site of a destroyed mosque in the city of Ayodhya and remove restrictions on Hindu migration to Kashmir, with its large and restive Muslim population. An expected Muslim backlash was curtailed by strict, even repressive measures that, for example, shut down the internet in Kashmir. The avowedly Hindu-nationalist government has done little to restrain anti-Muslim sentiment. In late February 2020, New Delhi experienced the worst communal violence in almost three decades when Hindu mobs attacked Muslims and the police largely stood by. Almost fifty people died.

Reinforcing these trends towards identity politics across the region is the combined impact of an alarming rise in income inequality and in religious orthodoxy. The two trends are mutually reinforcing.

## Trends towards Religious Orthodoxy

Muslim society across Asia has inclined towards orthodoxy and intolerance over the past three decades. Funding for conservative Islamic education in support of Salafist and Wahabi teaching, which has mostly come from Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, has undoubtedly fueled the trend.

In Indonesia, Saudi influence on the Islamic education system can be traced to rise of Shiite Iranian influence following the Islamic revolution in 1979. Throughout the 1980s, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia spent hundreds of millions of dollars to counter Iranian influence by establishing well-funded institutes that propounded the strictly orthodox and Wahabist doctrine prevailing in Saudi Arabia.<sup>4</sup> The effect has been to bleach Indonesian Muslim society of many of the more tolerant, syncretic influences of past Islamic teaching, which has helped fuel the Salafist extremists who spearheaded Indonesia's homegrown and internationally linked Islamic terrorist organizations.

In a broader sense, there has been a rise in religiosity among those of all faiths stemming from greater social and economic inequality and insecurity, aided by the retreat or defeat of secular salvation ideology in the form of revolutionary Marxist-Leninist thought. Mass-based charismatic sects in both the Christian and Buddhist churches appeal to people who have been marginalized or feel socially and economically insecure. (Interestingly, in the Philippines, the avenue for channeling peasant grievances is a fifty-year-old Maoist insurgency, the New People's Army, that continues across much of the country in the absence of substantive negotiations over social and economic reforms.)

When the embrace of religious faith and orthodoxy is linked to chronic social and economic inequality, you have a recipe for division in society and a lightning rod for protest that can fuel conflict and turn violent. Across much of Asia, economic growth and development have not been accompanied by an equitable spread of wealth or leveling of incomes. In Thailand, the richest one percent of the population control almost 60 percent of the wealth. In Indonesia, the four richest men in the country are wealthier than the poorest 100 million Indonesians.

Little wonder, then, that we have seen conservative religious agendas harnessing the relatively poor and disenfranchised to mass protests. When hardline Islamic groups brought hundreds of thousands of people into Jakarta to pressure the government to prosecute the city's Christian and Chinese governor at the end of 2017, they could tap into angry people whose real incomes have declined or who perceive they have limited access to better healthcare and education.

Mainstream religious orthodoxy that breeds exclusivity and communal friction should not be conflated with the fringe phenomenon of Islamic extremism. Ever since the destruction of the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York and the attempted destruction of the Pentagon, in September 2001, the world has fixated on the spread of Islamic militancy as a source of global terrorism. Al Qaeda in Afghanistan gave birth to Jemaah Islamiyah in Southeast Asia, and more recently to the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (ISIS), which successfully established a franchise in the southern Philippines whose representatives seized the city of Marawi in western Mindanao and held it for five months in 2017.

To be sure, radical Islamic movements supporting violent extremism remain a threat in the region, as governments fear that the defeat of ISIS in northern Syria may send foreign fighters scurrying back to Asia. Indeed, there were deadly attacks in Indonesia in 2018, and arrests in Malaysia and the Philippines continue to be made. ISIS remains active in the southern Philippines.

“The problem is that the more politicians milk identity politics for popular support, the more these social trends will be fanned and religious prejudice or conflict condoned.”

Arguably, though, violent extremism linked to radical Islamic movements can be contained and may be on the wane. A more pressing threat to stability is the much broader spread of religious orthodoxy that upsets social harmony, generates religious conflict, and affects tolerant and relatively open societies that have helped foster rapid economic growth and development over the past half century. The problem is that the more politicians milk identity politics for popular support, the more these social trends will be fanned and religious prejudice or conflict condoned. The case of Myanmar is worth highlighting.

## The Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar

The Myanmar military's decision to proceed with an orderly transition to elected government saw a mild-mannered general named Thein Sein lead a hybrid government of civilian and military officials after flawed elections in 2010. This political opening lent impetus to the emergence of local parties based on ethnic identity, such as the Arakan National Party in Rakhine. Growing popular support for civilian-led opposition parties forced army-backed parties to look for issues to animate the popular base, which made Muslims a target in areas such as Rakhine State and Mandalay.

The problem got worse when politicians on either side of the civilian-military divide tapped into Buddhist preachers who started using hate speech across social media networks to ram home the message about the Muslim threat. U Wirathu, a monk from Mandalay, spread hate speech that prompted the initial violence against Rohingya Muslims in Rakhine State in 2012.

Some observers consider that Buddhist extremism was harnessed as an instrument to deter support for Aung San Suu Kyi's popular National League for Democracy ahead of the 2015 elections. But the problem also speaks to profound issues of race and identity that are legacies of the colonial era, which was characterized by policies of ethnic divide-and-rule.

Decades of military rule after independence entrenched the classification of component races rather than promoted an all-embracing national identity. This set the stage for ethnic politics to consume the democratic transition after 2011.<sup>5</sup> A recent survey of popular opinion in Myanmar found only modest support among the majority Bamar population for the kind of autonomy that the country's ethnic armed groups have been fighting for since the end of the colonial era. "The trend points to growing political divisions that have emerged out of the democratic transition and arguably will be obstacles to greater democratization," the survey concluded.<sup>6</sup>

Politically inspired hate speech has had a serious impact in Rakhine State, where traditionally more than a million and a half Rohingya Muslims had lived in uneasy coexistence with the majority Buddhist Rakhine. Communal violence and a government-led campaign to disenfranchise and isolate the Rohingya ensued. By the end of 2012, Rohingya in central parts of Rakhine had been corralled into dingy camps with little or no freedom of movement.

In 2015, many of these unfortunate people started to clamber onto boats and seek resettlement elsewhere in the region. Thousands were trafficked under harsh conditions that led to many deaths. Then, after an attack on police posts by Rohingya insurgents, an army-led clearance operation, starting in 2016, forced almost 800,000 Rohingya to flee for their lives across the border from northern Rakhine State. Large-scale acts of rape and killing are suspected to have taken place and are the subject of an international, UN-led inquiry.

While there is little doubt about local animosity between the Buddhist Rakhine and Muslim Rohingya communities, the narrative put forward by the Rakhine-nationalist Arakan Army, which after months of fierce fighting with the Tatmadaw (the Myanmar armed forces) now exerts influence over almost half the state, is that violence and unrest on this scale would never have occurred without instigation by the Tatmadaw and the Union government for political purposes.

Ironically, it was the Tatmadaw's arguments with the civilian elected government over how to cope with the violence in Rakhine that contributed to the unraveling of the uneasy relationships between the powerful army commander, Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, and the country's elected leader, Aung San Suu Kyi. The February 1 coup that ended a decade-long experiment with democratic transition came about in part after Aung San Suu Kyi rebuffed the army's push for a rerun of some elections that had been postponed in Rakhine for security reasons.

## Curbing Identity Politics

Identity politics has the potential to destabilize South and Southeast Asia more than the threat of radical extremism. Unlike the extremist threat—for which security countermeasures, if used with surgical precision, are mostly effective—it is hard to imagine effectively curtailing the use of identity politics without seriously infringing on democratic rights and freedoms.

Reforms that address political campaign rules and the responsible shaping of party platforms would help. So would fairer elections and stiffening established legal safeguards for minority rights. But it is hard for politicians responsible for implementing reforms to willingly make their task of reelection harder.

Instead, governments in the region are turning to the tools of hard security to address rising communal tensions. In Indonesia, the government banned the pan-Islamic conservative group Hizbut Tahir in 2017. Myanmar has declared the ethnic armed group known as the Arakan Army a terrorist organization, which has inflamed tensions between Rakhine and the majority Bamar. And in the Philippines, the government has proposed a more draconian antiterrorist law that would extend the period of detention without trial.<sup>7</sup> In the long term, this security approach will infringe on human rights and impact democratic life, which could lead to a new cycle of repression and democratic regression.

In reality, most democratic transitions across the Asian region, after initial bursts of enthusiastic reform, soon gave way to fatigue and complacency. Australian academic Lee Morgenbesser argues for the Southeast Asian context that authoritarianism has adapted and survived by mimicking broad elements of democratic government, but using sophisticated tools to perpetuate the concentration of power and selfish elite behavior, which are ultimately divisive and destabilizing.<sup>8</sup>

## Geopolitics: Pivots and Swings

The other driver of conflict that has loomed larger in Asia in recent years is geopolitics. The end of the Cold War in 1990 was thought to have laid to rest the ideological contestation between the communist and capitalist worlds that wreaked havoc across Asia. Wars on the Korean peninsula and in Indochina cost millions of lives and set back development for sizable populations by decades. South Korea only emerged as a developed country in the 1970s; its northern neighbor remains closed and desperately poor. Vietnam spent almost three decades in a grueling war, first with France and then with the United States and its allies, and then spent the next 20 years rebuilding the country.

The international effort led by regional states and the United Nations to bring an end to Cambodia's brutal civil war and rebuild the shattered country seemed to mark the end of an era of invasive geopolitical conflict. The Cambodian peace process at the end of the 1980s paved the way for three decades of unimpeded economic development that has seen Vietnam and Cambodia enjoy GDP growth often in excess of 10 percent a year.

Much of this growth across the region has in more recent years been derived from access to China's dynamic economy and growing market. China's rise has dominated the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, yet while there is no doubting the benefits to Asian economic growth, what has become more problematic in recent years has been the accompaniment of Chinese growth and investment with an appetite for influence and control.

China's great-power aspirations became apparent with its challenge to U.S. military primacy in the Asian maritime domain, largely expressed by an assertion of sovereignty in the South China Sea. Since 2010, China has built military facilities on islands and features it claims in the Spratly Island chain, and its powerful coast guard has harried and harassed fishing and mineral exploration activities by other littoral states across the South China Sea. China ignored a 2016 ruling from an arbitral court in the Hague that deemed its claims in the area excessive and unjustified under international law. In the past two years, the risk of conflict has increased with the frequency of freedom of navigation operations by the United States Navy, which China aggressively denounces.

Meanwhile, China's grand plans for investment and infrastructure development across 70 countries in Asia, Europe, and Africa under the Belt and Road Initiative, announced in 2013, have been accompanied by active diplomatic efforts to dominate regional forums such as in the greater Mekong basin on mainland Southeast Asia. The Chinese-funded Lancang-Mekong Cooperation platform, launched in 2016, has steadily displaced Western-funded forums such as the Mekong River Commission, established in 1995.

In Myanmar, official dialogue between the government and an array of ethnic armed organizations was initially supported by Western governments and the United Nations. Since 2012, China has asserted itself strongly in the process, facilitating armed group meetings across the border in China that have helped bring them to the table. Beijing has made it clear to both sides that the price of China's help is the marginalization of Western involvement in the process.

Debate in China about these more forward diplomatic initiatives in the region has revolved around transitioning from the bedrock Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, which eschewed involvement or intervention in the affairs of other countries, to an approach that permits and even encourages

**“Both of the conflict trends highlighted here—the rise of identity politics, and the return of geopolitical competition—will be exacerbated as the world emerges from the global Covid-19 pandemic crisis.”**

involvement where China's interests need safeguarding. So far, international conflict has been avoided. Tension over boundary disputes in the Himalayan region and the South China Sea have been managed through consultation and dialogue, even if they steer clear of the kind of international arbitration that China's neighbors would prefer to see used to settle these disputes.

The stakes have increased, however, as have the risks in the past four years, with a pronounced push by the United States and its allies in the region to counter China's strategic expansion in Asia. To some degree this reflects regional demand for the United States to play a more muscular role in pushing back on China's aggressive claims—for instance, in the South China Sea. But equally there is regional apprehension about Washington and Beijing pressuring states to make choices about alignment and cooperation that could impact economic and commercial interests. This is an uncomfortable position for leaders in a region that has been accustomed to a reasonable degree of balance in their relationships with external great powers.

Some have urged the United States and China to work together. “New international rules need to be made in many areas, including trade and intellectual property, cybersecurity, and social media,” Singapore prime minister Lee Hsien Loong told a gathering of security officials in Singapore in 2019. “China will expect a say in this process, because it sees the present rules as having been created in the past without its participation. This is a reasonable expectation.”<sup>9</sup> Yet the United States has actively campaigned against China's bid to play a bigger role in international organizations at the United Nations. At gatherings where the two powers are represented, the talk is about decoupling more than collaboration. A survey conducted among respondents in ASEAN countries showed that people in the region trust neither great power.<sup>10</sup>

Going forward, there is an urgent need to replicate the myriad dialogues on economic and security issues between the United States and China that no longer take place because of the pronounced hostility between the two countries. There is hope that their common cause of denuclearizing the Korean peninsula could help sustain constructive diplomacy, not to mention the need to stave off mutually destructive trade sanctions. All the same, in many parts of Asia, the most proximate cause of conflict is increasingly seen as a miscalculation or accident that sparks an armed confrontation between the United States and China.

## **Coping with Disease and Climate Change**

Both of the conflict trends highlighted here—the rise of identity politics, and the return of geopolitical competition—will be exacerbated as the world emerges from the global Covid-19 pandemic crisis. Most recently, U.S.-China tensions spiked dramatically as each country blamed the other for the virus's uncontrolled spread.

At a national level across Asia, the social and economic gains of three decades of growth and development will be reversed. As governments in the region shut down their economies and imposed border restrictions, legions of migrant workers lost their jobs almost overnight and were forced to return home to their villages across South and Southeast Asia. And while many people were able to seek refuge in the rural economy when the Asian Financial Crisis hit in 1997, today the rural economies of the region have less absorptive capacity. In many areas, agricultural exports are less competitive and generate less income—the Philippines and Indonesia are net importers of rice, for example. Compounding the problem, drought and rising temperatures have put pressure on formerly fertile areas of production.

The expected social, economic, and political fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic will exacerbate existing drivers of conflict in Asia and generate new ones. Quite possibly the most significant will be that of human migration. Looking ahead, one of the most widely anticipated impacts of climate change will be the rendering uninhabitable of significant areas of the globe. This could be the result of rising sea levels, rising temperatures, or the absence of life-sustaining water. The ASEAN-wide survey mentioned above also showed that more than half of respondents considered climate change a bigger threat to their security than terrorism or military conflict.

One immediate impact will be the mass movement of people. As far back as 1990, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change noted that the greatest single impact of climate change could be human migration. In the Asian context, large areas of the central part of mainland Southeast Asia, the traditional rice-growing region, already suffer more frequent droughts and increases in daytime temperatures in the hot dry season beyond 43 degrees Celsius.<sup>11</sup>

Combined with monsoon failure and the reduced flow of major rivers like the Mekong, which recorded its lowest level in more than half a century in 2019, climate change could render a region that is home to more than 60 million people almost uninhabitable within the next 50 years. Well before then, agricultural output will fall and rural livelihoods will suffer. Where will people go? Almost certainly northwards and across the borders with China and India into more temperate climate zones. Similarly, in low-lying coastal areas in the Bay of Bengal, where sea levels are rising, the only escape route is westward into India.

In the future, conflict will arise when countries that migrants head for to escape rising temperatures and sea levels shut them out. We are already seeing the first signs of this in India, with its controversial national register of citizenship in Assam, which seeks to identify mainly Muslim Bengali migrants not eligible for Indian citizenship.

The irony is that China, which has spent the past two decades building dams across the upper reaches of the Mekong and strategic roads and railway lines out of Western China across Southeast Asia to establish alternative supply routes from the sea, may well see these same routes used by migrants escaping extreme climate change in the once fertile central plains of Thailand and Myanmar.

## Notes

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## KEYNOTE ESSAY | SIDNEY JONES

# Identity Conflicts in Southeast Asia – an Overview



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Disputes rooted in national, regional, ethnic, and religious identity defined much of the conflict in Southeast Asia as the decade ended, and they looked set to continue in the decade ahead. It is not as if identity conflicts in Southeast Asia are anything new, but three factors in particular have affected how they have played out: the role of violent religious extremism, especially that associated with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS); the rise of majoritarian populism; and increased tension between migrants and “indigenous” peoples, particularly over land and resource issues.

Between 2014 and 2020, ISIS inspired a small but significant minority of Southeast Asian Muslims to believe that a global Islamic state could control territory, win military battles, and apply Islamic law in full. An even smaller minority responded to appeals to contribute to the struggle by joining ISIS forces in Syria or by waging war at home. The new “caliphate” changed the dynamics of violent extremism in the region but also affected risk perception, security policy, and donor priorities. Its attraction was waning by 2019, but its legacy was a conviction in the extremist fringe that an Islamic state, as an alternative to a democratic system, was both possible and worth fighting for.

Conservative majoritarian political movements in Asia—Islamic in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Bangladesh, Buddhist in Myanmar, and Hindu in India—generally emerged from a different set of factors than those that produced support for ISIS. They tended to be ultranationalist rather than antinationalist. Like majoritarian movements elsewhere, they were driven by a fear that the majority’s privileged position was under threat from minorities—religious, ethnic, and sometimes sexual. The movements were particularly lethal when they were backed by governments in power. When they were in opposition, as in Indonesia, they could still use popular mobilization to push a discriminatory agenda.

Many conflicts in Southeast Asia also arose with shifting relationships between “migrants”—often internal, from another part of the country—and “indigenous” residents with a distinctive culture and a particular claim to territory. Many of these were triggered by the expansion of palm oil and other plantation crops into areas officially designated state land but in fact customary land. A different

kind of dispute arose with the influx of Chinese migrant workers employed on China's Belt and Road Initiative projects and resource-extraction activities, where local resentment fed into long-standing issues of ethnic Chinese economic dominance.

These trends have added new layers of complexity to the region's identity politics, but they have not necessarily produced creative new approaches to conflict resolution. Throughout the region, the best ideas for approaching conflict have come from local actors who can use their knowledge of communities to unpack the broader issues and tackle one or two manageable parts. Donors can give local actors technical capability such as negotiation skills, new technologies, and information about models that have worked elsewhere. But the ability to resolve conflict ultimately depends on the political will of the actors concerned, combined with the best approximation of a level playing field. Powerful actors have no reason to compromise when to resist doing so carries no political risks.

The following sections explore how ethno-nationalist conflicts, Islamist extremism, migrant-versus-indigenous disputes, and resource issues combine to shape and change identity conflicts in the region.

## Ethno-Nationalism and the Global Jihad

Southeast Asia has a huge number of armed ethno-nationalist struggles for independence or autonomy, with Myanmar alone accounting for dozens. Governments call these movements “separatist”—the term is almost never used by the fighters themselves—because they aim to dislodge themselves from the rule of an ethnically distinct elite. The rise of the global jihad—first Al-Qaeda in the 1990s and then ISIS from 2013 onwards—led to fears on the part of governments in the region (and often their Western partners) that nationalist movements rooted in Muslim populations could join forces with terrorists in a way that could bring violent attacks from the periphery, where these movements were based, to the national capital or to major tourist centers.<sup>1</sup>

But one can be armed and Muslim in Southeast Asia without having any interest in fighting an international “Crusader-Zionist alliance” or setting up a universal caliphate. For the most part, nationalist movements are not interested in deviating from political goals linked to a specific territory, language, culture, and/or shared history to join movements led by Middle Easterners. The Free Aceh Movement, fighting for independence from Indonesia, never showed any interest in approaches by Al-Qaeda in the early 2000s. Not only were its leaders not interested in broader ideological goals, but one of their objectives was to get Western support, which any hint of alliance with Al-Qaeda would have made impossible. The National Revolutionary Front (Barisan Revolusi Nasional, BRN) in Thailand's deep south proved impervious to offers of help from foreign Islamist fighters, including from Indonesians and Malaysians eager to join. Among the Rohingya, Harekat al-Yaqin—the Arakan Salvation Army (ARSA)—has focused since its establishment in 2012 on securing for the Rohingya the full citizenship rights that other officially recognized minorities in Myanmar enjoy; although, like BRN, it has used terrorist tactics to intimidate others and punish informants. For these nationalist insurgencies, outside assistance with arms and training has sometimes been acceptable when foreign fighters were not, but at least in Southeast Asia, most Muslim ethno-nationalist groups have recognized that links to the global jihad, whether Al-Qaeda or ISIS, would be political suicide.<sup>2</sup>

The Philippines has been the exception to the rule, where different factions of ethno-nationalist insurgents in the Muslim south, from the mid-1990s onwards, periodically have looked to the global jihad to help redefine identity in the face of internal disputes, retaliate for government attacks, or get access to new sources of funding. Thus, in 2000, the Special Forces unit of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), an insurgent group, worked on a series of bombings with the jihadist group Jemaah Islamiyah after the Estrada government declared “all-out war” on the MILF and attacked its main camp. In 2008, a more radical splinter of the MILF emerged, as one top commander, angered by yet another setback in the interminable peace process, set up a new group called Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF).<sup>3</sup>

The declaration of a caliphate by ISIS leader Abubakr Al-Baghdadi introduced a new ideological element into the dynamics of these ethno-nationalist groups. Through the end of the five-month siege of the city of Marawi in 2017 by militants in Mindanao, the Philippines, ISIS provided an umbrella that transcended ethnic and regional identities. If, in Muslim-majority Southeast Asia, ISIS attracted support because of the appeal of the caliphate rather than local grievances, in Muslim Mindanao it fed into a narrative of discrimination, neglect, and abuse. Many fighters were drawn in by material incentives, including recruitment payments.<sup>4</sup> The ideological attraction, however, was real, not just for the leaders of what came to be called the East Asia Province of Islamic State, but also for some of the middle-class recruits who had grown up in the smart-phone era and had ready access to ISIS propaganda. For them, an Islamic state seemed like a plausible alternative to corrupt democracy.

“It is not as if identity conflicts in Southeast Asia are anything new, but three factors in particular have affected how they have played out: the role of violent religious extremism [...]; the rise of majoritarian populism; and increased tension between migrants and “indigenous” peoples...”

## Muslim Majorities and Minorities

Whatever happens to ISIS in the Middle East, its impact on identity politics in Southeast Asia has been profound. This includes increased Islamophobia among some non-Muslim communities, and heightened government wariness of nonviolent Islamist movements—strengthened, perhaps, by a huge influx of donor funds to Southeast Asian security forces for counterterrorism training, equipment, and sophisticated surveillance technologies.

Two Buddhist-majority countries, Myanmar and Thailand, evinced very different reactions to efforts to whip up anti-Muslim hysteria. Both were driven by local dynamics rather than ISIS, but ISIS served as a backdrop to vilify Muslims as violent extremists. In Myanmar, government-directed persecution of the Muslim Rohingya minority, which goes back to colonial-era alignments and post-independence politics, combined with a hugely influential Buddhist national movement called Ma Ba Tha to promote the idea of Muslims as a national security threat.<sup>5</sup> Ma Ba Tha warned that Muslims—4 percent of the population as against the Buddhists’ 88 percent—would swamp the Buddhist population through immigration, a high birth rate, and a campaign to marry and convert Buddhist women. This was a classic majoritarian narrative.<sup>6</sup>

While the government made some attempt to stop Ma Ba Tha hate speech, especially after an eruption of communal violence in 2012, the movement retained a huge grassroots base through a network of monasteries. Moreover, military actions sent a different signal: that anti-Muslim mobilization was in fact state policy. In Rakhine State, attacks on security forces by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), first in October 2016, then in August 2017, triggered savage retaliation by the Myanmar military that appeared aimed at the forcible expulsion once and for all of the Rohingya from Myanmar and resulted in more than 700,000 crossing into Bangladesh.<sup>7</sup> Other Muslim ethnic groups, much smaller, suffered as well. The popularity of Ma Ba Tha ensures that the Myanmar government has no political incentive to ease its anti-Muslim stance.

“Whatever happens to ISIS in the Middle East, its impact on identity politics in Southeast Asia has been profound. This includes increased Islamophobia among some non-Muslim communities, and heightened government wariness of nonviolent Islamist movements...”

In Thailand, however, successive governments have made periodic efforts at a ceasefire with the BRN rebels in the far south. In such circumstances, hate speech directed at a potential negotiating partner can be detrimental. In 2017, the unpopular Thai military government brought criminal charges against a prominent monk for his inflammatory, anti-Muslim rhetoric, declaring him a national security threat. The government was presumably worried about sparking more violence in the deep south, but it may also have had an eye on future talks.

In Indonesia, a series of pro-ISIS terrorist attacks, most of them low tech and low casualty, including in central Jakarta in January 2016, created a heightened concern about Islamist activism. In late 2016, massive street demonstrations, organized by hard-line Islamist activists, that brought down the Christian governor of Jakarta, popularly known as Ahok, led many officials in the government to see radical Islam for the first time as an existential threat to the state. Officials tried to make a case for a linear progression from hard-line activism to violence, but not only were the leaders of the so-called 212 Movement (after the largest protest, on December 2, 2016) deeply anti-ISIS; they were also deeply nationalist. They just wanted the Indonesian state to have more of an Islamic cast, as befitted the 87 percent majority position, and to ensure that Muslim-majority areas in Indonesia were only governed by Muslims, thereby undermining constitutional guarantees of equal rights of all citizens. They had no problem with Christians governing Christian-majority areas of eastern Indonesia. While pro-ISIS extremists shunned the democratic system as promoting man-made instead of God-given law, 212 leaders saw democracy as a way to ensure majoritarian control at the expense of minority rights. They also used mass mobilization to hint at the possibility of uncontrolled mob action if their demands—in this case to arrest and try Ahok for blasphemy—were not met. They subsequently all mobilized in support of President Jokowi’s rival in the 2019 election, only to be taunted when he lost by ISIS supporters, who said that they should have known better than to trust in democracy.<sup>8</sup>

One other issue emerged from the 212 Movement that will be worth watching. As is the case in other countries of Southeast Asia, tensions have emerged in Indonesia over the number of Chinese workers coming in on Belt and Road Initiative contracts to work on infrastructure projects. The 212 Movement’s activists tried to make a case that Jokowi’s dependence on China was coming about through collusion with local ethnic Chinese, like Ahok, who discriminated against *pribumi* (literally *indigenous*, but in this context meaning Muslim) entrepreneurs. There has been little anti-Chinese violence in Indonesia since the deadly 1998 riots, but unscrupulous politicians could still try to use unhappiness with Chinese workers from the mainland to stoke anti-Chinese sentiment more broadly.

## Migrant vs. Indigenous

Many of the conflicts in Southeast Asia have a migrant-versus-indigenous dimension, although “indigenous” and “migrant” can both be fraught terms in multiethnic societies.<sup>9</sup> The notion of outsiders coming in to dispossess the rightful owners of land or displace a traditional elite has become an important narrative of conflict in the region, especially where control over lucrative resources is involved.

Benedict Anderson, in his 1983 book *Imagined Communities*, showed how the idea of a nation is a constructed concept that can create powerful bonds of loyalty through shared histories written by dominant elites, with the concept of citizenship creating the myth of a shared identity that erases or obscures ethnic, racial, class, and other distinctions.<sup>10</sup> Ethno-nationalist insurgencies can be understood as a challenge to that constructed history, but so are some indigenous movements that seek recognition from the nationalist projects that have overlooked or excluded them. The problem is that “indigeneity” is also a social construct, open to different interpretations. It can be defined in opposition to the state and the dominant elite, to new arrivals of different ethnicities, or to competing indigenous groups.

The different ways “indigenous” is used in Malaysia are a case in point. The term can refer specifically to the ethnic groups that make up the “First People” (*Orang Asli*) of the Malaysian peninsula; to the notion of “native son” (*bumiputera*), or Muslim Malays as opposed to the two other major ethnicities that became citizens at the time of independence, Chinese and Indians; or to non-Muslim ethnicities of Sabah and Sarawak as opposed to Malays coming from the peninsula or immigrants from the Philippines and Indonesia. The state adopted the first definition, designating the Orang Asli as “wards of the state,” and thus less than full citizens, under the Aboriginal Peoples Act of 1954; “indigenous” carried the implication of “backward and in need of guidance.”<sup>11</sup> The “native son” concept was used by the dominant elite to assert privileged status over non-Malays, relegating them to a second-class status. The third notion of “indigenous” has been used by local elites to stigmatize mostly Filipino immigrants whose undocumented arrival was deliberately encouraged by the state to alter the demographic balance in support of the ruling elite.<sup>12</sup>

Another example of competing indigeneities comes from the Philippines, where Mindanao Muslims sought to define themselves in opposition to the Christian elite from the north who in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century gradually established political and economic dominance over much of the island. The 2017 law that emerged from the peace process between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), gives one definition of indigenous:

*Those who, at the advent of the Spanish colonization, were considered natives or original inhabitants of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago and its adjacent islands, whether of mixed or full blood, shall have the right to identify themselves, their spouses, and descendants as Bangsamoro.*<sup>13</sup>

This became the definition on which the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), which came into being in 2019, was constituted. The problem was that this competed with an earlier definition of “indigenous cultural communities” (ICC), even though both allowed for self-ascription:

*A group of people or homogeneous societies identified by self-ascription and ascription by others, who have continuously lived as organized community on communally bounded and defined territory, and who have, under claims of ownership since time immemorial, occupied, possessed, and utilized such territories, sharing common bonds of language, customs, traditions, and other distinctive cultural traits, or who have, through resistance to political, social, and cultural inroads of colonization, nonindigenous religions and cultures, become historically differentiated from the majority of Filipinos.*<sup>14</sup>

## “Across the region, land and resource issues are at the root of indigenous-versus-migrant conflict.”

But what happens when an indigenous community, living within the boundaries of the new autonomous region, claims land that the latter wants to control? The Teduray, an ICC, complained that Bangsamoro authorities had disrupted the process of its gaining title to more than 200,000 hectares of land and 12,000 hectares of water. They had submitted the claim in 2014 to the central government's National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), but the new Bangsamoro administration called on the NCIP to stop any consideration of land claims falling within its jurisdiction. The Teduray called this tantamount to the perpetuation of an historical injustice, setting up the fault-lines for a potential conflict between two self-defined indigenous groups.<sup>15</sup>

Indigenous-migrant conflicts, which may seem easily parsed at first glance (powerless clans versus powerful interlopers, for example) become not so simple when the terms are unpacked and the multiplicity of interests and identities revealed. “Migrant” can become a label for a vilified out-group, especially one that is ethnically distinct, economically successful, or perceived by ethnic insurgents as an extension of the state they are fighting (non-Papuan Indonesians in Papua, ethnic Bamar in Myanmar's Kachin State). Unwanted minorities can also be defined as migrants to reinforce their pariah status, the Rohingya being the most dramatic example. The label of “migrant” in a conflict is almost always a pejorative, regardless of who uses it.

Across the region, land and resource issues are at the root of indigenous-versus-migrant conflict. In Myanmar, resource extraction in areas where ethnic insurgencies have signed ceasefire agreements with the government has led to the extension of military control and in-migration of lowland (Buddhist) Bamar to work as wage labor. This is only one aspect of center-periphery relations and subnational conflict in Myanmar, but it is an area of ongoing concern.<sup>16</sup> As Kevin Woods writes:

*Concessions create new forms of territory that typically require first to be “secured” and then to be policed. This helps to produce and inscribe the power and authority of those claiming to uphold the right of the concessionaire through this policing role, in this case the military-state, its laws, and its “right to force.” Military-state territory is created in practice, then, by regional military commanders and state agencies working in tandem to allocate resource concessions to particular businesspeople and companies. The concessions allocated to domestic and foreign businesspeople, if taken as territorial reconfigurations, act as a currency of power and authority for the extension of the military-state.<sup>17</sup>*

In most of these indigenous-migrant conflicts, the state comes down on one side, often complicating resolution. When “indigenous” is defined in opposition to the state, then migrants can be perceived as state agents. When “indigenous” is aligned with the dominant elite, then “migrant” becomes a threat to the established order. It is important to underscore as well that just as all of these categories—state, indigenous community, migrants—are social constructs, they also involve perceptions and dynamics that can change over time. One example is the Filipino immigrants in Sabah, where in the perception of the Malaysian government they ceased being a political asset, exploited for votes and labor, and became instead, especially after the rise of ISIS, a potential security threat, seen at both the national and local level as possible allies or protectors of the Abu Sayyaf Group.

## Conclusions

The three trends in identity conflicts identified here—the rise of ISIS, the emergence of majoritarian politics, and indigenous-migrant issues—all involve the creation of social constructs designed to advance a particular cause. Ethno-nationalist insurgencies are based on the creation of histories as much as are nation-states; the difference is who controls the writing and dissemination of those histories. Indigenous and migrant groups are often at odds, but what constitutes “indigenous” and “migrant” is open to multiple interpretations. The first step in conflict resolution will necessarily involve an effort to understand those interpretations and how they developed.

All of these conflicts have become more complex, because they mostly involve an international dimension, and because, in all, social media has become a tool for reinforcing identities in a way that is beyond the capacity of governments to control.

One of the attractions of ISIS in the region was its ability to portray Islamic State as a plausible alternative to corrupt democracies. Its propaganda machine made it possible to fit local grievances of exclusion or marginalization into a universalist framework, with the enemies of Islam defined as the West, non-Muslims, and agents of states that refuse to apply Islamic law. Videos of individuals making the case in local languages were disseminated over social media; ISIS relied on hundreds of thousands of chat groups on WhatsApp, Facebook, Telegram, and other platforms to get the message to anyone with the capacity to use a smart phone. Those videos and other propaganda materials are likely to outlast ISIS itself and to continue to provide a basis for religious study groups in the region for years to come.

Likewise, the emergence of majoritarian politics has been characterized by a strong xenophobic streak. In Myanmar, this involves defining Rohingya Muslims, who should be entitled to citizenship, as foreigners in a way that serves to justify their internment or expulsion. Majoritarianism in Indonesia is not just anti-Chinese, but identifies the West as responsible for corrupting youth, stealing resources, and weakening the economy. Majoritarianism, which relies on mass mobilization, also benefits from social media and messaging, which can link politicians directly to political strongholds, bypassing democratic institutions like parliaments or political parties.

Indigenous-migrant issues take on an international dimension to the extent that they involve a focus on international corporations or support from diaspora groups overseas. Web cameras make it possible to follow clashes in real time. The antiracist protests in Papua in August and September 2019, followed by anti-migrant violence, followed by state arrests of alleged provocateurs, could all be watched as it unfolded. Not only does this make escalation difficult to avoid, but it calls for a new set of techniques in conflict management on the part of both the state and civil society. The unfortunate tendency of states in the region has been to curb freedom of expression and restrict access to the internet, or in some cases to use buzzers and bots.

The strengthening of democratic institutions would ordinarily help, but when majoritarians gain control (in many Western countries just as much as in Southeast Asia), they can put in place discriminatory policies through legislation and court decisions. In the meantime, donors could look for ways to train judges, educators, legislators, and others to promote the notions of citizenship and equality under the law in a way that eliminates distinctions between majorities and minorities and at least starts with a level playing field. Colonial pasts and anticolonial struggles have shown how exclusivist citizenship can be. But in the current climate, it is at least a start.

## Notes

- 1 ISIS only declared a caliphate and the new “Islamic State” after taking control of Mosul in June 2014. But it had already moved into Syria more than a year earlier and had attracted support from Southeast Asians inspired by the “parent” of ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq, led by Ahmad Musab al-Zarqawi. About a dozen Indonesians and several Malaysians had joined the ISIS forces before the official declaration of the caliphate. Several of their compatriots had joined rival militias in Syria, including the Salafist Ahrar al-Syam and the Al-Qaeda linked al-Nusra Front.
- 2 In the Thailand case, insurgents rejected occasional offers by would-be jihadists from Indonesia and Malaysia to join the fight. The Free Aceh Movement, prior to the 2005 peace pact, accepted training from Libya in the 1980s and purchased arms from southern Thailand and beyond, but its fighters were only Acehnese. Among other considerations, The Free Aceh Movement’s leaders from the beginning wanted Western support against Indonesia and knew that any hint of an association with Al-Qaeda would make that impossible.
- 3 Former militants from another insurgent group, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), formed the more extreme Abu Sayyaf Group, originally called the Islamic Movement (al-Harakat Islamiyah), in 1991 out of frustration with their own leadership and a desire for a stronger Islamic identity. The Abu Sayyaf Group’s affiliation with Al-Qaeda from 1994 to 2002 reflected a tactical partnership rather than an ideological meeting of minds.
- 4 Julie Chernov Hwang (2019), “Relatives, Redemption, and Rice: Motivations for Joining the Maute Group,” *CTC Sentinel* 12(8), <https://ctc.usma.edu/relatives-redemption-rice-motivations-joining-maute-group/>.
- 5 The Myanmar government claims that the Rohingya are not a definable ethnic group, but “Bengali immigrants” from British India and later Bangladesh. The historical record is contested, with Rohingya claiming a presence since long before the 1823 cut-off point in Myanmar’s citizenship law, and Rakhine historians pointing to census data showing a huge increase in the Muslim population of Arakan, as Rakhine was then called, during the British colonial period as the British brought in agricultural labor from neighboring Bengal. The term “Rohingya” was not in wide use as a self-identifier before the 1950s. As with the Uyghur minority in China, however, relentless persecution has helped forge a sense of ethnicity and nationhood.
- 6 International Crisis Group (2017), *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*, Report No.290 (Brussels: ICG), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/290-buddhism-and-state-power-myanmar>.
- 7 International Crisis Group (2017), “Rohingya Crisis: A Major Threat to Myanmar Transition and Regional Stability,” ICG website, October 27, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/rohingya-crisis-major-threat-myanmar-transition-and-regional-stability>.
- 8 For a full discussion of the anti-Ahok protests and the ideological positions of their leaders, see a series of three reports from the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC): Nava Nuraniyah (2018), *After Ahok: The Islamist Agenda in Indonesia*, Report No.44, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327261022\\_AFTER\\_AHOK\\_THE\\_ISLAMIST\\_AGENDA\\_IN\\_INDONESIA](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327261022_AFTER_AHOK_THE_ISLAMIST_AGENDA_IN_INDONESIA); IPAC (2019), *Anti-Ahok to Anti-Jokowi: Islamist Influence on Indonesia’s 2019 Election Campaign*, Report No.55, [http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2019/03/Report\\_55.pdf](http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2019/03/Report_55.pdf); and IPAC (2019), *Indonesian Islamists and Post-Election Protests in Jakarta*, Report No.58, [http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2019/07/Report\\_58\\_2019.pdf](http://file.understandingconflict.org/file/2019/07/Report_58_2019.pdf).
- 9 The ILO, one of the first UN agencies to acknowledge indigenous rights, accepts the problems of definition but simply notes that indigenous peoples self-identify as having distinct cultures, ethnicities, languages, and customs. As the concept of indigenous rights has grown in the region, the term has also acquired a strong association to specific territory, especially amid concerns about resource exploitation by powerful political elites. See International Labour Organisation, “Who are the indigenous and tribal peoples?” ILO website, accessed June 3, 2021, [https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/indigenous-tribal/WCMS\\_503321/lang-en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/indigenous-tribal/WCMS_503321/lang-en/index.htm).
- 10 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, 1983.
- 11 Rusaalina Idrus (2011), “The discourse of protection and the Orang Asli in Malaysia,” *Kajian Malaysia* 29 (January): 53–74, <http://web.usm.my/km/29%28Suppl%292011/KM%20Vol.%2029%20Supp.%20I%20-%20Art.%204%20-%20%28Rusaalina%20Idrus%29.pdf>.
- 12 Zulaikha Zulkifli (2013), “I processed thousands of ICs for Sabah illegals,” *malaysiakini*, February 28, <https://www.malaysiakini.com/news/222557>.
- 13 Republic Act No.11054, July 24, 2017 (The Lawphil Project) [https://www.lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2018/ra\\_11054\\_2018.html](https://www.lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2018/ra_11054_2018.html).
- 14 Republic Act No.8371, An Act to Recognize, Protect, and Promote the Rights of Indigenous Cultural Communities/ Indigenous Peoples, October 29, 1997 (Official Gazette), <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1997/10/29/republic-act-no-8371/>.
- 15 Germelina Lacorte (2019), “Indigenous peoples hit BTA rule on ancestral domain,” *inquirer.net*, October 13, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1177132/indigenous-peoples-hit-bta-rule-on-ancestral-domain>.
- 16 See The Asia Foundation. (2017), *The Contested Areas of Myanmar: Subnational Conflict, Aid, and Development* (San Francisco: The Asia Foundation), <https://asiafoundation.org/publication/contested-areas-myanmar-subnational-conflict-aid-development/>.
- 17 Kevin Woods (2016), “The Commercialisation of Counterinsurgency: Battlefield Enemies, Business Bedfellows in Kachin State, Burma,” in *War and Peace in the Borderlands of Myanmar: The Kachin ceasefire, 1994–2011* (NIAS Press), 114–145, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339166236\\_The\\_Commercialisation\\_of\\_Counterinsurgency\\_Battlefield\\_Enemies\\_Business\\_Bedfellows\\_in\\_Kachin\\_State\\_Burma](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339166236_The_Commercialisation_of_Counterinsurgency_Battlefield_Enemies_Business_Bedfellows_in_Kachin_State_Burma).

## KEYNOTE ESSAY | MARIA RESSA, SANJANA HATTOTUWA, SARAH OH

# How Does Social Media Affect Conflict in Asia? Expert Views



The internet, and social media in particular, are no longer new communications tools but are core aspects of contemporary politics and social change. The Asia Foundation interviewed three experts to find out how the use of social media affects violent conflict and political tensions across the Asia region.

*Maria Ressa* is a renowned journalist and the cofounder of Rappler, a social news network from the Philippines. Maria was named Time Magazine's 2018 Person of the Year for her work on disinformation.

*Sanjana Hattotuwa* is a PhD candidate at the University of Otago and a special advisor for the ICT4Peace Foundation.

Through activism, research, and creative output across a wide range of disciplines, he has worked for two decades at the intersection of media, policy, rights, and democracy in the Global South.

*Sarah Oh* works at the interface of tech and rights-based issues. She has supported Myanmar's civic leaders to tackle hate speech, worked with Facebook's crisis-response teams in the Asia-Pacific, and led research projects and digital campaigns.

Interviews were conducted remotely in late 2020 using Zoom and email. Responses have been edited for clarity and brevity.

**Welcome and thank you for joining us. Can you first tell us a bit about yourselves and your interest in the broad field of online media and its impact on politics, society, and conflict?**

**Sanjana Hattotuwa:** My entry into technology and peacebuilding in 2002 was very hands-on. I helped design platforms to help stakeholders in a Norwegian-led conflict mediation process based on a ceasefire agreement between the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The process was called One-Text, and I led the development of software tools used by those who were part of it.

Since 2006, I have worked with the ICT4Peace Foundation. Through this experience, I also foresaw the role of mobiles in conflict transformation before smartphones were ubiquitous. In July 2020, I reviewed what we did nearly 20 years ago,<sup>1</sup> which was the kind of engagement Swiss-based think tanks like HD Centre are only now starting to think about.

**Maria Ressa:** By next year, I'll have been a journalist for 35 years. I opened the Manila Bureau for CNN in 1987, and then I opened the Jakarta Bureau in 1995. And then I came home to the Philippines in 2005. I headed the largest newsgroup here for six years, the one that was just shut down by the government. In 2012, we were a journalists' organization that decided to experiment with tech to build a community.

“Our governance, oversight, regulatory, and legal frameworks are no longer fit to address the way news and information are produced, spread, and engaged with. Political entrepreneurs produce propaganda at a pace that overwhelms the ability of existing governance mechanisms to address.”

I come with three different perspectives that normally don't come together in one person: I run the business and the tech of our newsgroup; I am also an investigative journalist and have used social-network analysis with CNN for the tracking of terrorist networks. It's a hop, skip, and a jump to go from physical social networks to social media. And then the third part, I became a target.

**Sarah Oh:** I've been working at the intersection of tech, civil society, and government for the last decade or more. I recently worked at Facebook, understanding the impact of social media on conflict, specifically in emerging markets and regions of the world that have just come online.

Before that, I worked with civil society and the tech community in Myanmar on hate-speech trends as the country was coming online. This work on understanding the abuse of tech in these contexts, particularly the impact on marginalized groups, is very different from the beginning of my career, which involved the potential of tech to support civic participation in the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

**Our forthcoming report, *The State of Conflict and Violence in Asia 2021*, focuses on identity-based conflicts and extremism. Do you think that new media technologies have played a role in the politics and patterns of violence?**

**Sanjana Hattotuwa:** First, the term “new media” is outdated. It is new only for those of a certain age. For our children, and especially those in their teens today, “new media” is a meaningless phrase. It's just media, where offline information and news flows seamlessly merge with online platforms and apps.

Our governance, oversight, regulatory, and legal frameworks are no longer fit to address the way news and information are produced, spread, and engaged with. Political entrepreneurs produce propaganda at a pace that overwhelms the ability of existing governance mechanisms to address it. Social media a decade ago offered, in many ways, platforms for dissent. Today they are often cesspools of toxicity and polarization.

Biased, partial, partly true, or entirely false worldviews, promoted as the sole truth, influence the beliefs of billions. They rend society asunder by amplifying division and hate and normalizing the worst of who we are instead of the best we can be. The situation is dire and getting worse.

**Maria Ressa:** The biggest problem right now is that lies laced with anger and hate spread faster and further than facts, because facts are really boring, and that means the platforms are biased against facts. If you don't have facts, then how can you have truth? How can you have trust? And how can you have democracy? Facts underpin democracy. Facts underpin markets, right? And what's replacing them? Well, propaganda networks. Networks that are for sale, essentially.

What we've seen, the alternate realities, really began with Russian disinformation in 2014 on Crimea, and the first real target was Ukraine. Most recently, we've seen digital outfits pretending to be news

organizations. And these are hiring journalists. It's an extremely dangerous time, because if you don't have the integrity of facts, how do you have the integrity of elections?

As the platforms have grown, journalists, news organizations, have lost our gatekeeping powers. Around 2014–2015 that gatekeeping power went to tech, and tech abdicated responsibility for protecting the public sphere. They like to say that they're neutral; that's not true.

**Sarah Oh:** Myanmar is a great example of a place where dangerous discourse was being amplified. There is also the example of misinformation about the Easter terrorist bombings in Sri Lanka wrongfully targeting minority groups as the perpetrators. In Myanmar, you have a lack of accurate, high quality reporting about armed conflict, so you have an environment where misinformation or half-truths can shape perceptions. In 2017, there were photos of people in Bangladesh fighting, with headlines suggesting they were Rohingya militants. That's dangerous. The subtext is that this group is violent, so perhaps violence against the Rohingya would be justified.

“The problem is occurring in environments that exacerbate this type of abuse: weak protections for digital rights, lack of public education in media and information literacy, fragility in the information ecosystem.”

The problem is not only the immediate outcomes, but also that it's occurring in environments that exacerbate this type of abuse: weak protections for digital rights, lack of public education in media and information literacy, fragility in the information ecosystem. We've seen so many examples of how political leaders have skillfully used social media to mobilize their supporters and broadcast their messages. Religious leaders in Southeast Asia, like the monks leading Ma Ba Tha, have used Facebook, YouTube, and VK [the Russian social media site Vkontakte] to do exactly that. Many of these groups and actors are becoming very savvy. It really surpasses any single strategy, platform, or method, and it's constantly evolving.

### What has been the impact of social media on democratic systems of governance, or on governance in general?

**Maria Ressa:** In 2016, we exposed what we started calling the “propaganda machine,” the disinformation networks that are government, progovernment, or government affiliated. The most recent one we exposed, which Facebook just took down, was linked to the police and the military. When we did this in 2016, I was targeted with an average of 98 messages per hour. That's when I realized this is a brand-new world, we are not prepared for it, and it can be weaponized.

Being a target also meant I watched our democracy in the Philippines cave in, and I watched how it seeded a narrative on Facebook. In 2016, I started warning Western journalists and Google that what is happening to us is going to come your way. Our dystopian present is your dystopian future. And here we are four years later.

It's impossible to deal with this now. The decisions made in Silicon Valley cascade and destroy us faster than they do the West, because our institutions are just so weak. The Cambridge Analytica whistleblower, Chris Wylie, called the Philippines a petri dish. He said that the company, Cambridge Analytica, as well as its parent, experimented with tactics of mass manipulation here and in other countries in the global South. When these tactics worked, they ported—that's his word—they ported them over to the West, America and Europe.

**Sarah Oh:** People talk a lot about the authoritarian playbook being replicated across countries. We're constantly seeing, for example, what's happened in the Philippines popping up in the United States. And then you see some other evolution of those tactics and strategies in other countries.

It's everywhere. And I think we need to pay attention to how those tactics are being reused and strengthened. One personal anecdote is from the U.S. elections, when we saw disinformation targeting Spanish-speaking voters in Florida in advance of the final stage of the primary elections. That immediately felt familiar, based on the work that I'd done in Southeast Asia on disinformation campaigns and strategies.

### **Do new technologies reinforce patterns of civil unrest, instability, and challenges to state authority? What patterns are evident, on the side of both protests and governments?**

**Sanjana Hattotuwa:** Social media's role is complicated and fluid. Simplistic projections of social media as a monolithic entity are wrong. But the toxicity, violence, hate, and racism on the platforms I study for doctoral research are clear evidence of a failed global experiment in believing that connecting everyone leads invariably to democratic, plural, liberal, and peaceful outcomes. Please read my "Hidden Campaigns"<sup>2</sup> and "Murals as Masks"<sup>3</sup> as key examples from Sri Lanka, over just the past year, that directly speak to this question.

There is also evidence of citizens countering violent extremism, but the odds are increasingly stacked against civil society. (A recent article by Andrew Marantz in the *New Yorker* is essential reading in this regard.<sup>4</sup>) Templates for sophisticated authoritarian control allow for more precise, sustained, and sinister propaganda—constant digital campaigns to undermine the foundations of democracy. A few of us have studied the genesis of these dynamics over the past decade, but it appears to be only when Western societies are under the threat of what we [in the Global South] have suffered far longer that global media, concerted policymaking, and conversations on regulation are generated.

**Maria Ressa:** As early as November 2017, Freedom House came out with a study that said cheap armies on social media had rolled back democracy in more than two dozen countries around the world. A year later, Oxford University's Computational Propaganda Research Project pushed that number to almost double, and by 2019 the number had reached 70 countries around the world.

“The toxicity, violence, hate, and racism on the platforms I study ... are clear evidence of a failed global experiment in believing that connecting everyone leads invariably to democratic, plural, liberal, and peaceful outcomes.”

The platforms have learned how to handle terrorist content. But the bigger problem is the gray areas—hate speech, conspiracy theories. They're like black holes that you dive into: if you watch one video, the next recommendation will be just a little more extreme, because the end goal of these platforms is to keep you on their site and to learn your behavior so they can sell your behavior.

Social media platforms have become behavior modification systems. As we users dump our posts into Facebook, that's all picked up by machine learning, and it builds a model of who we are. It knows us more intimately than we know ourselves. And that model then is pulled together by artificial intelligence, which looks for the weakest moment we have to a message and sells it to the highest bidder. And that bidder can be a company or a nation. So, the advertising model is a perpetual learning machine that learns from our own behavior.

So, you can say that extremist content or the shift towards more extremist beliefs is built into the designs. They push your behavior, and you're insidiously manipulated.

## How have existing conflict actors—violent extremists, nonstate armed groups, militaries—adapted their strategies to new media technologies?

**Sanjana Hattotuwa:** The adoption and adaptation of social media by violent extremists is indicative of how far ahead they are of civil society in leveraging new vectors of communication, control, and persuasion. It is now the norm, not an aberration. It is what the platforms aid and abet, albeit to varying degrees. Some violent conflict is now purely digital in nature, ranging from cyber-warfare and offensive cyber-operations to the weaponization of trolls and bots against human-rights defenders, examples of which are legion from Sri Lanka and Asia. Other, more entrenched violent conflict is now shaped by digital frames, either to sustain division and hate or by actors who seek to reconcile differences. In sum, the impact of social media on conflict is multifaceted and evolving.

“The adoption and adaptation of social media by violent extremists is indicative of how far ahead they are of civil society in leveraging new vectors of communication, control, and persuasion.”

**Maria Ressa:** In 2016 [in the Philippines], a progovernment account seeded this narrative of journalist = criminal. This has been seeded in many countries around the world, but here in the Philippines, because *Rappler* stood up, it was targeting me. And in 2016 I laughed, because I'm really old, I've been around a long time, and you can see my track record. But there is no track record on social media. There's no context on social media. So, while I laughed, over time people started going, well, maybe where there's smoke, there's fire.

In 2017, we got our first subpoena. And then in 2018, 11 cases were filed against me and *Rappler*. In 2019 I had eight arrest warrants. I was arrested twice in a five-week period. On June 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the first of the eight criminal cases came to a verdict in a lower court, and I was found guilty. And this is the funniest part: it was for a story we published eight years ago, before the law we allegedly violated had even been enacted. You can see that some of my obsession with this is because I'm living it and it's shocking.

## Compared with these high-profile political concerns, less has been written on the gendered effects of social media. Do you have any reflections on how these technologies are experienced differently by women and men?

**Maria Ressa:** *Rappler* is a fact-checking partner of Facebook; we're one of two Filipino fact-checking partners. The database that we have shows that gendered disinformation targets women at least 10 times more than men in the Philippines.

The top three targets that we started looking at were our vice president, Leni Robredo; then, Senator Leila de Lima, who has been in jail for more than three years now with less time in court than I've ever had. She was our former commissioner of human rights and a former justice secretary. And I was the third one. The tactics at the beginning are always about the way you look. It is definitely sexist at best. With Laila de Lima, there were doctored videos of her supposedly having sex. For women, once the attacks are sexualized, it's a hop, skip, and a jump to hate speech and then to violence.

**Sarah Oh:** Violence against women online—on social media and on the internet in general—is a serious, serious issue that needs a much closer look than it's getting right now. Without question, this is the

“ Violence against women online ... is the single most common issue that’s been raised with me in every country that I’ve done research in. ”

single most common issue that’s been raised with me in every country that I’ve done research in.

It’s important to have more conversations with civil society and groups that work on women’s safety and rights. Sometimes it’s making sure women can freely express themselves online. Other times it’s creating the opportunity for them to not have their identity linked to what they’re saying. There’s work to be done on legal recourse for women who have suffered abuse online.

I think it starts with really understanding the experience. There’s a lot of great research about some of these issues in the offline context, but we are only beginning to understand how it intersects with online platforms.

### **How can governments or intergovernmental bodies in Asia address these challenges? Do you support more regulation? Can national governments manage social media, or are they dependent on action elsewhere—in California, perhaps?**

**Sanjana Hattotuwa:** Governments in Asia are interested in their own survival and will use social media regulation to clamp down on inconvenient truths and dissent. Ultimately, it comes down to a global, regional, and domestic conversation about responsibility (who can and should act), responsiveness (how quickly actions must be taken), transparency (making clear what was done and why) and accountability (including avenues for redress and appeal by actors involved in regulation). Independent of democratic underpinnings, it is unclear how these principles can find expression in Asian governments that, in their outlook and investments, undermine these principles daily.

**Sarah Oh:** The industry should bear the brunt of these challenges, but I think there’s a lot more that can be done at the government level. I’m really interested in opportunities for associations or regional networks like ASEAN [the Association of Southeast Asian Nations] to pressure their member governments to create environments that are safer for online engagement in their countries.

This could include making sure resources are put forward for media and digital literacy education, really trying to understand what works, and creating more robust legal frameworks that protect people online. A lot of critical events have provided almost an x-ray of the weaknesses in both of those areas—public education and literacy, and all the gaps and bad laws that are still on the books.

We have this challenge of creating a better regulatory environment for a service that both has no borders and is generally pretty popular with the consumers who use it, especially in emerging markets and places in Southeast Asia, for example.

### **Can tech companies police themselves? Can you share any positive examples of change that has reduced the abuse of online spaces, and explain what incentives or actions caused the positive outcome?**

**Sanjana Hattotuwa:** No.

**Maria Ressa:** No. We tried. And I was one of the people early on. Even though I was under attack, I actually thought the tech platforms could act like journalists. But news organizations have standards and ethics manuals. And there is a line between our editorial team and our business, right? There’s nothing like that in the social media world, in tech. In fact, tech is built to make money, to continue to grow. And with those two imperatives, they’ve torn apart democracy in many countries around the world.

**Sarah Oh:** I come back to transparency and creating a mechanism to enforce accountability, because market forces themselves won't result in the outcomes that we want. I'm glad to see public discussion about the international implications of American companies, but I don't think it's enough. There needs to be multi-stakeholder engagement to really drive home the accountability that's required.

The Facebook oversight board is up and running. It's still early, but so far it's promising. What's perhaps still missing is an effort to bring all sectors together on neutral ground. There have been great ad hoc efforts by civil society, but, again, I don't think any of them have been convened with all sectors on a neutral footing.

“Market forces themselves won't result in the outcomes that we want... There needs to be multi-stakeholder engagement to really drive home the accountability that's required.”

### What can nongovernmental groups and civil society do to reduce the negative impacts and build on the positive impacts of new media technologies?

**Sanjana Hattotuwa:** Focus on investments, data, evidence, and innovation. Hostage to a practice of activism that is outdated, and to outmoded senior management and leadership, civil society's simplistic assumptions about social media aiding democratic processes and institutions are increasingly out of sync with stark realities.

Complex new technologies require new modes of engagement, research, and advocacy. The potential for inciting hate and violence is present on social media platforms alongside their socially beneficial role. Focusing on one or the other misses out on how the interplay, always in flux and linked to context, can be studied and adapted to strengthen democratic, positive outcomes. It is unclear the degree to which civil society recognizes the need to intentionally engage with social media, basing advocacy and activism on data, evidence, and context. And therein lies the rub.

**Maria Ressa:** What is going to govern content moderation? This kind of whack-a-mole approach that the social media platforms are using doesn't work. So, the first thing is, use the UN Declaration of Human Rights to actually define the principles of content moderation, because the current list doesn't work.

I always say there are three C's—collaborate, collaborate, collaborate—because we don't have a seat at the table. We never did. These decisions were made in Silicon Valley and we bear the full brunt of a lot of them. We're still partners with Facebook, so we demand accountability. We speak a long time behind the scenes; we flag. And then we need to look for policy solutions. I'm a cochair of the Forum on Information and Democracy, a working group that will be releasing policy recommendations. And there are at least 52 countries that will look at that.

We're trying to raise a billion dollars a year for independent media. It's the International Fund for Public Interest Media. I said at the very beginning in *Rappler*: we build communities of action, and the food we feed our communities is journalism, right? In civic engagement, we continue MovePH,<sup>5</sup> which The Asia Foundation worked on with our civic engagement team.

I think this is the battle for the next five years. We're on the precipice, and we need to do exactly what happened after World War II: bring a lot of people to the table and say, "This is destroying all of us. How do we prevent our tools, what we create, from destroying humanity, destroying our structures? What new structures do we need to put in place?"

**Sarah Oh:** I really think this is an ecosystem problem that requires governments, civil society, and tech companies to have a shared framework for understanding these issues. A way to get there is, first, setting up some principles and expectations of transparency. [We should] dramatically rethink how we support people who know the most about conflict: the NGOs or advocates on the ground. To date, I've mostly seen direct training for a lot of these groups. Why not give them the resources to hire experts in those areas, whether it's machine learning or data science?

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Monitoring and measuring are critical. It's been really encouraging to see what groups have been able to do with access to tools like [Facebook's] CrowdTangle. It's not everything, but it begins to give groups tangible things to look at, monitor, and understand. I'm hoping that in the next five years we can begin doing those really practical things, coming up with shared principals and then trying to measure work against them.

**Finally, Covid-19: the pandemic has been described as a disruption accelerator. Clearly, people are videoconferencing and shopping online more than before, but what about its impact on how tech relates to conflict?**

**Sanjana Hattotuwa:** Please read "Post-Pandemic Peace Operations,"<sup>6</sup> based on a presentation to the UN's senior leadership on this very question a few months ago.

**Maria Ressa:** It's destroyed the world as we know it. In the Philippines, Covid quarantine was characterized by lockdowns, curfews, barricades; there were more than a hundred thousand people arrested for breaking quarantine rules; some people were killed. In many countries, the Covid crisis gave leaders a chance to consolidate power. How do you hold great power to account when you're stuck at home?

In the time of Covid you have to make sure journalism survives. So, we've used this time period to take what we know as journalists and evolve a new, sustainable business model. And that's worked for us. But the other part is realizing that as we come under attack, as the law is weaponized against us, we actually need new laws to protect journalists.

**Sarah Oh:** I worry about the conflicts that we've seen in pandemics past feeding into the polarization we see online. We've seen scapegoating of minority groups at a level that's extremely alarming and has resulted in offline violence against Muslims, who've been targeted by misinformation about super-spreader events in some countries.

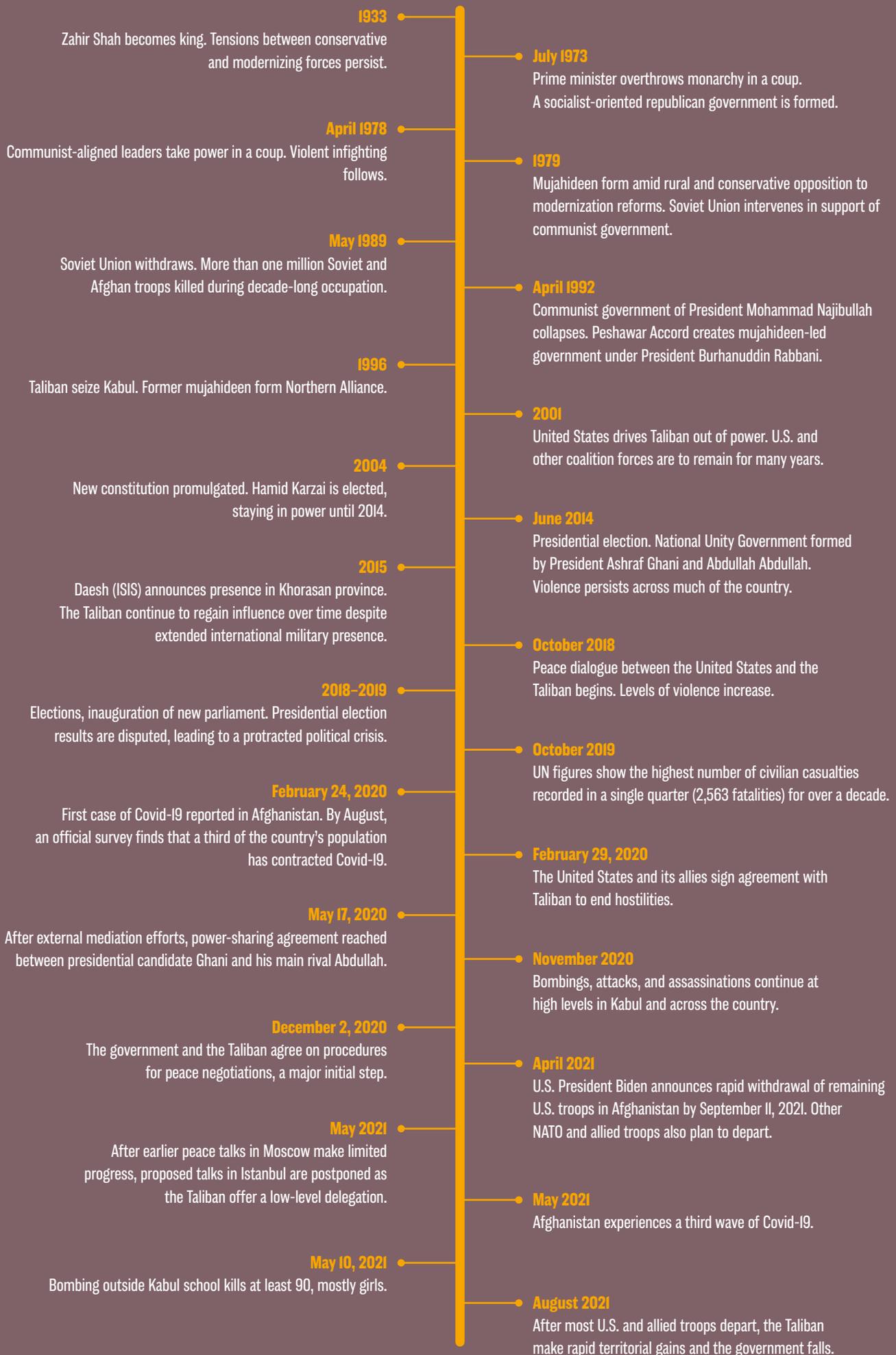
I'm also really worried about the vulnerabilities that get exposed in a very insecure population. When the first lockdown occurred in India, there was a lot of food insecurity and people being trapped. There were some efforts to try online methods to distribute food and resources to people who were unable to move around. What would it look like to really scale up and give the handful of groups who are working on the most important causes the resources they need to really get their message out? Someone once told me that the only time they saw people from different groups coming together was after major floods or earthquakes. And the place where that person had seen that—people reaching out to offer services and relief—was on social media. Sometimes things like that can only happen in a digital space.

## Notes

- 1 Sanjana Hattotuwa (2020), "Peace processes after the pandemic: What role for technology?" *ICT for peace foundation*, 7 July, <https://ict4peace.org/activities/peace-processes-after-the-pandemic-what-role-for-technology/>
- 2 Sanjana Hattotuwa (2019), "Hidden campaigns," Sanjana Hattotuwa Wordpress, 22 December, <https://sanjanah.wordpress.com/2019/12/22/hidden-campaigns/>
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- 4 Andrew Marantz (2020), "Why Facebook Can't Fix Itself," *The New Yorker*, 12 October, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/10/19/why-facebook-cant-fix-itself>
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- 6 Sanjana Hattotuwa (2020), "Post-pandemic peace operations," *ICT for peace foundation*, 21 June, <https://ict4peace.org/activities/post-pandemic-peace-operations/>



**PART TWO  
COUNTRY  
SUMMARIES**





## Overview

Afghanistan is the only country in Asia affected by intense and extensive violent conflict.<sup>1</sup> Security has not improved in the last few years as the Taliban continued to challenge and ultimately assumed control of the government. Other armed groups and factions, including Daesh (also known as Islamic State Khorasan Province, or as ISIS), also maintain an active presence.<sup>2</sup> The number of recorded battle incidents in 2019 surged by over 50 percent from the previous year before declining in 2020.<sup>3</sup>

Political tensions associated with the contested 2019 presidential election and ethnic politicization have deeper roots in the long-term failure of both Afghan and international actors to establish an effective national political settlement. These tensions have continued to undermine government stability. Parliamentary elections finally occurred in October 2018 after three years of postponement. The 2019 presidential election saw widespread reports of fraud and irregularity and led to a political impasse that eroded confidence in the democratic process. A power-sharing agreement between the two main political candidates was eventually reached in 2020.

In 2020, the peace process moved ahead as U.S.-Taliban dialogue led to an agreement in early 2020 and U.S. troop withdrawals continued. After numerous upsets and delays, a framework for future discussions between the government and the Taliban was accepted in December 2020. Despite the ongoing violence, hopes for peace persist; over half (54.1 percent) of Afghans interviewed in late 2020 felt that peace was achievable within the next two years. In the same survey, an overwhelming majority (84.7 percent) said that it is very important for women's rights to be protected as part of a peace agreement.<sup>4</sup> U.S. withdrawal plans accelerated as the Biden administration set a target for all troops to depart by September 2021. Afghan and international actors voiced concerns over the likely impact of the withdrawal on the political process, human rights, and security. These concerns increased as the Taliban advanced across the country in July and August 2021.

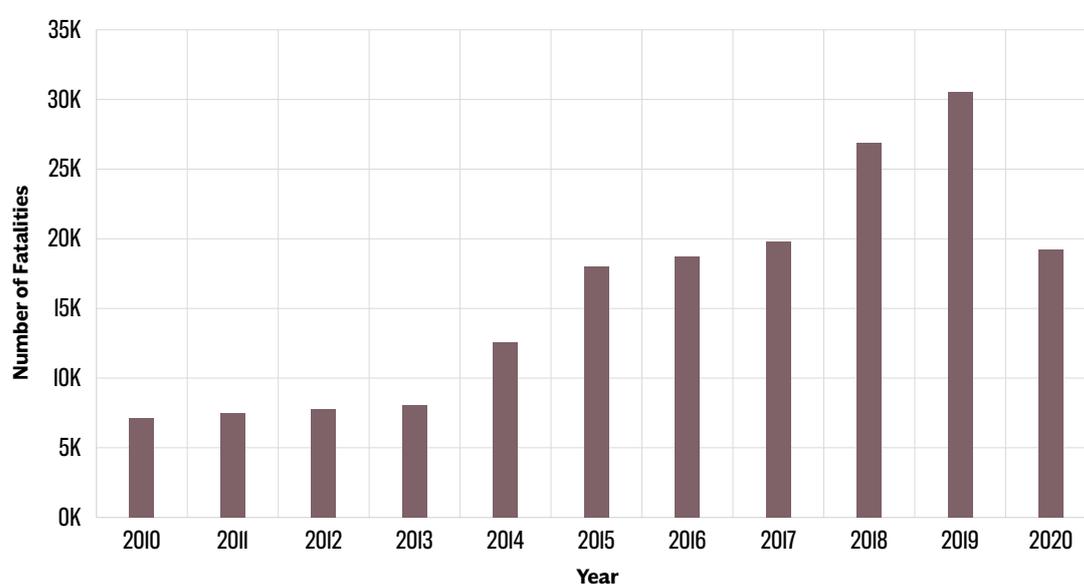


## National political context

The Afghan government's National Defense and Security Forces and the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission continued to wage war with antigovernment forces amidst several attempts to secure a peace agreement with the Taliban. The area of full government authority was gradually reduced, and by 2020 an estimated 33 percent of districts were under government control, 19 percent were under Taliban control, and 47 percent were contested.<sup>5</sup> Security deteriorated in Kabul, the capital, with regular bombings, assassinations, and terrorist-style assaults on targeted buildings.

Conflict led to almost 162,000 fatalities from 2010 to 2020. Between 1989 and 2019, Afghanistan was the third-most conflict-affected country globally.<sup>6</sup> The conflict trend escalated sharply from 2017, reaching its bloodiest peak in 2019. ACLED reported 6,887 armed clashes from January to September 2019.<sup>7</sup> Levels of violence dropped in 2020, but recorded casualties remained high at around 20,000 for the year.<sup>8</sup> Attacks on civilians in Kabul and elsewhere during 2020 generated a pervasive sense of fear and insecurity (Figure 4).<sup>9</sup>

The security situation has been volatile across the country (Figure 5). Violence was most intense in eastern and southern regions during 2018 and 2019, while clashes increased in the north and west during 2020.<sup>10</sup> Conflict between the government and the Taliban was by far the greatest cause of casualties. The rise in violence since 2017 can be attributed to the peace talks between the U.S. government and the Taliban, as the negotiating parties sought to increase their leverage.



**Figure 4:** Conflict fatalities in Afghanistan since 2020

Source: UCDP<sup>11</sup>

While attacks on civilians drew significant attention, by far the greatest numbers of fatalities continued to be caused by clashes between armed actors, including government militaries and rebel groups. ACLED recorded over 73,000 deaths through such clashes in Afghanistan over a three-year period, 2018 to 2020.<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 5:** Geographical spread of violence in Afghanistan, 2010–2020

Source: UCDP<sup>13</sup>

From 2015, there were multiple bilateral and multilateral discussions to support peace efforts in Afghanistan at regional dialogue platforms as well as ad hoc conferences and meetings on Afghanistan led by regional powers and neighboring governments. In July 2018, U.S. president Donald Trump abandoned the policy of supporting the Afghan government's lead role in the peace process and ordered direct talks with the Taliban.

Following this move, Russia held an international conference in May 2019 that was attended by Taliban delegates, while President Ghani emphasized that the Afghan government should lead the peace process. He also started preparations for an intra-Afghan peace dialogue by setting up a negotiating team and an advisory council for future talks with the Taliban. A large conference attended by delegates from across the country was convened to develop parameters for the talks. On September 2, 2019, after nine rounds of negotiation, Khalilzad told local media in Afghanistan that an agreement had been reached in principle for the withdrawal of 5,000 troops in 135 days in exchange for the Taliban reducing violence in two key provinces.<sup>14</sup> However, in the following five days, President Trump postponed the peace negotiations after a U.S. soldier died in a car bomb attack in Kabul.

Progress in peace talks resumed in 2020, and in February the Taliban and the U.S. government signed an agreement that proposed gradual U.S. troop withdrawals in return for the Taliban not allowing Al-Qaeda and other international jihadist groups to operate in the country. The agreement was also based on progress towards peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

Attacks on foreign forces then declined but attacks on Afghan targets increased. In the 45 days following the February 2020 agreement, there were more than 4,500 attacks in Afghanistan, marking an escalation in violence. More than 900 Afghan local and national forces were killed over the same period. The coronavirus pandemic, which swept across Afghanistan starting in March 2020, made little

difference in the pattern of violence, as the Taliban looked to strengthen their rural positions and build their capacity to affect urban areas.<sup>15</sup>

Heightened levels of violence continued throughout the rest of 2020. Kabul and other cities were affected by a series of incidents including suicide attacks and targeted assassinations. In November, for example, an attack on Kabul University caused over 30 fatalities, and a car bomb killed former TOLO TV presenter Yama Siawash along with two others.<sup>16</sup> Five journalists were killed in the last two months of 2020 alone.<sup>17</sup> The Taliban has denied targeting journalists, intellectuals, or other civilians, especially women.<sup>18</sup> An increasing number of attacks were unclaimed as the Taliban, the government, and the United States looked to downplay levels of violence.<sup>19</sup> Attacks on civilian targets including women and journalists continued into 2021.<sup>20</sup>

On December 2, 2020, after three months of talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban in Qatar, a framework for negotiation was agreed upon. The three-page agreement set out the ground rules but did not yet specify the agenda or give a timetable for further discussions between the two parties. The positions of foreign powers, particularly the United States, remained important to the peace process. Meanwhile, the political crisis that followed the Afghanistan presidential election affected the government's legitimacy. Efforts to promote further peace talks in Moscow made little substantive progress in March 2021, while talks due to be held between the Afghanistan government and the Taliban in Istanbul were postponed and appeared to gather limited momentum.<sup>21</sup>

While public opinion of the prospects for peace remains positive overall, optimism is far from universal. Younger age groups, especially those living in cities, are less optimistic than others, as are many intellectuals.<sup>22</sup> Peace advocates and campaigners continue to argue for a more inclusive and consultative process that safeguards constitutional rule, maintains women's rights, and responds to the needs of minority groups. Extensive surveys and interviews have indicated that such approaches, if politically feasible, would be popular.<sup>23</sup>

A survey conducted by The Asia Foundation found that approximately 85 percent of people consider it very important that the peace process promote a strong central government and equality among all groups, regardless of ethnicity. A clear majority of respondents (89 percent of women and 82 percent of men) state that they would be very unwilling to accept a peace agreement with the condition that women and girls could no longer attend school.<sup>24</sup>

Consensus on Afghanistan's national political system is limited, and factions divided along party and ethnic lines, as well as public frustrations over the lack of safety and good governance, continued to threaten stability and prospects for peace. In 2014, a disputed presidential election led eventually to the formation of a National Unity Government based on a power-sharing agreement between President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah. The administration was encumbered by the ensuing tug of war between the two leaders until Ghani managed to consolidate his power in 2016.<sup>25</sup> Ghani and other leaders have been accused of favoring their own networks (mainly ethnic-majority Pashtun) over others when it comes to appointments. Ghani's preference for technocrats over regional political figures or former mujahideen in his administration, Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum's forced exile, and prosecutions of some ethnic warlords alienated northern ethnic parties.

After a date for the 2018 parliamentary elections was announced, political coalitions began to strengthen. The most notable was the "Coalition for the Salvation of Afghanistan," which included leaders from Jamiat-e Islami and other parties known for their influence over the Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek communities. Parliamentary elections were held on October 20, 2018, although late results meant that the new assembly only started on April 26, 2019.

Following repeated delays, the 2019 presidential election eventually took place on September 28. After another two-horse race between Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani, a toxic debate erupted over who had won, generating dangerous tensions along ethnic lines, after Abdullah rejected both preliminary

and final election results that gave Ghani a clear margin of victory on a very low voter turnout.<sup>26</sup> Following mediation by Afghan leaders and international pressure, another power-sharing deal was eventually reached, in May 2020, with Abdullah heading up the High Council for National Reconciliation, the Afghan government's new peace negotiation body.<sup>27</sup>

Disputes over the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections underscored problems within the 2004 Constitution, which mandates a strong executive branch and a centralized form of government. Discussion of constitutional reform became more intense after the 2019 elections, with much to gain for minorities, regional leaders, and others who feel marginalized by the current system, and for all those who seek greater legitimacy and stability for the state.<sup>28</sup> However, further reforms were then delayed given limited progress in peace negotiations and the lack of debate on governance between the main participants.



## Transnational terrorism and international tensions

U.S.-led international security interests in Afghanistan persist even though only a few dozen Al-Qaeda members are thought to remain in the country.<sup>29</sup> Afghanistan overtook Iraq in 2018 with the most deaths from terrorism, according to the Global Terrorism Index.<sup>30</sup> The Taliban and Daesh are responsible for most attacks. Beyond these two groups, over 20 regional and international armed groups operate in Afghanistan, primarily active in border areas. Estimates of foreign fighters range from 8,000 to 10,000. Daesh, Al-Qaeda, and other groups were left out of the peace talks, and yet they remain significant actors with the capacity to maintain high levels of violence and, indirectly, to derail political processes.<sup>31</sup> Relations between the various jihadist groups are complex and fluid.<sup>32</sup>

From 2018 to 2020, Daesh suffered major defeats against Taliban, Afghan, and U.S. forces. According to a UN report in June 2019, Daesh lost more than 1,200 fighters over a 12-month period.<sup>33</sup> It also ceded territorial control, and its operational capabilities were hampered.<sup>34</sup> Yet Daesh continued to stage high-profile attacks in Kabul and eastern provinces. It is believed to have renewed its forces through local recruitment and inflows of foreign jihadis from Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and those who have fled from Syria.<sup>35</sup>

Numerous powerful local leaders maintain armed groups or militias in Afghanistan, and the line between such groups and more clearly defined terrorist organizations is not always clear. Daesh received defectors from the Taliban, Tehrik-i Taliban Pakistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-e-Islami after the latter group reconciled with the government.<sup>36</sup> Lashkar-e-Taiba, which maintains relations with both the Taliban and Daesh, has around 500 under its command. Other groups, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Jihad Group, and Jamaat-ul-Ahrar, have fewer than one hundred members remaining in Afghanistan.<sup>37</sup>

The long history of tense relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan stems at least partly from their disputed border. South Asian geopolitics further complicate the scene. India has been providing support for the Afghan-led peace process with the Taliban and is uncomfortable with Pakistan's influence, fearing that it may harm Indian interests. Russia, China and other neighboring countries in Central Asia have been supporting efforts to minimize threats from radical Islamic terror groups, including Daesh, which use Afghanistan as a base.

Construction of river dams for domestic water and power continues to generate tensions between Afghanistan and neighboring countries. In July 2017, civil society and political organizations, tribal leaders, and local citizens gathered in Kabul, Qalat, Tarinkot, and Nimruz to protest against Iranian president Hassan Rouhani's criticism of the construction of hydropower dams in Afghanistan.<sup>38</sup> A treaty dating from 1973 has supported cooperation over the management of the Helmand River, between Afghanistan and Iran, but no such formal agreements exist for any of the nine waterways

flowing between Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>39</sup> Electricity supply from the Central Asian countries of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan into Afghanistan was disrupted in early 2021, causing power cuts in Kabul and elsewhere.<sup>40</sup> Power infrastructure is often targeted by Taliban and other insurgent groups.



## Separatism and autonomy

While there is no significant group defined primarily as a separatist movement in Afghanistan, and formal state authority is highly centralized, much of the country is governed in practice by local tribal and ethnic leaders. In some areas, the central government cannot maintain security or provide basic services, strengthening the influence of these local authorities. Limited state capacity and accountability have resulted in a governance vacuum and local fragmentation, undermining stability and security.<sup>41</sup>

In order to connect local politics to the central government, the international community backed a hybrid approach: it aimed to build state capacity by integrating informal powers into the government, while powerful local leaders were offered ministerial posts and received financial support to fight the Taliban.<sup>42</sup> Success was partial. Due to weak and ineffective governance at the subnational level, the central government relied heavily on traditional mechanisms and local institutions such as *shuras* or *jirgas*.<sup>43</sup> The Asia Foundation's annual *Survey of the Afghan People* indicates that confidence in local institutions remains higher than in national institutions.<sup>44</sup> Many local strongmen enjoy significant influence, access to resources, and command of armed militias, giving them the political and economic means to challenge both the government and insurgents.<sup>45</sup>



## Identity-based tension and conflict

Sectarian violence, ethnic factions, and extremism have long been at the core of instability in Afghanistan. Ethnic mobilization and the encouragement of religious and sectarian divides for political ends date back at least to the nineteenth century, when the Afghan Empire waged war against Sikh rulers of Peshawar and against the British. Afghan rulers were, and are, mostly ethnic Pashtun. Patronage-based politics mean that group affiliation is often vital to personal success and security.<sup>46</sup> Leaders make use of ethnicity to mobilize support against rivals, although political parties also seek cross-ethnic appeal.

Protests and violent incidents have occurred on numerous recent occasions. Tensions erupted when President Ghani proposed that the electronic national identity card cite the word “Afghan” as nationality, with some politicians claiming that the term referred to the country’s majority ethnicity and was therefore not inclusive. While all groups in Afghanistan suffer the effects of past and ongoing violence, and numerous minority communities have been targeted, Hazara and other Shia communities have been especially affected by sectarian attacks from Daesh, which killed over 233 people between 2017 and 2019, mostly in Kabul. The Hazara community has a long history of persecution and suffered several mass killings during the 1990s.<sup>47</sup> Armed clashes between the Taliban and Hazara or other Shia communities also persist, although Taliban leaders have insisted that the attacks are not sectarian in nature.



## Local political conflict and electoral violence

Parliamentary elections were finally held on October 20, 2018, after three years of delays due to tensions within the government. Abductions, threats, intimidation, and harassment against civilians were all reported. UNAMA monitoring found 1,007 civilian casualties (226 deaths and 781 injured) related to the elections.<sup>48</sup> At least 10 candidates were murdered in the run-up to the vote, and only two-thirds of polling stations could be opened.<sup>49</sup> While these figures are alarming, they occurred against a backdrop of severe ongoing violence before, during, and after the election period.

Levels of violence were lower during the presidential election of September 28, 2019. UNAMA recorded 85 civilian deaths and 373 injuries, the majority of them occurring on election day.<sup>50</sup> Almost all casualties were attributed to the Taliban. Schools and populated areas were targeted, and one-third of the victims were children.



## Local conflict over resources and community rights

Land remains the leading cause of local disputes. Data from the Ministry of Justice shows that over 60 percent of all legal cases between 2016 and 2018 related to land conflicts. The lack of formal documents to prove property rights has led to land grabbing and forced evictions. At present, fewer than one in six properties has a formal title deed, while close to half have neither formal nor customary documents.<sup>51</sup> Government attempts to improve the security of land tenure continued. In 2018, land administration responsibilities were consolidated by the merger of two institutions into the new Ministry of Urban Development and Land. The cabinet also endorsed the National Land Policy.<sup>52</sup>

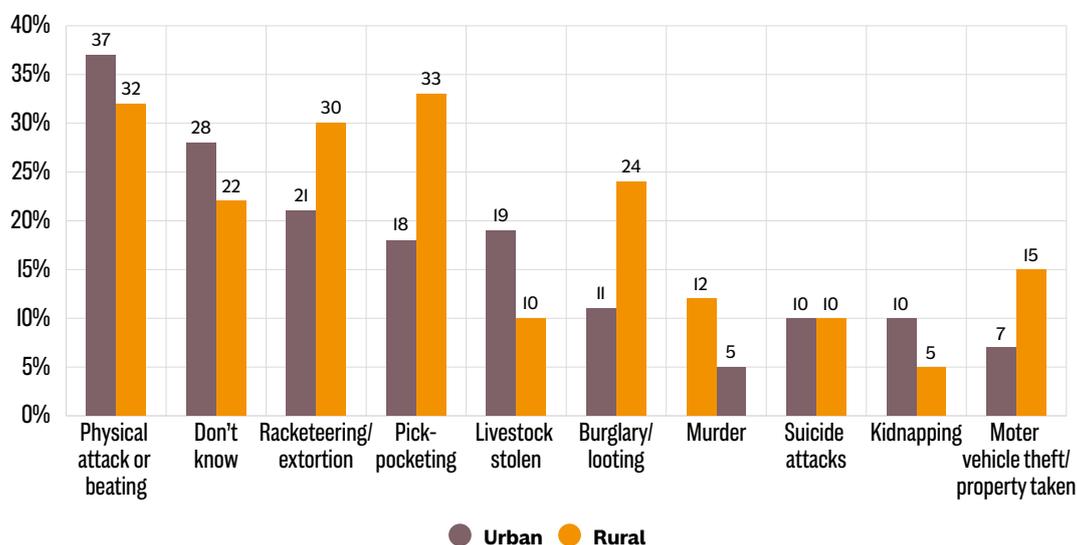
According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), opium cultivation rose to a new high of 9,000 tons, from 328,000 hectares of land, in 2017.<sup>53</sup> Some declines in the area of production were recorded in 2018 and 2019.<sup>54</sup> UNODC found that the crop is grown in 35 percent of villages across the country and is especially widespread in the southern provinces. Insurgents, nonstate armed groups, and prominent leaders make significant sums from taxing opium farming and production. The United States and Afghanistan's counter-narcotics programs appear to have met only limited success in reducing cultivation.<sup>55</sup> Detailed assessment based on extensive fieldwork has indicated that alternative development strategies intended to reduce farmers' dependence on opium production have failed to offer sufficiently consistent and appropriate support.<sup>56</sup> Methamphetamine production is also rising in Afghanistan, partly as a result of greatly increased use of the naturally growing plant ephedra to create ephedrine, a precursor chemical used in manufacturing the stimulant.<sup>57</sup>

Afghanistan has vast untapped mineral reserves. Foreign investment in large-scale mining could generate massive government revenues, but contractual problems have halted potential Chinese, U.S., and other investments in copper and gold.<sup>58</sup> Illicit or unregulated mining predominates, and it is believed to represent the Taliban's second-largest source of income.<sup>59</sup> Disputes over extraction rights typically occur between local communities and government, and between government and armed groups.<sup>60</sup> Almost all illicitly extracted minerals are exported informally to or through Pakistan.<sup>61</sup> Other actors involved in the industry, including traders, local politicians, security forces, and local government officials, collaborate and sometimes compete for the gains.<sup>62</sup>



## Violent crime

Widespread concerns persisted over surging criminality in Kabul. Murders, kidnappings, the drug trade, car thefts, and intergroup fighting are common, as crime networks compete and receive patronage from politicians in exchange for their assistance. Many politicians and power brokers themselves have criminal pasts.<sup>63</sup> During April and May 2019, 70 Kabul residents were murdered and dozens more abducted.<sup>64</sup> Former vice president Amrullah Saleh (who was interior minister at the time) launched concerted efforts to strengthen and improve the capacity of the police force to tackle criminal groups. The chief of the Criminal Investigation Department for Kabul, Mohammad Salim Almas, was sacked over a “dramatic increase” in crime.<sup>65</sup> Officials vowed to dismantle crime networks, stating that they involved over 1,500 members who possessed almost 30,000 illegal arms.<sup>66</sup> Amid ongoing concerns in October 2020, Vice President Saleh temporarily assumed direct responsibility for security in Kabul.<sup>67</sup>



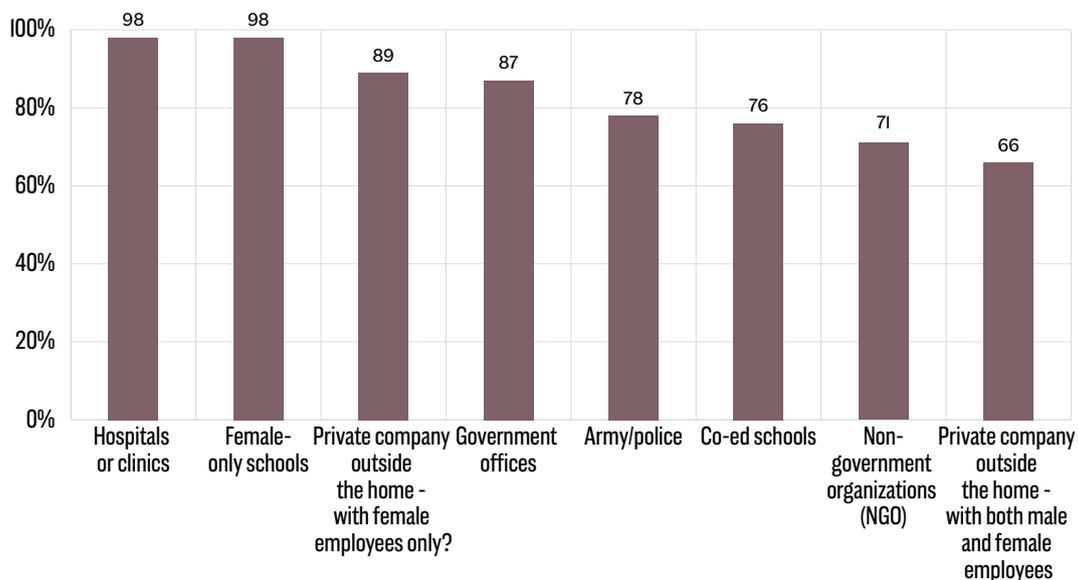
**Figure 6:** Types of crime and violence, rural and urban, 2019  
 Source: *The Asia Foundation*<sup>68</sup>

Nationwide, the proportion of people stating that they have personally experienced crime and violence has remained fairly constant, recording a negligible decrease from 18.6 percent in 2018 to 17.7 percent in 2019.<sup>69</sup> Experiences of most forms of crime and violence are similar in rural and urban areas, although theft-related crime is higher in urban areas (Figure 6).

Public confidence in the Afghan National Police appears to have grown. The percentage who strongly agree that the police help to improve security in Afghanistan rose to just over half (53.9 percent) in 2019, a noticeable increase from 36.4 percent in 2019. One reason for this increase may be amplified visibility due to increased police operational activity.<sup>70</sup> However, a spate of high-profile kidnappings and armed robberies during 2020 may have undermined these gains.<sup>71</sup>

## Domestic and gender-based violence

Legal changes and public measures to promote women's rights in Afghanistan have improved women's status and opportunities since 2001. The government has made continued efforts to promote equality. Repeated surveys have indicated changes in attitudes and realities across many fields. Acceptance of daughters' rights to inherit from fathers has continued to increase, to over 90 percent, as has support for gender equality in education. Following concerted awareness campaigns, there has been a significant decrease in public acceptance of some traditional practices such as *baad* (giving away a daughter to another party as a penalty or payment to settle a debt or resolve a dispute, grievance, or conflict between families).<sup>72</sup> Marriage below the age of 16 is seen as desirable by a small and shrinking proportion of the public (just 2.5 percent of respondents in the 2019 *Survey of the Afghan People*).<sup>73</sup> An overwhelming majority of Afghans (89.3 percent in 2019) say that women should have the right to vote in elections. Current attitudes reflect norms for separating women from public space while also recognizing the value of women's contributions in many spheres (see Figure 7).



**Figure 7:** Acceptable places for women to work outside the home  
Source: *The Asia Foundation*<sup>74</sup>

While the Afghan constitution affirms women's rights, Afghan women are still subject to comparatively high rates of intimate partner violence and have very limited access to justice.<sup>75</sup> Violence against women and girls has further increased during the Covid-19 pandemic, at the same time as services for survivors of violence having been curtailed due to the crisis.<sup>76</sup> Traditional dispute resolution mechanisms dominate efforts to resolve allegations of violence against women, and many women choose not to bring cases to the formal justice system while perpetrators commonly enjoy impunity.<sup>77</sup>

There were concerns about the limited representation of women in the peace talks. In 2020, only 24.9 percent of respondents indicated that they thought women would be represented very well in peace talks, while 25.3 percent said that they would be represented very poorly.<sup>78</sup> In the context of Covid-19, women's participation in less formal discussions of peace and political change was further hampered by restrictions on movement and public gatherings.<sup>79</sup>



## New media, conflict, and violence

Almost one in four men (23.2 percent), but only around one in 20 women (5.6 percent), use the internet as their main source of news and information. Use is most prevalent among younger, more educated, and urban people.<sup>80</sup> Ninety-five percent of social media users use Facebook far more than any other app.<sup>81</sup> The telecommunications sector has grown rapidly to cover most of the country, including the roll-out of a nationwide fiber-optic backbone, but remote provinces suffer from weak infrastructure that is vulnerable to sabotage and Taliban restrictions on internet access.<sup>82</sup>

Social media have been used to mobilize people around political causes in Kabul. Demonstrations in June 2017 started with a social media campaign right after a bomb blast that occurred as civil society groups and individuals rallied to march to the presidential palace.<sup>83</sup> When the city was hit with a series of terrorist attacks in January 2018, there were widespread calls on social media for the resignations of security officials.<sup>84</sup> Prominent political figures and government offices also use social media to communicate with people and their political supporters, and sometimes to attack their rivals.

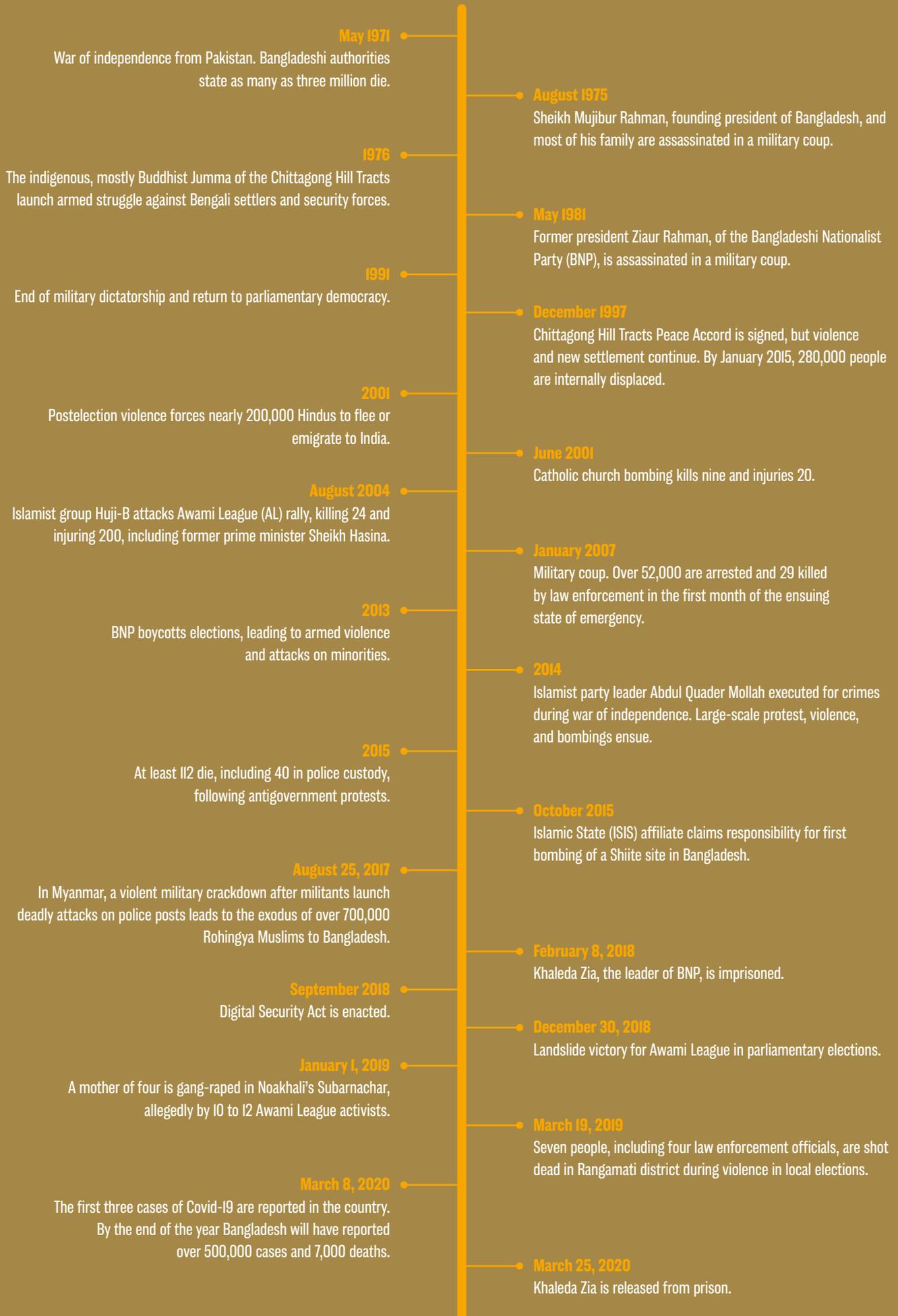
Radio is still used by many, including insurgent groups, to recruit fighters and garner support in rural areas where illiteracy is still widespread. The main armed groups also use social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram to gain ground in the propaganda war.<sup>85</sup> The lack of local information from many parts of Afghanistan generates huge opportunities to dominate the narrative in the wake of a violent incident, and the propagandists rapidly deploy short tweets, with graphic images claiming to be from the scene, on official accounts that have many thousands of followers.<sup>86</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Asia does not include the Middle East. The combined fatality total recorded for Afghanistan is over four times more than for all other Asian countries over the same timeframe.
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# BANGLADESH

## Overview

Bangladesh continues to make progress, especially on economic and human development. Successive governments have managed long-term challenges to peace and stability including terrorism and extremism, subnational tensions, ethno-religious friction, confrontational political rivalries, violent crime, and problems arising from neighboring countries.

Authorities continue to crack down on Islamist militant groups and suspected terrorists and have managed to significantly reduce the risks from groups affiliated with or influenced by the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda. Intolerance towards other religious beliefs remains an ongoing concern and a primary source of sectarian violence and militant extremism.

Political conflict remains a major issue. Rivalry within political parties is very common and causes more casualties than interparty conflicts, killing 122 and injuring 9,892 people in 2017–2018. Several laws have been passed on political assemblies and to strengthen online censorship. The enactment of the Digital Security Act in 2018, in addition to the Information and Communication Technology Act, has put several activists, journalists, and social media users in prison. A number of politicians belonging to opposition parties have been arrested and prosecuted.

There has been some progress in legal protections for women although gender-based violence in various forms remains a persistent problem. Bangladesh continues to house Rohingya refugees from Myanmar—over a million individuals by some estimates. In January 2020, the government moved forward with a relocation plan establishing a refugee camp on the island of Bhasan Char, though Rohingya activists opposed the plan due to fears of the island flooding during monsoon season.



## National political context

Politics have followed an established pattern, as each party, when in power, seeks to undermine opposition parties and control dissident voices. In power since 2009, the political clout of the Awami League (AL) government has continued to increase. In 2017, the government made it compulsory for rallies and public meetings to seek police permission, even if held indoors.<sup>1</sup> The opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party has claimed that 152 candidates were attacked and hundreds more activists were injured in clashes with rival AL activists and police in 2018.<sup>2</sup>

Under the current law, 56 percent of civil service jobs are reserved for people of special categories, including families of veterans of the 1971 independence war and disadvantaged groups. Following an inappropriate comment from a minister on the incident in early August 2018, protests that started after two students were killed by a recklessly driven bus spread beyond Dhaka, the capital, and several key roads were blocked. Overall, the series of violent incidents injured more than 150 students and 20 journalists.<sup>3</sup> Several activists and journalists covering the event were arrested.

These and other incidents demonstrate that the use of violence for political ends remains prevalent in Bangladesh. According to data collected by Odhikar, political violence caused 77 deaths and 4,635 injuries in 2017, rising to 120 deaths and over 7,000 injuries in 2018. In 2017, most incidents were caused by intraparty fighting.<sup>4</sup> Several criminal cases against AL supporters were withdrawn for being “politically motivated,”<sup>5</sup> a tactic that was previously introduced during the BNP government of the early 2000s.<sup>6</sup>



## Transnational terrorism and international tensions

Since the mid-1970s, Bangladesh has been a hub for numerous militant groups. Apart from its homegrown Islamic militants, some northeastern Indian separatist groups, Pakistani international terrorist groups, and other international groups such as Hizbut Tahrir, Hizbullah, and Rohingya and Rakhine armed groups have all exploited the porous borders and assistance from domestic and international networks to train and operate clandestinely inside the country. Under Sheikh Hasina’s second term as prime minister, Bangladesh and India signed an agreement in 2010 to cooperate on counter-terrorism and transnational crimes, potentially making the country less conducive to militant groups.

After an upsurge in the number of terrorist incidents in 2013, Bangladesh has been using security forces to tackle the threat presented by terrorist groups. In early 2016, police officials revealed that they had arrested 2,856 militants, the majority associated with Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). The rest were members of other well-known international and domestic radical Islamic groups, some of them linked or associated with ISIS and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Subcontinent. Since the gruesome attack at the Holey Artisan Bakery in July 2016, which was linked to ISIS, the effort to halt terrorism has been stepped up. By November 2018, security forces had killed over 100 and arrested over 1,500 alleged terrorists.<sup>7</sup> Having been driven out of Bangladesh, more than 3,000 militants belonging to JMB and Harakat ul-Jihad-I-Islami/Bangladesh are believed to have moved to India and carried out attacks there.<sup>8</sup>

Since 2017, several attacks per year have been conducted in the name of ISIS or conducted by Al-Qaeda affiliates. Casualties have remained low. Attacks claimed by ISIS have typically been small suicide bombings targeting security forces or government officials with limited success. Raids by security forces on groups with ISIS links generally cause higher casualties. After an arrest of a pro-ISIS youth in August 2019, ISIS uploaded a video in Bengali calling on Bangladeshi supporters to carry out attacks on politicians, security officers, and non-Muslims. The investigation following the arrest revealed that ISIS perpetrators were often leaderless.<sup>9</sup> Incidents implicating Al-Qaeda generally involved violence against secular activists. See Figure 8 for attacks involving ISIS and Al-Qaeda reported by the mainstream media.

The presence of both Indian and Pakistani government intelligence agencies in Bangladesh has generated tensions. Between 1991 and 2009, the role of the Indian Research and Analysis Wing was highly controversial, while the BNP-led Bangladeshi government tacitly supported the operations and presence of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence. Following the Holey Artisan attack of 2016, the Bangladeshi government, now led by the Awami League, accused Pakistan of involvement with armed networks, and several Pakistani diplomats were expelled.<sup>10</sup> Cross-border terrorism is also one of the reasons behind repeated shootings and detention by Indian security officials of Bangladeshis crossing the border illegally, and occasional clashes with Bangladeshi border guards.

Ongoing discrimination, violence, and denial of rights and livelihood opportunities in Rakhine State, Myanmar, have led to multiple waves of displacement into Bangladesh. Seventy-four thousand Rohingya fled Rakhine State after violence in 2016. Most of them joined 35,000 previously registered refugees in and around Cox's Bazar. Then, beginning in August 2017, over 710,000 additional Rohingya refugees fled to the same area.<sup>11</sup>

Date	Incident	Terrorist group	Deaths	Injuries
1/7/2016	Attack on Holey Artisan Bakery leads to 29 deaths	ISIS/JMB	29	50
3/16/2017 <sup>12</sup>	Suicide bombing at a police raid in Chittagong	JMB	2	1
3/17/2017 <sup>13</sup>	Suicide bombing at a special force base in Dhaka	ISIS	1	2
3/24/2017 <sup>14</sup>	Two bomb blasts during raids by security forces in Sylhet	ISIS	6	40
3/24/2017 <sup>15</sup>	Suicide bombing at a police checkpoint near Dhaka airport	ISIS	1	0
6/11/2018 <sup>16</sup>	Murder of Shajahan Bachchu, a secular writer and political activist in Munshigan	Al-Qaeda affiliates	1	0
7/12/2018 <sup>17</sup>	Suicide bombing at a police box near Dhaka airport	ISIS	1	0
4/26/2019 <sup>18</sup>	Suicide bombing during a raid in Dhaka	JMB	2	0
5/26/2019 <sup>19</sup>	A bomb blast in Dhaka	ISIS		3
7/25/2019 <sup>20</sup>	Two bombs recovered in Dhaka	ISIS	0	0
9/11/2019 <sup>21</sup>	Bomb thrown at a Bangladeshi minister's car in Dhaka	ISIS	1	2

**Figure 8:** Violent incidents involving ISIS and Al-Qaeda

Bangladesh has hosted the refugees and enabled the provision of essential aid by domestic and international organizations. Yet conditions in the camps remain tough. Refugees are mostly confined to designated camp areas, have minimal education or work opportunities, and face major security

risks associated with criminal and armed groups. Drug trafficking across the border from Myanmar has increased significantly and added to insecurity in the wider Cox's Bazar area.

Most Rohingya refugees want to return to their native homes in Myanmar, but the likelihood is small that safe and dignified voluntary repatriation will be possible for significant numbers in the short term. Refugees have continued to risk dangerous travel by sea to Malaysia or Indonesia, while other opportunities—and hopes for an eventual return to Myanmar—remain limited.<sup>22</sup>



## Separatism and autonomy

Tensions and some violence have continued in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). After more than two decades, the main provisions of the 1997 Peace Accord, such as recognizing a tribally inhabited region and introducing a special governance system, a land-dispute resolution mechanism, and demilitarization, have not yet been fulfilled. Land disputes and the influx of settlers into the region, the principal causes of the conflict between the central government and indigenous communities, remain unresolved.

The government continues to oppose giving indigenous Jumma communities exclusive rights to own land in CHT, and the local Regional Council is hampered by inadequate financial and technical resources. Power to impose prohibitions over land settlements and to approve land transfers and acquisitions has not been transferred. Land acquisitions, reserved forest, the expansion of settler villages, and tourism development have continued in violation of the Accord.<sup>23</sup>

Ongoing tensions between Bengali settlers and indigenous communities sometimes turn violent. On June 2, 2017, looting and arson attacks against Jumma villages occurred in Langadu, Rangamati District, and around 300 houses and shops were burned down.<sup>24</sup> Armed tribal groups operating in the area have also clashed, leading to 22 deaths in 2018.<sup>25</sup>

The army, police, and local government have sporadically been attacked by local armed groups and unidentified armed perpetrators in CHT.<sup>26</sup> On a day of local elections in March 2019, election officials and security forces with ballot materials were ambushed, and seven were killed. Indigenous groups accused each other of instigating the attacks.<sup>27</sup> Rapes and kidnappings of indigenous girls and women have also occurred in the region.<sup>28</sup>



## Identity-based tension and conflict

Since 1975, government leaders and political parties have not only employed Islamic narratives, but also pursued alliances with radical Islamic parties and organizations for political benefit, providing fertile ground for the growth of radical Islamic militancy and intolerance towards religious minorities. Constitutional amendments in 1977 and 1988 removed secularism from state principles and established Islam as the state religion. These changes and other related measures allowed political Islamists to become a significant force in Bangladesh, and both the BNP and the more secular AL have had to court their political support.

In 2017, the Awami League introduced changes in textbooks that Islamized the public school curriculum and allowed child marriage under special circumstances, which received praise from Islamists. The government also formed an alliance with the Hefazat-e-Islam, a radical group that in 2010 demanded a ban on men and women mixing in public spaces and opposed gender equality in inheritance rights.<sup>29</sup>

The government has tried to clamp down on Islamic militancy, but sectarian violence such as assaults on religious minorities and vandalism of their properties, places of worship, and religious idols, as well as attacks on secular activists, persist. Recent years have seen a slight decline in sectarian violence and

violence against minorities (Figure 9), although in 2019 annual casualties increased again. In October 2019, 20,000 Muslims demonstrated in Borhanuddin to demand the death sentence for a Hindu man who was accused of posting criticism of the Prophet Mohammad on Facebook.<sup>30</sup> Clashes between the demonstrators and police left four dead, and properties belonging to the Hindu community were burned down or vandalized. Members of both main parties are often among the perpetrators of sectarian violence. Rights groups state that land grabs are often behind local political violence and minority oppression.<sup>31</sup>

	2016		2017		2018		2019	
	Violence against minorities	Sectarian violence <sup>32</sup>	Violence against minorities	Sectarian violence	Violence against minorities	Sectarian violence	Violence against minorities	Sectarian violence
Incidents	129	42	69	24	82	23	40	10
Deaths	25	8	7	0	15	0	9	0
Injuries	108	3	69	25	82	8	97	60

**Figure 9:** Violence against minorities

Source: Prepared based on data provided by the Bangladesh Peace Observatory<sup>33</sup>

Following India's adoption of the Citizenship Amendment Act, which is widely felt to discriminate against Muslim migrants, the Bangladeshi public has been anxious over a possible exodus of Muslims from India to Bangladesh. Concerns persist over growing public hostility towards India and possible violence against the Hindu community in Bangladesh.<sup>34</sup>



### Electoral violence, resources, and community rights

The parliamentary elections of December 30, 2018, saw widespread violence during campaigning and on polling day. Opposition parties claimed that thousands of their supporters had been detained in the run-up to the election. The *Daily Star* reported that at least 875 opposition supporters and 13 candidates had been injured, and 26 motorcades attacked.<sup>35</sup> Although violence mainly targeted the opposition, two AL members and 75 supporters were also reported killed. Clashes between AL supporters and opponents killed at least 17 people on election day.<sup>36</sup>

Infighting within political parties across the country is responsible for many casualties each year. In 2017 and 2018, Odhikar recorded 595 incidents of internal violence within the AL, which killed 119 and injured 6,552. For the BNP, 36 incidents, 3 deaths, and 340 injuries were recorded.<sup>37</sup> Between January and May 2019, political violence killed 28 and injured 1,279 in 114 recorded incidents.<sup>38</sup>

Beyond the Chittagong Hill Tracts, land conflicts are a nationwide concern. The most common cause of legal problems, land disputes are estimated to affect around eight million Bangladeshis every year.<sup>39</sup> A study completed in 2014 also found that 7.5 percent of households suffering from this problem had experienced physical assaults, while 18.3 percent paid bribes to police to assist with the cases.<sup>40</sup>

Protests over the government’s natural resource and energy policies have generated violent responses. In 2017, more than 50 activists were injured in clashes with police during a protest in Dhaka over a plan to construct a coal-fired power plant near the Sundarbans, the world’s largest mangrove forest and a UNESCO World Heritage Site.<sup>41</sup> In 2019, a student who used social media to criticize a water resource deal with India was beaten to death by members of the Awami League’s student wing. The incident sparked protests in universities across Bangladesh.<sup>42</sup>



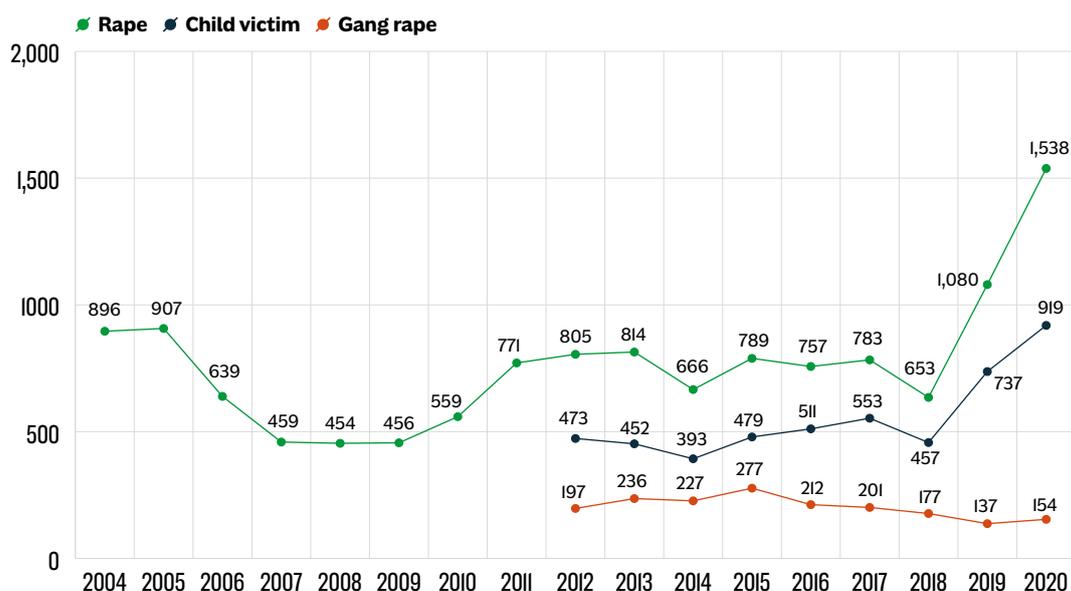
## Violent crime

Levels of violent crime in Dhaka appear to be fairly stable. Since 2014, figures indicate that there has been a downward trend in the incidence of violent theft, which used to be the most common violent crime in the capital but has been superseded by violence against women and children (see Figure II). However, when data on other types of offenses is included, such as illegal possession of arms, possession of explosives, and drug-related crime, the number of crimes in Dhaka is seen to have risen sharply, from 19,900 in 2016 to 27,150 in 2018. The change has been attributed to the rise in the recovery of explosives and illegal narcotics. In Dhaka alone, the recovery of explosives increased from 88 incidents in 2016 to 354 in 2018, a rapid rise also seen at the national level, which may be the result of strengthened efforts to control extremists. The increase may also be related to parliamentary elections, as a number of people arrested under this charge belonged to political parties. The ongoing rise in drug-related crime also raises concern. The number of recorded cases rose from 47,692 in 2015 to 112,549 in 2018. On a more positive note, the intentional homicide rate fell from 2.6 per 100,000 population in 2015 to 2.0 in 2017.

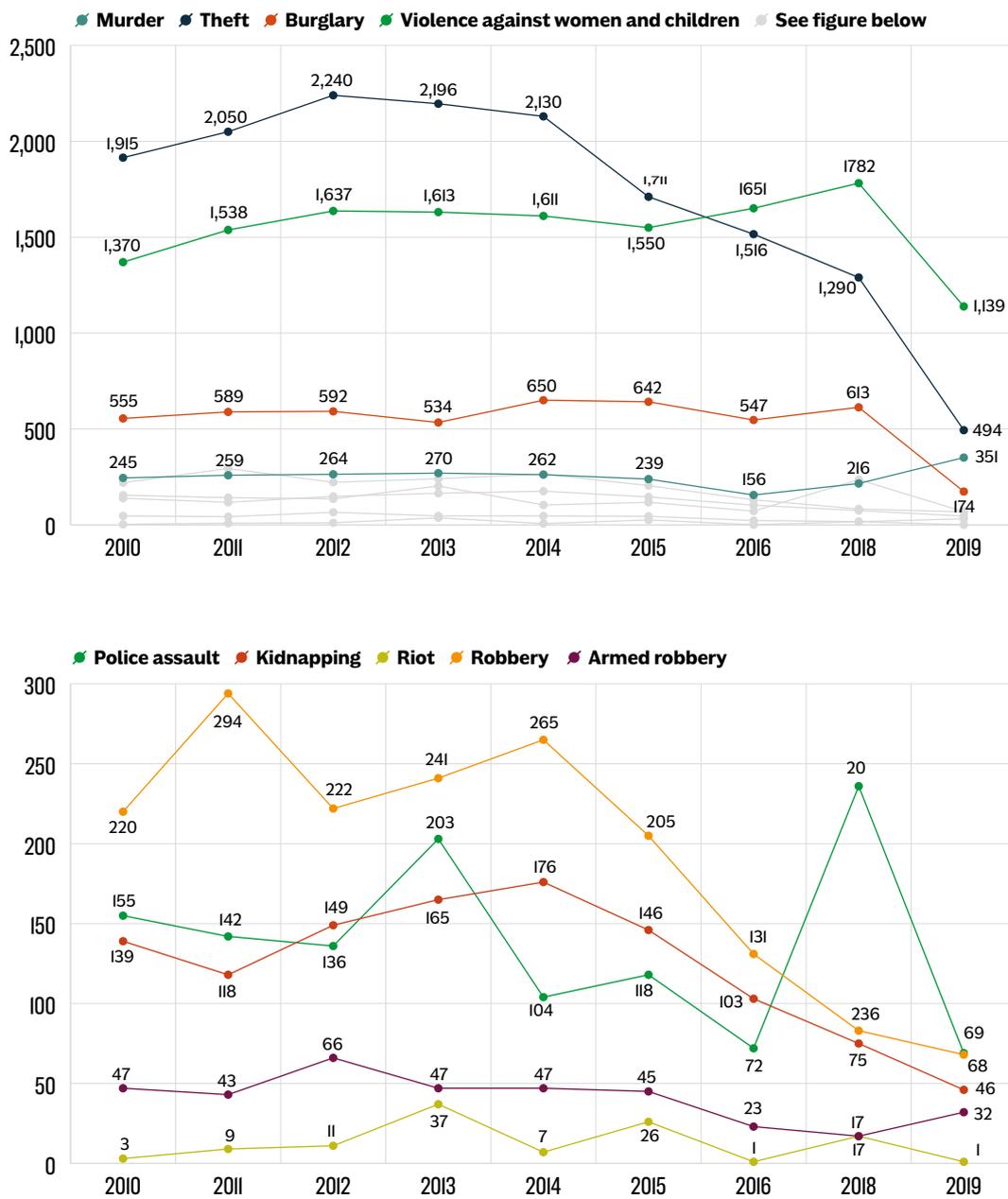


## Domestic and gender-based violence

Women continue to face gender-based violence and harassment, including extreme acts such as rape, acid attacks, and murder. In 2018, offenses against women and children became the most prevalent category of crime in Dhaka (see Figure II). Statistics on rape have fluctuated over the past decade (see Figure 10).



**Figure 10:** Rape cases in Bangladesh (2004–2020)  
 Source: Prepared based on data provided by Odhikar<sup>43</sup>



**Figure II: Dhaka crime statistics 2010–2019**  
 Source: Prepared from Bangladesh police statistics<sup>44</sup>

Dowry-related violence persists. One human rights group identified during 2018 a total of 71 women who were allegedly killed, 69 who were physically abused, and two who committed suicide, all associated with dowry violence.<sup>45</sup> Early marriage remains a problem, with around 59 percent of marriages in Bangladesh involving a minor under 18, the highest rate in Asia.<sup>46</sup> The rate is declining over time, although the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 2017 has been criticized for a provision which permits the marriage of girls and boys younger than the age of 18 if the court rules that it is in the best interest of the child.<sup>47</sup>

Studies have shown that most violence against women occurs within the domestic sphere.<sup>48</sup> Almost three-quarters of women who have been married have experienced violence at the hands of a spouse. Most experiences of intimate partner violence are not disclosed. The most common form of such violence is controlling behavior (55.4 percent), followed by physical violence (49.6 percent).<sup>49</sup> Nearly one-third have experienced sexual violence by their spouse. Rates of intimate partner violence are marginally higher in rural areas, and higher in lower socioeconomic strata,<sup>50</sup> while ethnic-minority women and girls are on average more at risk. A survey in 2017 showed that 7.52 percent of victims were from indigenous communities that represent just 1.8 percent of Bangladesh's total population.<sup>51</sup>



## New media, conflict, and violence

The number of internet subscribers in Bangladesh doubled between 2015 and 2020 to 108 million in a population of 165 million.<sup>52</sup> Not all subscribers are users, however. A household survey from 2018–2019 found that 43.1 percent of the population over the age of 15 had used the internet in the previous three months. Of all male respondents, 53.2 percent reporting using the internet, compared to 34.2 percent of women respondents.<sup>53</sup>

This rapid growth has brought new opportunities while also creating concerns, especially over social media misuse and manipulation. The government has criticized the failure of online platforms to screen dangerous content, and blamed disinformation and hate speech on social media, especially Facebook, for causing incidents of sectarian violence. Online platforms have been used by extremist organizations; for example, the Telegram messaging application is used by ISIS to communicate with followers and sympathizers in Bangladesh. The group creates channels in Bengali and enables video uploading. Following government attempts to remove these channels, the production of content in Bengali decreased, but substantial material remained available and was frequently accessed.<sup>54</sup>

The government has fairly criticized corporate inaction on dangerous online content. This inaction was also used to justify legislation, the 2018 Digital Security Act, that can be applied to curtail dissident online activity and control media reporting. The Act establishes an Emergency Response Team working around the clock to remove or block some data and information.<sup>55</sup> The government also launched a project called “Cyber Threat Detection and Response” to employ new technology for filtering and blocking keywords “to prevent propaganda against the government, to protect the country’s image, to stop all pornography, and to prevent cyber-crime.”<sup>56</sup>

Within three months of the approval of the Digital Security Act, the new provisions were applied to arrest at least two journalists. Fifty-four news and other websites were blocked or temporarily suspended prior to the national elections.<sup>57</sup> A popular blog site, *somewhereinblog.net*, which has more than 213,000 bloggers—many of them liberal activists—was blocked in February 2019. Facing an uproar from civil society and the online community, the government later partially unblocked the site.<sup>58</sup> In May 2019, the arrests of a well-known human right activist, a poet, and a lawyer, under vague charges of hurting religious sentiment and undermining law and order, prompted protests in Dhaka against the government’s encroachment on free speech.<sup>59</sup>

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- February 1, 1948** ● The Malayan Emergency, declared to counter communist insurgency, starts and eventually runs until 1962.
- August 31, 1957** ● The Federation of Malaya achieves independence from the UK.
- 1964** ● Tensions between UMNO and Singapore's ethnic-Chinese-dominated People's Action Party spark communal riots. Cross-border clashes occur with Indonesia over the status of Sabah and Sarawak.
- May 13, 1969** ● Following historic electoral gains by mainly ethnic Chinese parties, and tensions over inequality, riots between Chinese and Malays kill at least 196.
- June 28, 1981** ● Amid growing Malay nationalism, Mahathir Mohamad becomes prime minister, bringing rapid economic growth and maintaining democracy alongside authoritarian measures.
- October 25, 2003** ● His coalition weakened by the Asian financial crisis and mounting opposition, Mahathir steps down.
- April 3, 2009** ● Najib Razak sworn in as prime minister.
- May 9, 2018** ● Barisan Nasional coalition is defeated in a general election for the first time. Mahathir Mohamad elected prime minister under the Pakatan Harapan.
- March 2019** ● Police start the process of return and relocation of Malaysians who had joined violent extremist groups the Middle East.
- March 1, 2020** ● Pakatan Harapan is ousted in a political crisis and the brief reformist period ends. Prime Minister Mahathir resigns and is succeeded by Muhyiddin Yasin.
- June 23, 2020** ● Malaysia leads the UN appeal for a global ceasefire during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- January 12, 2021** ● Nationwide state of emergency is declared for the first time in over 50 years in order to combat Covid-19. The measure also suspends parliament.
- **July 27, 1955**  
The Alliance, an intercommunal coalition, wins an election landslide. Later known as Barisan Nasional, the coalition has dominated Malaysian politics ever since.
- **September 15, 1963**  
The Federation of Malaysia is formed with Singapore and the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak.
- **August 9, 1965**  
Singapore exits the Federation of Malaysia.
- **1971**  
The New Economic Policy is launched. It will succeed in reducing poverty, redressing inequalities, and also entrenching ethnic Malays' preferential status.
- **October 27, 1987**  
Operation Lalang jails 106 opposition politicians and activists under the Internal Security Act.
- **2007**  
The Bersih ("Clean") movement demands free and fair elections.
- **March 5, 2013**  
A group of 200 Filipinos invade a village in Sabah and claim traditional sovereignty. After armed clashes, security forces overpower them.
- **December 2018**  
The government reverses its pledge to sign and ratify the UN International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination after a backlash among some Malay groups.
- **August 2019**  
1MDB corruption trial involving former prime minister Najib Razak begins.
- **May 3, 2020**  
Malaysian authorities round up hundreds of undocumented immigrants in what police term an effort to stem the Covid-19 pandemic.
- **July 28, 2020**  
Former prime minister Najib Razak is found guilty of seven charges in the 1MDB Trial. Najib appeals.



## Overview

Malaysia, a relatively stable and peaceful multiethnic state, is approaching developed-country status after decades of rapid growth. Since independence in 1957, Malaysia has endured a range of internal threats—a communist uprising, ethnic tensions, political instability, and subnational tensions. The country has maintained sometimes uneasy relations among ethnic and religious groups and across political rifts, with few significant incidents or violent conflicts.

Malaysia's democratic political system and sustained economic growth are core factors in its relative stability. Successive governments of the Barisan Nasional coalition offered continuity and managed competing interests. Since the late 1960s, the country's New Economic Policy has offered a program of affirmative action that primarily supports the indigenous majority, providing benefits to alleviate their lower socioeconomic status and to reduce ethnic tensions. The delicate balance of appealing to all groups while also favoring Malay and Muslim interests has persisted through decades of increasing religiosity in this modern and progressive Islamic nation.

In 2018, elections led to the country's first regime change since independence. Mahathir Mohamad returned as prime minister under the Pakatan Harapan coalition, becoming the world's oldest head of government. But in February 2020, tensions within the coalition led to its collapse, and Muhyiddin Yassin, a veteran establishment politician, formed a new coalition government with a slim majority in parliament. Political contestation was effectively suspended for the duration of the state of emergency that was declared in response to the Covid-19 pandemic on January 12, 2021. In August, after just 17 months in office and amid political turmoil, Muhyiddin Yassin resigned along with his cabinet. He was replaced as prime minister by Ismail Sabri Yaakob of the venerable United Malays National Organisation.

During election campaigns, political leaders have continued to draw on deep social cleavages, and particularly on ethno-religious Malay identity, while also seeking a degree of consensus. Regional frustration in the states of Sabah and Sarawak has led to demands that the national government offer them greater rights and status. Other low-level tensions persist. International recognition of the Malaysian government's effectiveness in tackling violent extremism echoes earlier successes in countering communist insurgency from 1948 to 1960 and from 1968 to 1989. Recent terrorist attacks have been rare, although concerns persist over jihadist returnees from the Middle East and the risk of local networks reemerging. Rates of local electoral violence, resource conflict, and criminal violence are also low by regional standards.

The first case of Covid-19 in Malaysia was confirmed on January 25, 2020. The pandemic exacerbated both ethnic and political tensions within Malaysia, particularly tensions surrounding Rohingya refugees. Civil society groups drew attention to hateful online messages targeting the Rohingya community.



## National political context

Malaysia is a parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarchy and a federal structure. In the aftermath of the 2018 general election, Malaysia witnessed the first regime change since independence in 1957, as the Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition led by Najib Razak of the United Malays National Organization lost its grip on power to Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope, PH). The BN coalition had experienced uninterrupted rule for more than six decades.<sup>1</sup> The change was the culmination of efforts by opposition politicians to unseat the BN, including support for mass street protests under the Bersih movement. Demands for reforms, transparency, and clean elections had been strongly backed by protesters and civil society groups over the previous decade.

The PH opposition also benefited from the defection of former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad, who joined forces with his erstwhile rival, Anwar Ibrahim. In the 2018 elections, the PH and its allies won 121 out of 222 seats and were able to form the next government.<sup>2</sup> On May 10, 2018, a day after the election, Mahathir was sworn in as prime minister at the age of 92.

Immediately after he was sworn in, Mahathir successfully secured a royal pardon for jailed PH leader Anwar Ibrahim, embarked on an ambitious policy reform agenda, and initiated criminal charges against leaders of the previous government over their involvement in the huge 1MDB corruption scandal and other issues related to misuse of power.

By February of 2020, however, the new government had fallen apart amid political maneuvering. As the end of its second year in power approached, Anwar and his supporters had stepped up their efforts to fix a transition date for Anwar to take over. Anwar's camp eventually relented, but then Muhyiddin Yassin, Mahathir's chief deputy, broke away. Mahathir then abruptly resigned, and by March the king of Malaysia had appointed Muhyiddin as prime minister. Prime Minister Muhyiddin assembled another broad coalition, Perikatan Nasional (PN), consisting of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), the Islamist Parti Islam se Malaysia (PAS), and others, to secure power.<sup>3</sup>

The new PN coalition maintained a fragile grasp on power, with a majority of just two seats. In the September 2020 election for Sabah State, the coalition and its allies won 38 of the 73 open seats, amidst an alarming rise in the number of local Covid-19 infections.<sup>4</sup> In January 2021, an unprecedented nationwide state of emergency was declared in response to the pandemic. Government critics found the measure and its planned eight-month minimum duration to be disproportionate, suspecting that its main purpose was the preservation of power rather than public health.<sup>5</sup> Amid the shifting power balance and organized street protests, growing polarization could threaten the enduring political stability that has been achieved in Malaysia through coalitions between diverse groups. In August 2021, as Malaysia was struggling to overcome a further wave of Covid-19, the coalition lost its majority and Muhyiddin was replaced as prime minister by Ismail Sabri Yaakob of UMNO.

The corruption trial of former prime minister Najib Razak started in 2019. The former prime minister faced 21 counts of money laundering and four counts of abuse of power for allegedly receiving illegal transfers of at least 2.3 billion rupiah (USD 550.8 million) between 2011 and 2014.<sup>6</sup> Najib was eventually found guilty on some of the charges in July 2020 and sentenced to 12 years of jail, suspended pending appeal.<sup>7</sup> The high-profile case exacerbated long-standing public concerns around corruption in Malaysian politics.<sup>8</sup>



## Transnational terrorism and international tensions

Terrorist attacks in Malaysia have been relatively rare, and the overall effectiveness of government efforts to tackle extremism is regarded as quite high. Hundreds of Malaysians joined the Afghanistan jihad in the 1980s, and a domestic extremist network existed for several years before it was disbanded in 2002. Noordin Mohammad Top, the mastermind of the 2005 Bali attacks, was a Malaysian national. A total of 102 Malaysians are thought to have joined ISIS in the Middle East since 2013. Forty of them are believed have been killed in combat, nine as suicide bombers.<sup>9</sup> Following the death of Malaysian ISIS leader Muhammad Wannady Mohamed Jedi in Syria in April 2017, the Counter Terrorism Division reported a decline in recruitment of ISIS militants in Malaysia.<sup>10</sup> In March 2019, the police announced that they had supported the return and relocation of 11 adults and 12 children out of 51 Malaysians detained in Syria for their alleged involvement in terrorism.<sup>11</sup>

The Malaysian government also monitors the risk of reemerging domestic extremist networks. A grenade attack on a nightclub near Kuala Lumpur injured eight people in 2016, and Malaysian authorities successfully foiled a plot to launch a terror attack during the 2017 Southeast Asian Games in Kuala Lumpur, arresting 19 suspects.<sup>12</sup> In late December 2017, a video featuring Malaysian citizen and ISIS militant Muhammad Aqif Heusen Rahizat (aka Abu Sufyan Malayzi) was posted online to appeal to local extremists, urging followers to launch attacks in their home countries if they couldn't join the fight in Syria.<sup>13</sup> Some research has suggested that extremist views are widespread in the country. One survey found that 11 percent of Malaysians view ISIS favorably, the second-highest percentage among all countries.<sup>14</sup>

The Malaysian government has passed several anti-terror legislative acts and also supports intensive actions on the ground. The police pursue the rehabilitation of terrorist offenders during and after detention, and education initiatives include a range of programs.<sup>15</sup> For example, in 2017 the Ministry of Youth established guidelines, based on government-sponsored research, for promoting public awareness of the dangers of radicalism and involvement in extremism. The police have also supported outreach and security partnerships with communities in eastern Sabah.<sup>16</sup> Civil society groups have contributed to counter-messaging through initiatives to promote a shared, democratic national identity and by using foundational religious teachings to educate youth. Civil society groups have also raised human rights concerns over the government approach—for example, over the close monitoring of released prisoners.<sup>17</sup>

Malaysia has sought to play an active role in regional and international conflict-reduction initiatives. In 2020, it led a UN global ceasefire appeal as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, gaining the support of 171 member states. The government has also played a role in the peace process of various neighboring countries. In 2001, Malaysia began facilitating peace dialogue between the Philippines and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, maintaining a significant external role ever since. Malaysia has also supported the less productive peace dialogue between the Thai government and Malay-Muslim separatists from southern Thailand.<sup>18</sup>

Malaysia has complex security interests in both southern Thailand and the southern Philippines. In the Philippines, Malaysia is concerned about extremism, kidnapping for ransom, illicit trade, migration flows, and long-standing claims by traditional rulers from the nearby Philippine islands of Tawi Tawi. In late 2017, Malaysian security forces killed a key member of the Filipino group Abu Sayyaf who was involved in kidnapping in the waters off eastern Sabah.<sup>19</sup> In November 2018, Malaysian authorities arrested eight suspects for planning a series of kidnappings near the coast of Sabah. Detainees included a Filipino who is suspected of being a “right-hand man” to senior Abu Sayyaf leader Furuji Indama.<sup>20</sup>

Concerns persist regarding perceived threats to Malaysia's sovereignty over Sabah. In February 2013, as many as 200 individuals, many of them armed, landed on Sabah from Tawi Tawi. Sent by the self-proclaimed Sultan of Sulu, the group was involved in several violent clashes before Malaysian security forces overwhelmed them, killing many in the process. In early 2018, Malaysia rejected a proposal by a member of a Philippines government committee to amend the Philippine constitution to include Sabah as the 13<sup>th</sup> federal state of the Philippines. Diplomatic relations were also affected in 2020 when senior Filipino officials again suggested that Sabah was not part of Malaysia.<sup>21</sup>

A series of disputes with Indonesia over the Sipadan–Ligitan islands, the Ambalat sea block, and the precise land-border demarcation between the two countries raised security tensions, but they have not led to a repeat of the military attacks of 1964. Tensions also persist over Chinese maritime claims. Malaysia has sought to avoid being drawn into conflict or a geopolitical tussle, pursuing where possible diplomatic channels, judicial process, and legal resolution bilaterally, within ASEAN, and internationally.



## Separatism and autonomy

The rise of grievances and associated state nationalism in Sabah and Sarawak, the two Malaysian states that are geographically separated from the Malay peninsula, can be traced back to the 1963 Malaysia Agreement to create the Federation of Malaysia. Over the years, the country has witnessed indigenous calls to separate from peninsular Malaysia, and tensions have grown over the perceived erosion of equal status for Sabah and Sarawak.<sup>22</sup> Recent claims have been fueled by social media, although they remain relatively low key.<sup>23</sup> In April 2019, the new Pakatan Harapan government failed to pass an amendment to the first article of the Malaysian constitution to restore Sabah and Sarawak to the equal partner status accorded by the 1963 Agreement.

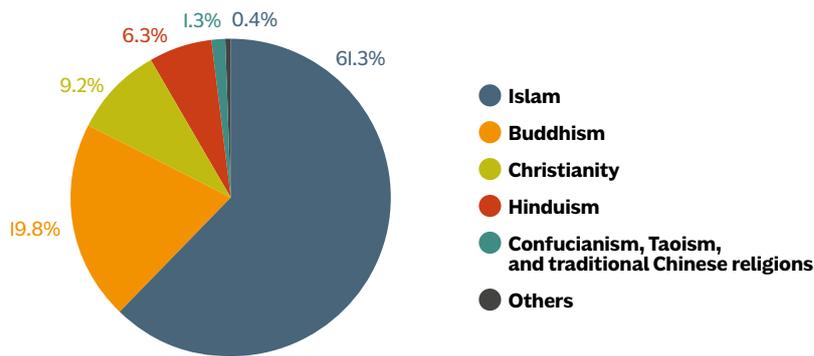
Interethnic differences, as well as divisions between Muslims and Christians, have also grown. Groups endorsing territorial supremacy and self-determination have become more vocal, especially in the state of Sabah. Key factors that raise the political temperature include the unique demography of Muslim and Christian indigenous populations and the presence of migrants from the southern Philippines in Sabah. Security specialists remain concerned over the potential impact of any future instability or violence in Indonesian Kalimantan, given the legacy of communal violence in 2001.<sup>24</sup>



## Identity-based tension and conflict

Malaysia's population of more than 32 million is categorized into Bumiputera (67.4 percent, consisting mainly of Malays and also including indigenous groups such as Orang Asli, Dayak, and Anak Negeri), Chinese (24.6 percent), and Indian (7.3 percent). While Bahasa Malaysia is the official national tongue, 134 languages are spoken, including English, Cantonese, Mandarin, Tamil, and indigenous languages in multiple dialects.<sup>25</sup> Approximately 61 percent of the population adheres to Islam, nearly 20 percent are Buddhist, 9 percent Christian, and 6 percent Hindu (Figure 12).<sup>26</sup>

The Malaysian system is in some ways an outlier, an example of explicit recognition of ethnic categories as a fairly successful means to preserve stability in a multiethnic state. The ethnic and religious diversity of Malaysia prompted the ruling government, after its independence from British colonial powers, to take steps to bolster national unity. Seeking to balance the interests of the Malay and Muslim majority with the overwhelming business dominance of the ethnic Chinese community, national leaders have attempted to safeguard ethnic-majority political dominance in a divided plural society. For this reason, preferential treatment for specific ethno-religious groups has been embodied in various forms in Malaysia. Article 3(l) of the 1957 Federal Constitution guarantees that "Islam is the religion of the Federation; but other religions may be practiced in peace and harmony in any part" of Malaysia, illustrating how Islam is legally enshrined as first among equals.<sup>27</sup>



**Figure 12:** Religious makeup of Malaysia

Source: Department of Statistics of Malaysia

Further measures were introduced after communal unrest and rioting in the late 1960s, particularly in 1969. The comprehensive New Economic Policy was introduced, initially aimed at achieving national unity and fostering interracial harmony. It was particularly directed at supporting the predominantly rural, ethnic Malay and indigenous groups by according them the status of Bumiputera (literally, “Land of the Prince”) and providing special benefits and privileges not enjoyed by other ethnic groups, notably the Chinese and Indian minorities.<sup>28</sup> The policy became controversial, as it was perceived to be discriminatory.

The long-standing Barisan Nasional (BN) government was founded on the *consociational* model, based on the idea of power-sharing, whereby political actors aspire to represent all the salient segments of society.<sup>29</sup> The model was institutionally grounded on inclusive coalitions, and yet ruling elites from across the political spectrum have frequently employed regionalism and ethno-religious electoral strategies to gain support by exploiting deep social cleavages. Politicians have often sought to represent their own ethnic interests and identities, narrowly focusing on communal issues to appeal to local voices.<sup>30</sup>

In November 2018, growing appeals to ethno-religious identity could be seen in the two-day riots that broke out at the Seafeld Sri Maha Mariamman Hindu temple in Selangor, which led to the death of an ethnic Malay fireman and involved the burning of eighteen cars and two motorcycles. In the politically charged debate following the incident, some attributed the violence to a disagreement over whether the temple should be moved, while others pointed to an increase in partisan rhetoric calling for the demolition of Hindu temples.<sup>31</sup> The incident renewed long-standing concerns over harsh police treatment of ethnic Indians, particularly Tamils. The subsequent case surrounding the death of the fireman, Muhammad Adib Mohd Kassim, continued to inflame political strains between the ethnic Indian and Malay populations.

In December 2018, the new government reversed its pledge to sign and ratify the UN International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination. Malay groups feared that such actions would require amending the affirmative action accorded to Malays and other Bumiputera under Article 153 of the constitution, which would in turn dilute the benefits they had enjoyed for decades.<sup>32</sup>

Close to three million of Malaysia’s 32 million population are noncitizens, a majority of them migrant workers from other Asian countries.<sup>33</sup> Malaysia has offered economic opportunity, and in some cases a haven from violence, to many. Tensions persist over the status and rights of migrants, especially when government agencies perceive them as a security threat. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated fears, particularly over Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, who became the subject of social media attacks and public acts of discrimination.<sup>34</sup> In April 2020, Malaysian authorities began a more restrictive policy of denying entry to boats carrying Rohingya refugees, citing Covid-19 concerns. During the next month, Malaysian authorities rounded up hundreds of the refugees and other undocumented migrants.



## Local political conflict and electoral violence

Election-related violence has been less prevalent in Malaysia than in many other Southeast Asian countries. However, several notable incidents occurred before and during the 14<sup>th</sup> general election. In March 2018, parliament approved revisions to electoral boundaries that many legislators and activists saw as intentional gerrymandering by the ruling BN coalition. Opposition parliamentarians, and hundreds of supporters, protested at the National Monument in the center of Kuala Lumpur.<sup>35</sup>

On May 9, 2018, the decision to close the polling center at Taman Dato Harun, near Kuala Lumpur, at the 5:00 p.m. deadline, denied around 100 queuing voters the chance to cast their votes.<sup>36</sup> Later that night, when vote counting was under way, hundreds gathered outside a results center in Ayer Hitam, Johor, to press their concerns that officials would not sign off on results that were in the opposition's favor.<sup>37</sup>

The resignation of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in March 2020 led to small protests in Kuala Lumpur against the royal appointment of Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yasin without an election. While some of the protests went without incident, others saw police arresting protestors and threatening to charge them under the country's Communication and Multimedia Act, the Peaceful Assembly Act, and the British colonial-era Sedition Act.<sup>38</sup>



## Local conflict over resources and community rights

Rapid economic development, intensive logging, and the expansion of palm oil plantations in peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak have adversely affected indigenous people whose livelihoods have traditionally depended on forest resources.<sup>39</sup>

Despite legal and constitutional protection for native customary rights, violations including systematic discrimination, nonrecognition, exclusion from decision-making, and land grabbing all persist.<sup>40</sup>

In December 2016, the Federal Court ruled that native customs with regard to land titles have no force of law.<sup>41</sup> In March 2017, another court ruling held that indigenous people who resettled in villages decades ago no longer enjoy rights over land they had previously decided to abandon.<sup>42</sup> Later, in July 2018, more than 500 indigenous people representing local rights bodies protested in Bintulu against the Sarawak Land Code Amendment passed by the State Assembly. This revision would further restrict their rights and control over the use of *pemakai menoa* (territorial domain) and *pulau galau* (communal forest reserve).<sup>43</sup>

Indigenous groups have demonstrated against development initiatives they deem to be detrimental to their ancestral lands. In early 2018, more than 800 people from the Orang Asli community established three blockades at the Gunung Stong Selatan forest reserve in Kelantan to protest logging activities and a durian plantation.<sup>44</sup> In January 2019, the federal government filed an unprecedented lawsuit against the Kelantan State government over infringement and encroachment by plantation companies.<sup>45</sup> In mid-February 2019, 300 people from the Penan and Berawan ethnic communities created human barriers to prevent forest clearing near Mulu National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site.<sup>46</sup> Around the same time, two blockades were erected near villages in Gerik, Perak. Loggers and local authorities have in the past attempted to tear down such blockades, but in August 2019 the head of the Perak State government, the Menteri Besar, ordered a temporary halt to logging activities until the state and indigenous communities reached an agreement.<sup>47</sup>



## Violent crime

Since 2009, the National Crime Index, constructed from Malaysian government data, has shown a downward trend, with an average of 11,000 fewer cases each consecutive year. Malaysian officials point to police deterrence and prevention initiatives as reasons for the reduction in crime rates.<sup>48</sup> In 2019, the index recorded 16,170 cases relating to violent crimes, along with 67,105 cases relating to property crimes.<sup>49</sup>

In 2018, the Small Arms Survey provided an estimate of 217,000 civilian-owned licit and illicit firearms in Malaysia, amounting to a relatively low rate of 0.7 firearms per 100 inhabitants.<sup>50</sup> A total of 0.49 deaths per 100,000 in 2017 resulted from firearm violence.<sup>51</sup> The Malaysian Firearms (Increased Penalties) Act 1971 is strict; any person in unlawful possession of a firearm risks being sentenced to whipping and up to fourteen years in prison.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, criminals have frequently resorted to using knives in violent crimes.<sup>53</sup>

Kidnapping for ransom remains a major risk in Sabah, where 20 successful and five attempted abduction cases were recorded between 2000 and 2016. Affecting foreigners and Malaysians alike, most of the abduction cases were carried out by the Abu Sayyaf group.<sup>54</sup> The police say that they have thwarted at least 40 kidnapping-for-ransom attempts in the seas adjacent to Sabah.<sup>55</sup>

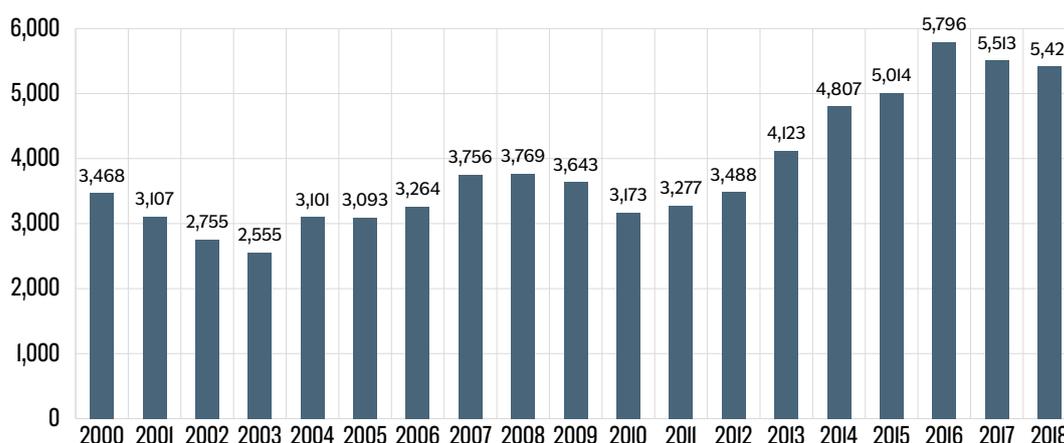


## Domestic and gender-based violence

As in many countries, gender-based violence in Malaysia is underreported, and few statistical studies have been conducted. Official data shows an increase in annual reported cases of domestic violence from 3,173 in 2010 to almost 6,000 in 2016, and then a reduction to 5,421 in 2018 (Figure 13). Figures also suggest a decrease in reported rape cases, from 3,595 in 2010 to 1,582 in 2017. Marital rape is not recognized as a crime in Malaysia. Services for victims of domestic violence, particularly the government's One Stop Crisis Centers, have received widespread acclaim, yet they still suffer from a lack of trained staff, limited medical supplies, and a concentration of services in urban areas.<sup>56</sup>

Malaysia has a relatively strong legal framework to combat sexual violence against children, and adequate social protection. Confidence in the capacity of government and law enforcement is low, however, and media engagement is limited.<sup>57</sup> Between 2010 and 2017, a total of 22,134 children (mainly girls) were sexually abused, according to government data.<sup>58</sup> Marriage of girls under the age of 16 persists in some communities, despite widespread public disapproval. Traditional circumcision of girls as well as boys remains widespread in Muslim communities.<sup>59</sup>

Discrimination against gender and sexual minority groups continues to be pervasive. Under Najib's leadership, the government introduced an Action Plan to Address Social Ills (LGBT Behavior) 2017–2021, with the aim of proactively curbing and suppressing gender identities/expressions perceived as against Islamic teaching.<sup>60</sup> In late 2018, Prime Minister Mahathir stated that Malaysia cannot accept LGBT rights such as same-sex marriage, dismissing them as Western values.<sup>61</sup>



**Figure 13:** Domestic violence cases (2007–2018)

Source: *Women’s Aid Organization*<sup>62</sup>



## New media, conflict, and violence

Most Malaysians are internet users (84 percent in 2019).<sup>63</sup> Social network platforms account for 96.5 percent of internet use.<sup>64</sup> Almost all social networking users in Malaysia (over 97 percent of them) have a Facebook account, making it the preferred online platform.<sup>65</sup>

In April 2018, Najib’s administration enacted the Anti-fake News Act, just a few weeks before the dissolution of parliament for the general election. It was introduced with the stated aim of maintaining public order and national security by criminalizing the publication of “wholly or partly false” news. The law carries a potential 10-year prison sentence for offenders and is applicable extraterritorially, and critics railed at its impact on freedom of speech and expression and its potential as a tool to suppress dissent for political gain.<sup>66</sup> A few weeks after its adoption, a Danish national became the first person to be convicted under the controversial law, for publishing “fake news” in the form of a YouTube video on the recent shooting of a Palestinian lecturer in Kuala Lumpur.<sup>67</sup> During the election campaign period, even Mahathir was probed under the controversial law for his statements alleging that his private jet was sabotaged.<sup>68</sup>

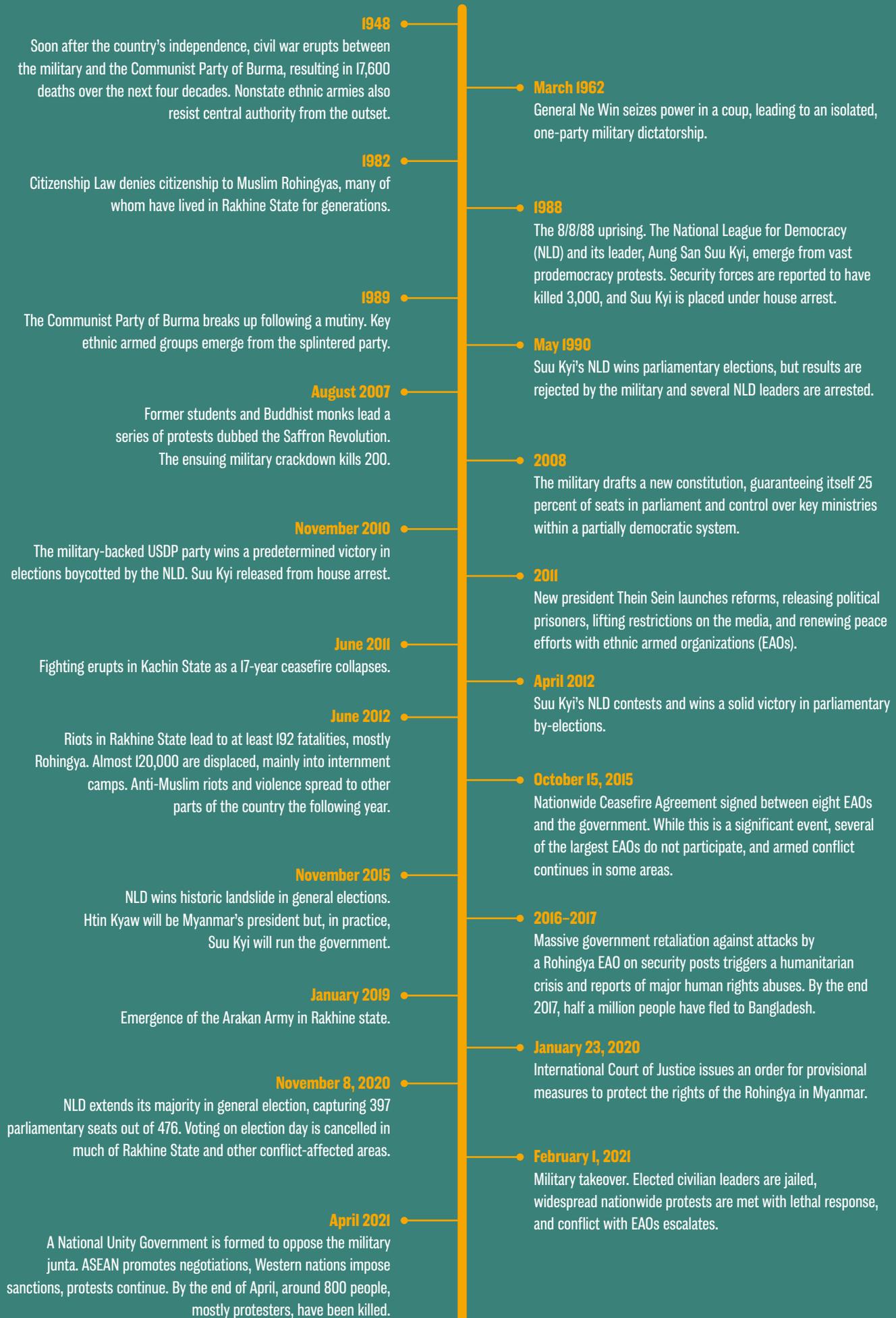
The coronavirus pandemic led to a spike in online hate speech against foreigners, as posts began to accuse foreigners of spreading the disease, burdening the state, and taking jobs. While social media groups like Facebook declined to state whether or not there had been an increase of such speech, 84 nongovernmental organizations wrote a letter to Mahathir expressing particular concern over prejudice against Rohingya refugees.<sup>69</sup>

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# MYANMAR

## Overview

Following a second landslide victory by the National League for Democracy (NLD) in the general election of November 2020, Myanmar's military alleged widespread voter fraud without producing convincing evidence. On February 1, 2021, the day the newly elected parliament was to convene, Myanmar awoke to news that the military had retaken control of all government and administrative institutions and detained NLD leadership and parliamentarians.

Widespread protests and civil disobedience soon followed, despite the imposition of a strict curfew. Security forces began to crack down on demonstrations, using increasingly violent tactics. General strikes pushed the national economy to the brink of collapse, generating severe risks of food insecurity and mass poverty across a population already affected by the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Internet access was severely restricted across the entire country, disproportionately affecting rural and poorer populations.

Aung San Suu Kyi had remained head of the ruling NLD since 2015, when the party won the first free elections in many decades. National political institutions were broadly stable over this period, and the country progressed on many fronts after decades of absolute military control. Yet key reforms to strengthen the foundations of democratic governance, including constitutional amendments, did not make headway, and the military easily reestablished its control in February 2021, either ending or pausing Myanmar's decade-long experiment with democracy.

During that decade, the main formal peace process achieved little beyond the landmark 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. Armed conflict continued, mainly in the areas with armed groups who did not sign the agreement, including Kachin State and northern Shan State near the Chinese border. In the west, Rakhine State also experienced upheaval after the Arakan Army emerged as a prominent and expanding armed group confronting the central government. A huge spike in battle deaths occurred in 2019 and continued in 2020, involving civilian casualties and leading to displacement across large areas of the state. In Kachin State alone, more than 97,000 remained displaced.<sup>2</sup> Responses to the political turmoil of February 2021 differed among Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), with a dramatic increase in clashes in Kachin and Kayin States reflecting both preexisting conflict trends and new protests among ethnic minorities.

Meanwhile, over 700,000 recent Rohingya refugees remain in Bangladesh. International pressure has grown to seek accountability for those who committed human rights violations in Rakhine during 2016 and 2017. Religious and ethnic divides worsened across the country as the government had limited success in curbing the spread of narratives targeting Muslims and other ethnic and religious minorities. Radical Buddhist groups used social media to propagate fear and hatred. The Myanmar military has lent support to radical groups and remains unaccountable for crimes against ethnic minorities in Rakhine and other areas.



## National political context

The political reforms undertaken by former president Thein Sein ushered in a period of relative stability at the national level. With its landslide victories in the 2015 and 2020 general elections, the NLD led the government and dominated the democratic political scene. Constitutional reform was central to the tension between the Tatmadaw and the democratically elected NLD administration. The NLD also appeared to make efforts to appease the military, as illustrated by its refusal to condemn the Tatmadaw's human rights violations in its clashes with ethnic armed groups and during violence against Rohingya in Rakhine State.

A month before the general election of November 2020, the election commission announced a list of constituencies where voting would not take place, disenfranchising nearly two million primarily ethnic minority voters from conflict-affected areas. The suspension of voting in nine of the 17 townships in Rakhine State was especially controversial, as it disenfranchised over one million voters. In the election itself, the NLD further extended its majority, and the military-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) performed poorly. Smaller parties representing ethnic minorities won seats in some states, but performed poorly in others as their efforts to run more professional campaigns failed to counter the strength and appeal of the NLD.

The military based its decision to retake power on February 1, 2021, on the assertion that Myanmar's democracy according to the constitution was under threat, initially promising to convene fresh elections within one year. It formed a new government called the State Administration Council (SAC), headed by the commander-in-chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. The SAC suspended parliament, removed all ministerial personnel, and replaced them with a mix of active members of the military and loyal civilians. The military began to rapidly consolidate power, undoing some key reforms from the NLD era and vesting security forces with increased capabilities and reduced oversight. Freedom of speech has also been restricted through tight controls and outright bans on access to the internet, the withdrawal of publishing licenses of dozens of media outlets, and arrests of journalists.



## Transnational terrorism and international tensions

Most of Myanmar's ongoing conflicts occur near border areas and affect trade and diplomatic relations with neighboring countries. China continues to play a significant role by providing support for nonstate armed groups while also maintaining its relationship with the government, including the military. Major infrastructure projects, especially plans to connect China to coastal ports, are threatened by armed conflict.

To the east, Thailand maintains relations with Myanmar's military while at the same time being a relatively safe harbor for leaders of some armed groups—the Karen National Union (KNU), the New Mon State Party, the Karenni National People's Party, and others. Fresh conflict between the Tatmadaw and the KNU since the 2021 military takeover has caused villages on both sides of the border to be evacuated and led thousands of displaced people to seek refuge in Thailand.<sup>3</sup> To the west, India-Myanmar relations must account for the presence of groups that straddle the border. For Myanmar, the National Socialist Council of Nagaland–Khaplang is the most significant of these groups, and it has close ties with other ethnic Naga groups in Northeast India. Following pressure from the Indian Government, the Tatmadaw arrested and deported to India 22 ethnic Assam and Meitei rebels who had been living in Myanmar's Sagaing region.<sup>4</sup> Since February 2021, hundreds of Myanmar security forces have defected, fleeing into India alongside locals seeking to avoid violence or arrest. Many have found safe haven amongst communities in Mizoram who share ethnic ties, though mounting pressure from New Delhi indicates that this will not be accepted as a long-term solution.

Problems have blighted the border with Bangladesh, including the mass flight of Rohingya. When the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army first emerged in late 2016 following a series of high-profile attacks against

Myanmar's Border Guard Police, there was much speculation that the group had links with transnational Islamist groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba. No verifiable evidence has proven that transnational terrorist groups have operated within Myanmar, despite statements from Jihadist groups in the wake of the Rakhine crisis.<sup>5</sup> The Arakan Army has also been present on the Bangladesh side of the border.

Political upheaval in early 2021 reversed progress since 2011 towards Myanmar's international rehabilitation. Western countries have introduced targeted sanctions and suspended foreign aid, while Japan and especially South Korea have pushed for a return to democratic rule.<sup>6</sup> China has adopted a guarded position, while Russia has been more supportive of the military regime. In April 2021, ASEAN leaders announced a five-point consensus on Myanmar involving constructive dialogue, an envoy, mediation, a halt to violence, and humanitarian assistance. ASEAN leaders hoped to build common ground with the United States and China in advancing this position. Campaigners in Myanmar stressed the need to engage with the opposition National Unity Government and civil society movements.



## Separatism and autonomy

Myanmar has been affected by a vast array of subnational conflicts since independence in 1948. Over time, as communist movements fell away and identity differences hardened, armed groups became defined primarily by their ethnicity.

Overall, there are more than twenty EAOs, as well as dozens of militias, border guard forces, and splinter groups. While the government has gradually expanded its authority in historically contested ethnic minority areas and frontier zones, approximately 118 of Myanmar's 330 townships were still affected to some extent by conflict and associated tensions as late as 2017, a figure that had barely changed by 2021. These townships contain more than 12.3 million people, or close to one-quarter of Myanmar's population. Myanmar's EAOs vary widely in terms of size and influence.<sup>7</sup> The largest, the United Wa State Army, runs a largely autonomous region along the Chinese border, can muster up to 30,000 troops, and has major business interests across Myanmar and beyond.

In 2011 and 2012, a new series of bilateral ceasefire agreements were reached with EAOs and militia groups, followed by the signing of a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) by eight EAOs in 2015. Two more EAOs, the mid-sized New Mon State Party and the tiny Lahu Democratic Union, signed the NCA in 2018. However, at least 10 major EAOs have not taken part. These nonsignatories control four times as many troops as those who have signed (Figure 14).

The main signatories to the NCA are based in southern Shan State and in southeastern Myanmar along the Thailand border (Kayah, Mon, and Kayah States, as well as Tanintharyi Region). Ten years ago, southeastern Myanmar included hotspots of violence, but it had been comparatively quiet in recent years until the rise in violence following the military takeover of government in 2021.<sup>8</sup> Armed clashes persisted in Kayah State, but there were only three conflict deaths in Mon in 2018 and 2019, and none in Kayah and Tanintharyi (Figure 15). By contrast, nonsignatories are largely found in northern Myanmar, along with Rakhine State.<sup>9</sup> In these areas, conflict has typically been far more intense.

Conflict in northern Shan State has mainly involved the military and EAO members of a grouping known as the Northern Alliance.<sup>10</sup> In late 2018, the political wings of the Arakan Army, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army announced that they would halt military operations and engage in political dialogue. Their statement was followed by the declaration of a unilateral ceasefire by the Myanmar military on December 21, 2018. Initially limited to six months, the ceasefire was nonetheless extended until the end of August 2019.

That month, however, three of the Northern Alliance groups staged a series of attacks on military installations and other locations (Figure 16).<sup>11</sup> For a time, fighting closed the main road to the primary trade crossing with China. After the attacks, China sought to broker an agreement between Northern Alliance members and the Myanmar military and government.

NCA signatory	Troops	Nonsignatory	Troops
All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF)	400	Karen National Progressive Party (KNPP)	600
Arakan Liberation Party (ALP)	100	United Wa State Army (UWSO)	30,000
Chin National Front (CNF)	200	Kachin Independence Organization (KIO)	12,000
Democratic Karen Benevolent Army (DKBA)	1,500	National Democratic Alliance Army–Eastern Shan State (NDAA–ESS)	3,000
Karen National Liberation Army Peace Council (KNU/KNLA–PC)	200	Palaung State Liberation Front / Ta'ang National Liberation Army (PSLF/TNLA)	6,000
Karen National Union (KNU)	5,000	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA)	2,000
Pa-O National Liberation Organization (PNLO)	400	Arakan Army (AA)	3,100
Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS)	8,000	Shan State Progress Party / Shan State Army–North (SSPP/SSA–N)	8,000
New Mon State Party (NMSP)	800	National Socialist Council Nagaland–Khaplang (NSCN–K)	500
Lahu Democratic Union (LDU)	0	Kuki National Army (KNA)	200
<b>Overall troop numbers</b>	<b>16,600</b>		<b>65,400</b>

**Figure 14:** Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement signatories and nonsignatories

Source: *The World Bank's Myanmar Systematic Country Diagnostic*<sup>12</sup>

In Rakhine State, the Arakan Army (AA) has expanded greatly. Like other EAOs, the AA seeks to represent the local population, who harbor grievances against the central state. The AA insurgency led to an estimated 1,456 deaths in Rakhine State in 2019, as well as 187 in neighboring Chin State the same year.<sup>13</sup> By mid-2020, the AA appeared to control many of the rural areas in central and northern Rakhine, while also conducting targeted attacks in the state's towns and spreading into southern townships. Government officials are not able to travel in much of the state. Major military operations against the AA have had limited success and have led to civilian casualties. Military air strikes in March 2020, for example, led to 21 civilian deaths.<sup>14</sup>

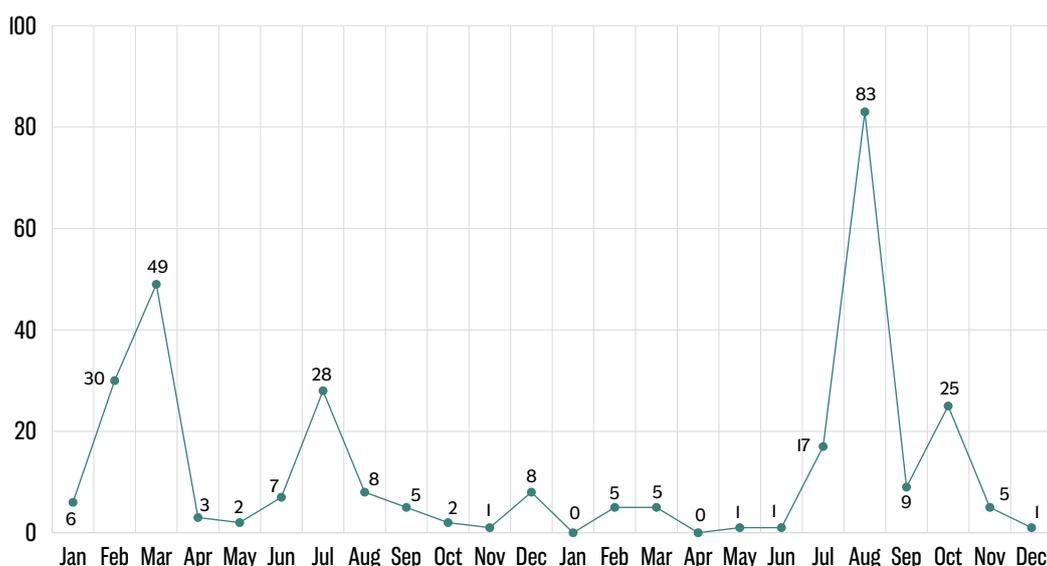
NCA signatories held political dialogues with the government, including three Union Peace Conferences (also known as the Twenty-First Century Panglong Process), and interim arrangements such as joint monitoring efforts were taken forward. Relatively little of substance was agreed upon, however, and violence did not totally abate. Most notably, the Karen National Union's Fifth Brigade and the Myanmar military clashed repeatedly in Hpapun township. The two largest signatories, the Restoration Council of Shan State and the Karen National Union, temporarily suspended their participation in the formal peace process in October 2018.<sup>15</sup> In parallel, the Tatmadaw challenged two militia groups that had agreed to ceasefires in 2010—the Kachin Defense Army (also known as the Kaung Kha militia), based in northern Shan, and a Border Guard Force occupying territory along the Thai border in Kayin State—highlighting the persistent instability of relations between armed actors.

The NCA essentially collapsed after the military takeover of government in 2021, as many signatory EAOs refused to recognize the State Administration Council and conflict between the KNU and the

State/region	2018	2019	Total	State/region	2018	2019	Total
<b>Southeastern</b>				<b>Western</b>			
Tanintharyi	0	0	0	Chin	49	187	236
Mon	2	1	3	Rakhine	37	1,419	1,456
Kayin	7	18	25	<b>Central</b>			
Kayah	0	0	0	Yangon	4	1	5
<b>Northern</b>				Magway	0	0	0
Kachin	13	3	16	Mandalay	0	0	0
Shan	149	152	301	Ayeyarwady	0	0	0
Sagaing	7	1	8	Bago	0	1	1
				<b>Total</b>	<b>268</b>	<b>1,783</b>	<b>2,051</b>

**Figure 15:** Conflict deaths by state/region (2018 and 2019)

Source: Myanmar Institute for Peace and Security<sup>16</sup>



**Figure 16:** Conflict deaths in Shan State, by month (2018–2019)

Source: Myanmar Institute for Peace and Security

Tatmadaw reignited. Fighting in the northeast of the country between the Myanmar military and the Kachin Independence Organization has also escalated. EAOs have been drawn into protest politics as important actors counterbalancing Tatmadaw military power, and some EAOs have offered sanctuary to prodemocracy activists from Yangon and elsewhere.

Covid-19 hit Myanmar when prospects for peace were deteriorating. While the first wave of the pandemic was relatively limited, the second wave caused thousands of deaths and reached across the country. Throughout March and April 2020, during the first wave, public calls to the Tatmadaw requesting a ceasefire were made by several EAOs, in line with international pressure from the UN secretary-general and others.<sup>17</sup> A unilateral ceasefire was eventually declared by the Tatmadaw on May 9, 2020, although cynical observers pointed to the limited impact of similar announcements in the past.

The Covid-19 response highlighted fragmentation across Myanmar society, in particular along ethnic lines. Large parts of the population, especially in rural and ceasefire areas, have limited access to government health services and support, relying instead on civil society or ethnic armed groups. The pandemic did, however, lead to some cooperation across conflict lines from late April 2020, when the government formed the Committee to Coordinate and Collaborate with Ethnic Armed Organizations to Prevent, Control, and Treat Covid-19. This cooperation, along with most other elements of the national response to Covid-19, came to a halt following political turmoil in early 2021.



## Identity-based tension and conflict

Over several decades of military rule, Burmese nationalism became increasingly associated with the ethnic and religious superiority of the Bamar Buddhist majority.<sup>18</sup> This perception, accompanied by the continued power of the Tatmadaw, has contributed to discrimination and occasional violence against religious minorities. After overthrowing the democratic regime in 1962, General Ne Win launched a “Burmanization” campaign in an attempt to assimilate ethnic minorities.

During the years of military dictatorship, mass conversion ceremonies were conducted in rural areas where poor Christians would be granted a national identity card in return for converting to Buddhism. In northern parts of Rakhine State, home to a large population of Muslim Rohingya, the regime created a network of model Buddhist villages by bringing in Buddhists from elsewhere to change the demographic balance of the region. Since the Ne Win era, most Rohingya have not been allowed full Myanmar nationality.

Networks of ultranationalist Buddhists, often led by monks, are influential. Notable are the 969 Movement, which fomented nationwide violence against Muslims in 2012, and its successor, the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion, or Ma Ba Tha. Formed in 2013, Ma Ba Tha performs a range of benevolent social functions while also pursuing an agenda of spreading Islamophobia through local sermons and social media.

After the NLD won the elections in 2015, anti-Muslim riots subsided, but institutionalized discrimination continued. The NLD was characterized as a pro-Muslim party by Ma Ba Tha and other Buddhist nationalists. The party relieved the pressure from Buddhist conservatives by fielding no Muslim candidates in the 2015 election and by allowing politicians to make anti-Muslim statements.

Ma Ba Tha became less vocal, and in 2017 it was banned by the national Buddhist organization, the State Sangha Maha Nayaka Committee, which has become more active in disciplining radical Buddhist groups. In the 2020 election, the NLD fielded two Muslim candidates, both of whom won their seats.<sup>19</sup> But authorities still refuse to register Muslims as native Myanmar citizens, they deny them access to healthcare and education in Rakhine State, and the national education curriculum has been criticized for including discriminatory content against nonmajority ethnicities and religions.<sup>20</sup>

There have also been incidents of Christian worshippers being attacked by radical Buddhists, and authorities banning gatherings of Christians.<sup>21</sup> Between 2017 and 2018, while engaging in conflict against the Kachin Independence Army in Kachin State, the Tatmadaw reportedly destroyed Christian churches.<sup>22</sup> Nonstate armed groups have also been accused of intolerance and, in at least one case, of committing atrocities. According to Amnesty International, up to 99 Hindu villagers were massacred by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army in Rakhine State in August 2017.<sup>23</sup>

The flight of Rohingya from Rakhine State in 2016 and 2017 continued a trend of military operations and organized communal violence. Almost 2,400 deaths due to conflict were recorded in Myanmar during 2017, most of them in Rakhine. It was the highest recorded annual total for Myanmar since 1989 according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme.<sup>24</sup> Bangladesh now shelters over 1.1 million

Rohingya, most of them in or near Cox's Bazar, with little short-term likelihood of safe return.<sup>25</sup> Many former Rohingya villages in Rakhine State have been bulldozed by the Myanmar authorities. A further 125,000 Rohingya were confined to displacement camps in Rakhine after the violence of 2012 and 2013.

The International Criminal Court approved an in-depth probe of reports that the Myanmar military had committed crimes against humanity in Rakhine State. In 2019, the UN Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar took over. In January 2020, a case involving a claim of genocide was filed at the International Court of Justice. The court ordered Myanmar to take provisional measures to protect Rohingya and to ensure that evidence would not be destroyed, and it required Myanmar to submit a report within four months, and every six months thereafter, outlining its progress.



## Local conflict over resources and community rights

Conflicts between the central government and ethnic minorities are partly driven by rights to, and control over, land and other natural resources. Myanmar's political and administrative systems remain highly centralized, and many development projects—dams, roads, plantations, mines—have generated tensions between local communities and the central government. Some projects have led to clashes between government forces and EAOs, especially in the country's north and southeast. Protests against resuming construction of a landmark hydroelectric project backed by China, the Myitsone Dam, have continued.<sup>26</sup>

The 2008 constitution upholds state ownership of all land in Myanmar, and laws give government the right to confiscate land and grant concessions in any project considered of national interest. On the other hand, major EAOs apply their own policies on land and natural resources, which tend to endorse customary ownership rights and management, and they sometimes promote the active participation of civil society. Local resource rights are also among the key demands of EAO leaders in the ceasefire and peace negotiations, and of ethnic political parties and civil society groups.<sup>27</sup>

Before the 2015 elections, the NLD promised to address the issue of land confiscations under military rule and to recognize customary land rights. Once in office, a reinvestigation process was established allowing for the participation of civil society. However, according to Human Rights Watch and local civil society groups, some of the committees that were established under the process are ineffective or inactive, and overall progress has been limited.<sup>28</sup> The NLD manifesto for the 2020 election did not emphasize the issue of land confiscations.<sup>29</sup>

In September 2018, the government amended the 2012 Vacant, Fallow, and Virgin Lands Management Act, a measure allowing the state to use rural land, with no official ownership rights, for large-scale investment and development. The amendment recognizes customary land ownership by rural and ethnic minorities for a 30-year period, but it set a deadline of March 2019 for filing claims, after which land can be confiscated and those living and cultivating it charged with trespass. One-third of the country's land is classified under the Act, most of it in ethnic minority areas.<sup>30</sup> The amendment to the Act has generated concerns among EAOs. The KNU, for example, issued a statement condemning it for violating rights and contradicting the provisions of the ongoing peace process.<sup>31</sup>



## Violent crime

According to the most recent data from UNODC, the homicide rate in Myanmar remained low at 2.3 per 100,000 people in 2016.<sup>32</sup> Around two-thirds of Myanmar's population still live in rural areas. Official statistics on civilian crimes unrelated to political and communal conflict are scarce. Available data shows that Yangon Region, a largely urban area, has the highest number of recorded crimes, with 13,424 major criminal cases in 2019, or one case per 548 inhabitants.<sup>33</sup> There were 206 reported incidents of human trafficking nationwide in 2018,

although actual trafficking cases, most of which go unreported, are far more numerous.<sup>34</sup> From 2018 to 2020, the United States placed Myanmar on the Tier Three Watch List for the trafficking of women, children, and men—a designation reserved for the most problematic offenders.<sup>35</sup>

Crime category	2017	2018	2019
Rape	270	298	175
Murder	156	176	178
All crimes in major categories <sup>36</sup>	16,015	17,232	13,424

**Figure 17:** Crimes in Yangon 2017–2019

Source: Prepared from crime statistics provided by Myanmar Police<sup>37</sup>

The illicit economy helps sustain conflict and complicates the peace process. The value of illicit trade through official routes between Myanmar and neighboring countries is estimated at USD 6.4 billion annually.<sup>38</sup> The overall value of illicit trade, which includes drugs, wildlife, timber, precious minerals, alcohol, and tobacco, is expected to be much more. For example, 80 percent of jade production, thought to be worth USD 12–31 billion a year, is trafficked out of the country.<sup>39</sup> Many EAOs and government-affiliated armed groups benefit greatly from illegal trade or drug production, particularly in Shan State. In 2018 and 2019, illegal drugs captured by authorities were worth about USD 301 million.<sup>40</sup> In May 2020, a record haul of synthetic and opium-based drugs was made in Kutkai, northern Shan State, when a state-aligned militia was disbanded by the Tatmadaw.<sup>41</sup>

Government-affiliated groups, and some EAOs, are free to pursue legal and illicit business opportunities under ceasefire agreements or informal settlements with the Tatmadaw. Decades of conflict have created criminal networks that receive protection from both rebel groups and militias allied with the Tatmadaw, particularly in Shan State.<sup>42</sup> The smuggling of methamphetamine from Myanmar to Bangladesh appears to have grown significantly since 2017.<sup>43</sup>



## Domestic and gender-based violence

While gender discrimination may be less overt in Myanmar than in some other countries, violence against women remains pervasive. Prosecution of alleged offenders is rare, especially in cases involving intimate partners or family members, and victims rather than abusers are often blamed.

National data on gender-based violence in Myanmar is scarce. Seventeen percent of ever-partnered women aged 15–49 years are believed to have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner at least once.<sup>44</sup> The most recent available data from the Ministry of Home Affairs shows an increase in reported rapes of adults and minors nationwide.<sup>45</sup> A UNFPA-based qualitative study of Southeastern Myanmar in 2017 found gender-based violence to be commonplace, especially intimate partner violence among married couples and sexual violence against children and young girls. Despite efforts by the government and others to build response systems, the formal justice system and essential services are rarely accessed. Key risk factors include drug use and the migration of parents for work, leaving young children vulnerable. Civil society groups have demanded that the criminal code provide more protection for women. At present, there is no specific law against domestic abuse. The preparation of a national prevention-of-violence-against-women bill has been ongoing for seven years.

Some conflict-affected areas are particularly rife with sexual violence. The military and some other armed groups continue to use sexual violence as a strategy to intimidate and create fear among local communities. A report issued by the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on Myanmar details the massive scale of sexual violence and slavery in Rakhine State during the “clearance operations” in 2016 and 2017, and also refers to conflict-related sexual violence elsewhere in the country. The report finds that hundreds of Rohingya women were raped, mostly by gangs, and most often by members of the Tatmadaw.<sup>46</sup>

Negotiations and peace dialogue, including the NCA process, have been dominated by military leaders who are overwhelmingly male. The lack of meaningful space for women at a strategic level translates directly to a lack of inclusion in peacebuilding negotiations and political settlements, where participation is often predicated on political capital and/or combat experience. This systemic exclusion compounds disadvantages in the ways that women experience political participation, economic opportunity, safety, and equality in conflict-affected areas.



## New media and conflict and violence

In 2020, 41 percent of Myanmar’s population had internet access, mostly through mobile phones, and active social media use was a norm.<sup>47</sup> With over 21 million users, Facebook was the most popular social media platform, to the extent that many users accessed no other platform or website.

The prevalence of Facebook has made it a main source of information and misinformation. The government made major announcements such as the resignation of President Htin Kyaw on the platform. Experts warned that future national elections would likely see an intensification of online threats as part of efforts to polarize voters.<sup>48</sup> In parts of Rakhine State, the government restricted internet access for over a year in response to ongoing conflict. Online platforms allowed narratives that justify and even promote majoritarian chauvinism in Myanmar to be propagated widely and with great force by sharing material—including ISIS videos and content from other Buddhist-majority countries. This process has occurred repeatedly across Myanmar.

Government has been associated with the incitement of violence. Hundreds of pages operated by the military, including accounts openly attributed to top generals, were taken down by Facebook in the second half of 2018 after a UN fact-finding mission reported that the platform was being used to incite hatred and encourage violence. This major propaganda effort, which continued online for several years, involved managing pages under a variety of guises, including using the names of well-known celebrities.<sup>49</sup>

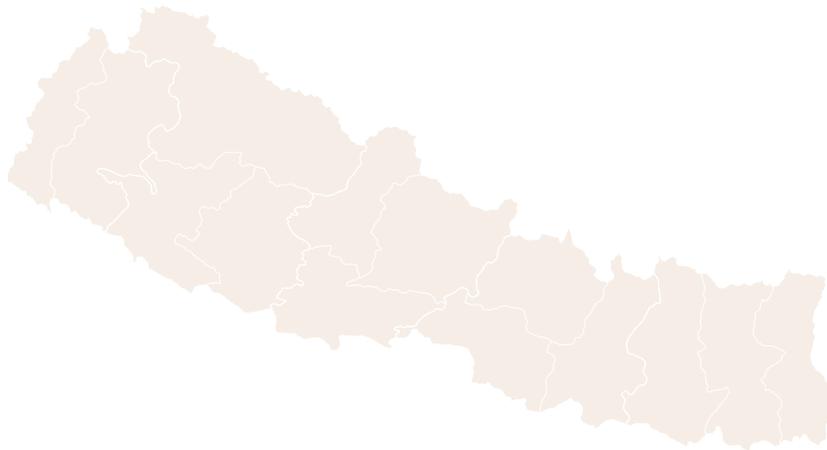
Internet access has also brought positive changes, notably a rapid jump in connectivity and new tools for community organizing. Many civil society initiatives focused on the online dimensions of local conflicts. For example, Nay Phone Latt’s *Panzagar* (Flower Speech) campaign—a counter-speech effort encouraging positive, peaceful social media use—is a prominent early example of attempts to mitigate online polarization and incitement to violence. Responding to widespread criticism, Facebook has itself attempted to address hate speech, with efforts such as hiring 100 moderators who speak Burmese or local minority languages and partnering with civil society organizations.<sup>50</sup> As a result, Facebook deleted 280,000 items in the second quarter of 2020.<sup>51</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the February 2021 military takeover of government, social media platforms were used to organize mass demonstrations. In response, severe internet restrictions were imposed by the State Administration Council, gradually shifting toward a “white-listing” system similar to the strict censorship measures of past military administrations. Months later, access to social media channels remained restricted.

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# NEPAL

## Overview

Following a long civil war, which ended in 2006, and a tumultuous decade with high levels of political tension, Nepal adopted a new constitution in 2015 and conducted largely peaceful elections in 2017. The vote was followed by the merger of two nominally communist parties as levels of violence and political contestation declined. Nepal has the world's only democratically elected communist government.

By the end of 2020, factional disputes in the unified Nepal Communist Party came to a head. Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli dissolved the parliament and called for midterm elections in April-May 2021. On February 23, 2021, however, the Supreme Court of Nepal reversed this decision, reinstating elected lawmakers and asking the government to call a meeting of parliament within 13 days. The original electoral timeline is expected to go ahead, with voting in November 2022.

The armed Biplav group, a peacetime breakaway faction of the Maoist party, carried out a wave of attacks in 2019. A vigorous state security response did not seem to deter the group, although it has been less visible since the pandemic. Citing frustration with the pandemic response and the ruling NCP's irreconcilable factional feuds, groups of royalists have begun to call for the restoration of the monarchy. Tensions in the southern plains of the Terai lowlands, where groups have sought greater autonomy and the protection of minority rights, have subsided. However, broader ethnic and identity-based tensions remain unaddressed, including disagreements over the federal structure of Nepal and struggles over what secularism means for the rights of minority religions.

Other entrenched forms of conflict, including gender-based and caste-based violence, remain prevalent. Land and resource disputes, which represent the majority of court cases, rarely lead to major violence but can be locally significant, especially when they occur along caste divides. As elsewhere, Nepalis are increasingly connected to the internet, but the government has been accused of increasingly autocratic behavior following new legislation to clamp down on defamation.



## National political context

After years of violent conflict and frequent changes of government, Nepal found some stability following elections in 2017. The Communist Party of Nepal–Unified Marxist–Leninist won 80 of 165 parliamentary seats and 168 of 330 provincial assembly seats. The party leader, K. P. Sharma Oli, became prime minister in February 2018. The CPN–Maoist, the country's other communist party, won 36 and 73 seats in parliament and the provincial assembly, respectively. The two parties merged in May 2018, forming the Nepal Communist Party (NCP) which commands a majority in all three tiers of Nepal's governance system.<sup>1</sup>

This merger helped to reduce levels of political contestation and violence. Less than two years later, however, factional struggles split the party.<sup>2</sup> In June 2020, senior leaders including Pushpa Kamal Dahal, or “Prachanda,” the former Maoist leader, called for Prime Minister Oli's resignation, criticizing his handling of the pandemic and economic issues and his failure to manage internal party politics. On December 20, 2020, Oli dissolved parliament with the approval of President Bidhya Devi Bhandari. The Supreme Court received 13 petitions challenging the constitutionality of the move.

Political violence remains a problem. From January 2017 to December 2020, 25 fatalities were attributed to political causes.<sup>3</sup> Most of these deaths took place before or during the 2017 elections (see further detail on electoral violence below). Fractious relations also continue between national politicians and leaders representing different ethnic groups or regions within Nepal.

The Nepal Communist Party government passed laws seen as attempts to curtail freedom of expression, accountability, public dissent, and political opposition. New laws broadly define offenses related to online speech and media reporting, stipulating harsh penalties. Further proposed legislation, including bills on personal privacy and media oversight, have also generated controversy. Other draft laws erode the autonomy of the National Human Rights Commission and grant broad surveillance and search powers to the intelligence services.<sup>4</sup>

Legacies of the Maoist conflict remain. The armed group led by Netra Bikram Chand, a former Maoist army commissar better known as Biplav, has a core following of former cadres united by skepticism of the political changes institutionalized since the end of the conflict. While the aims of Biplav's armed group are unclear, it retains the ability to inflict fear and to raise funds. During the 2017 elections, the group targeted polling stations and politicians, but preemptive arrests limited its impact. The group remained active after the elections, attacking some government offices and politicians. In February 2019, it attacked mobile communication towers owned by the private company Ncell, which it accuses of tax evasion. The following month, the government outlawed Biplav and carried out mass arrests of its cadres and leaders. In 2020, there were 212 violent incidents attributed to Biplav, including one murder, down from 523 incidents the previous year.<sup>5</sup> Casualties have been low as most attacks have not been designed to cause significant injury or loss of life. The group has not directly engaged the police or armed forces.<sup>6</sup>



## Transnational terrorism and international tensions

Nepal has not experienced attacks by transnational terrorist groups, but its open border with India, weak border controls, and historically lax banking regulations have made it a favorable hideout or staging point for transnational criminals. There have been three arrests of militants in recent years.<sup>7</sup> In 2018, two most-wanted Indian Mujahideen militants, Abdul Subhan Qureshi and Ariz Khan, were captured after hiding in Nepal for several years.<sup>8</sup> Bank accounts in Nepal have also been used to receive international transfers to fund terrorist activities in India.<sup>9</sup> Both governments cooperate on countering transnational terrorism through bilateral and multilateral mechanisms.<sup>10</sup>

Nepal's commitment to cooperating with India's counterterrorism efforts has on occasion been questioned.<sup>11</sup> This concern could be a manifestation of strategic differences, triggered by the perception that Kathmandu's political class has increasingly close ties with Beijing—something many Nepali actors themselves describe as “balancing” China and India or correcting an over-reliance on New Delhi.

Strategic concerns with India and China, two giant neighbors, cause unease in Nepal and are a strong factor in domestic political dynamics. Nepal and India's longstanding territorial disputes have been particularly restive. In May 2020, India's inauguration of a road link through the Lipulekh pass, which Nepal lays claim to, prompted protests in Kathmandu as well as a constitutional amendment reflecting a map of Nepal that includes all territories contested by India. Prime Minister Oli gained opposition support for his stance but was criticized by a faction of his own party.<sup>12</sup>

These developments came at a time when attention in Kathmandu was focused on the perceived closeness of the Oli government to Beijing. Opposition leaders amplified reports of Chinese encroachment on Nepali territory in the mountain district of Humla. While these were subsequently debunked, the intensity of the response, including a speedy statement from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in support of China, reflected the intertwined nature of Nepal's strategic position and domestic politics.<sup>13</sup>

India and China also featured in the factional struggles within the Nepal Communist Party: Oli accused New Delhi of supporting his political rivals' attempts to unseat him, a summer reconciliation was thought to have been brokered by China, and envoys from both countries met with senior members of government throughout the year.



## Separatism and autonomy

Tensions between national political parties and Madhesi political parties, representing people from the southern Terai, persist over perceived inequalities and the shape of Nepal's federal structure. Madhesi and also Tharu groups, whose cultural and historical identities are tied closely to the Terai, have experienced a long history of discrimination and exclusion from politics and state institutions traditionally dominated by Pahadi groups, people from Nepal's hill regions.

Pressure to devolve authority from the center grew after the end of Nepal's civil war. At the time, Madhesi, Tharu, and Janajati political and civil society groups led a series of political movements that influenced constitution-drafting and the restructuring of the state.<sup>14</sup> This ongoing process has been hotly contested and has occasionally led to violence and unrest, including street protests and the 2015 blockade of the Nepal-India border by Madhesi groups from the Terai.

Tensions were exacerbated when the constitution was adopted without the full support of Madhesi parties in 2015.<sup>15</sup> Madhesi parties protested the February 2017 announcement of local elections but eventually agreed to participate. A period of realignment and trial alliances followed until April 2020, when three parties, representing Madhesi groups, Janajati groups, and former Maoists including Dalit (lowest-caste) members, all merged to form the Janata Samajwadi Party, Nepal. The new party holds the third-largest share of seats in parliament.<sup>16</sup> Its leaders have revived calls for responses to longstanding discrimination against people from the Terai.

Between 2007 and 2012, armed groups were active in the Terai. The Informal Sector Service Centre, a Nepali human rights group, reports that over 1,600 people were killed in the Terai during that period, 90 percent of them by nonstate armed groups.<sup>17</sup> The February 2017 arrest of C. K. Raut, leader of the separatist Alliance for Independent Madhesh, for sedition led to demonstrations across the Terai and to several further arrests.<sup>18</sup> Raut was released from jail in March 2019 after reaching an agreement with the government to give up the demand for independence.<sup>19</sup>



## Identity-based tension and conflict

Hinduism is practiced by 81.3 percent of Nepal's population. The rest of the population practices Buddhism (9 percent), Islam (4.4 percent), the indigenous Himalayan Kirati faith (3.1 percent) and Christianity (1.4 percent).<sup>20</sup> Syncretic beliefs and practices blur the boundaries between the Hindu, Buddhist, and Kirati faiths.

Nepal has a long history as a Hindu state with everyday tolerance of minority religions alongside some restrictions on their propagation, primarily on Christianity. Although the country is now secular, the constitution retains some of these elements. In 2014–2015, protests across the country called for reinstating the primacy of Hinduism. As a result, the constitution now describes secularism as “protection of religion and culture being practiced since ancient times and religious and cultural freedom,” and criminalizes proselytizing.<sup>21</sup> In 2018, reports described Christian churches being attacked in several districts and at least one Christian leader being assaulted by Hindu nationalists.<sup>22</sup>

There are also occasional sectarian clashes between Hindus and Muslims. Since 2017, four Hindu-Muslim clashes, with no fatalities, have been recorded by Nepal Monitor.<sup>23</sup> However, such clashes often go unreported in the Nepali media.<sup>24</sup> An increase in Hindu-chauvinist and sensationalist media coverage has also occurred, mirroring similar trends in India. Several false rumors of efforts by Muslims to spread the coronavirus in Nepal—one story claimed that two Muslim women had scattered rupee bills after spitting on them—were widely circulated. However, police and government representatives sought to dispel the myths, distinguishing the official response in Nepal from that of India. Sensationalist coverage of Nepali current affairs in the Indian press is widely derided within Nepal.<sup>25</sup>

Data on caste-based violence in Nepal is limited. Despite legal protections enshrined in the constitution and Nepal's Untouchability and Discrimination Act of 2011, Dalit communities continue to have lower life expectancy, household income, and literacy than the national average.<sup>26</sup> They also continue to routinely suffer from discrimination, including in access to water sources and religious sites, as well as censure and violence for pursuing intercaste relationships. Cases of caste-based discrimination are rarely reported, and when they are, perpetrators are seldom punished. For example, Nepal Monitor reported fewer than 35 cases per year of Dalit-related violence in 2019 and 2020.<sup>27</sup>

In May 2020, a young Dalit man, Nabaraj B. K., and five others were killed by a mob in West Rukum district for his closeness to a so-called upper caste young woman. The incident briefly sparked a “Dalit Lives Matter” movement in other parts of Nepal, including Kathmandu. The same week, a 13-year-old Dalit girl was found dead in suspicious circumstances after being forcibly married to her rapist.<sup>28</sup> There has been no progress in prosecuting either case.



## Local political conflict and electoral violence

The 2015 constitution introduced three tiers of government. Elections for local governing bodies, provincial assemblies, and the national parliament were all held in 2017. These were relatively peaceful compared to historical levels of violence and tensions surrounding elections. However, political turmoil at the center, surrounding a split in the ruling party, is being felt at the subnational level. A total of 1,202 election-related incidents were recorded, 753 of them violent.<sup>29</sup> During the 2017 elections, fifteen people were killed, 728 were injured, and eight people were abducted. Violence was mostly the result of interparty clashes over accusations, from groups such as Biplav, of breaching election rules and using explosives or hoax bombs to disrupt election procedures.



## Local conflict over resources and community rights

Although competition over land, water, and other natural resources is deeply embedded in Nepali history and society, it rarely leads to violence at the community level. Poor governance and the country's highly unequal social structure skew access to natural resources, particularly for lower-caste and minority ethnic groups. Since the 1960s, land reform has been an important arena for competition among political parties. Land was also a central issue in the civil war, with Maoists targeting large landowners as a symbol of Nepal's patronage-based state.

Land disputes constitute the largest category of court cases, even though only a small portion of disputes reach trial. The formal legal process is costly and time-consuming, so the poor and marginalized tend to pursue land dispute claims in other, more accessible forums such as district land revenue offices.<sup>30</sup> Most land disputes are resolved at the community level through local mediation by high-status members of the village or Village Development Committee and never make it to the police or the courts.<sup>31</sup>

Large development projects have led to conflict between the state and local communities. The Newar community of southern Lalitpur has expressed disagreement with several large projects planned in their areas of settlement, including the Kathmandu-Terai Expressway. In March 2018, residents protested against the project, which they said would destroy areas of cultural celebrations and worship. Six people were injured in the response by security forces.<sup>32</sup>

A proposed bill to put customary land trusts or *guthi* under the regulation of a state commission was strongly opposed, particularly by Newar groups, with whom the trusts are traditionally associated. The movement against the bill was arguably the largest mobilization of civil society since the 2006 People's Movement, which marked the end of the civil war and the transition to a democratic federal republic. Six people were injured during police attempts to disperse the protesters.<sup>33</sup> The bill was later withdrawn.

Even though Nepal has abundant water, unequal access creates tensions, especially where there are competing uses (e.g., irrigation, drinking, hydropower, and industrial use) or where scarcity is increasing.<sup>34</sup> Disputes over water also arise from longstanding grievances over exploitation along caste divisions, clashes of egos, and other political disputes.<sup>35</sup>



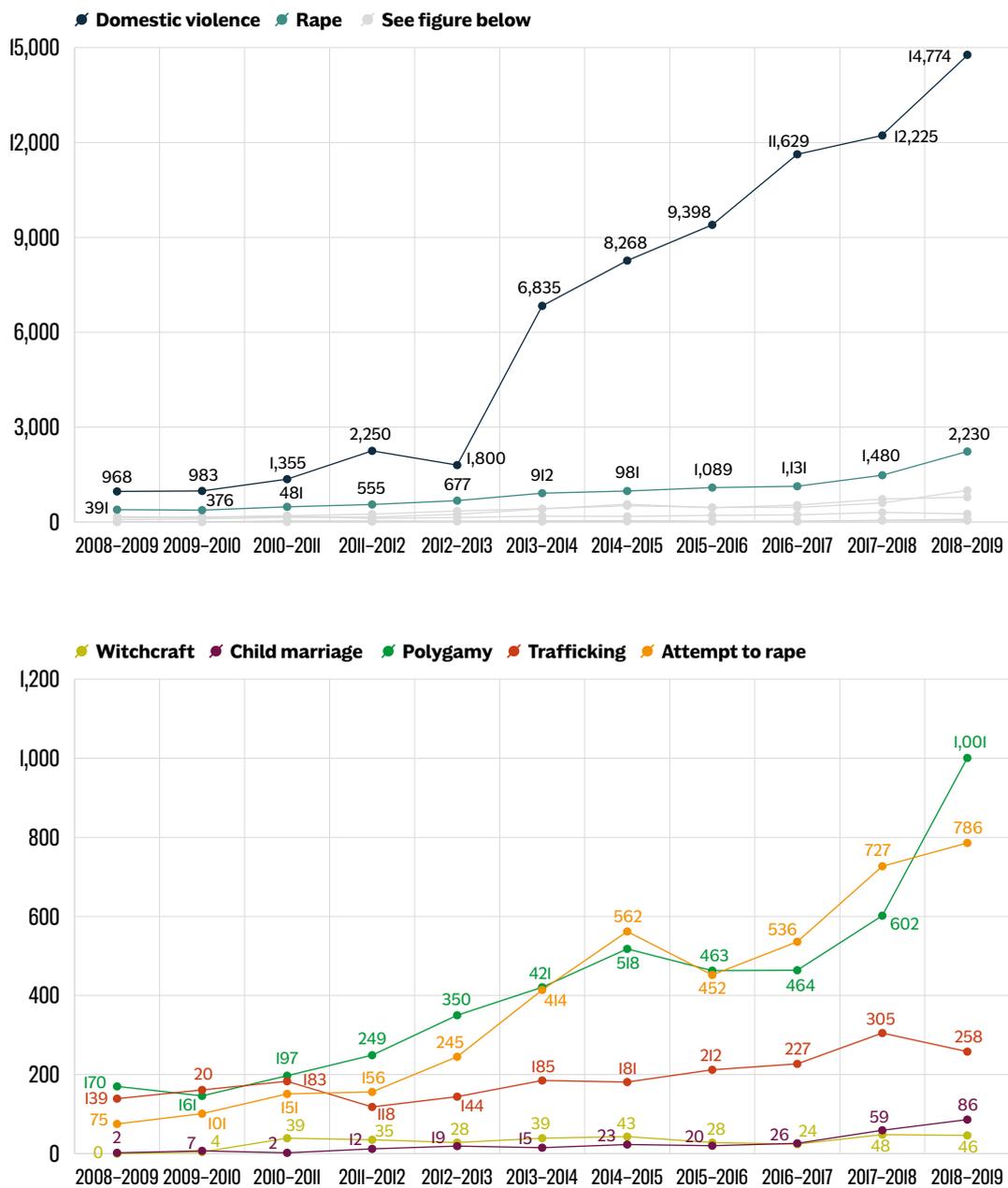
## Violent crime

A 2018 national survey by The Asia Foundation found that 95.1 percent of respondents in Nepal considered their households to be safe.<sup>36</sup> While most people feel safe, crime rates have continued to rise. In 2018, around 56 percent of those surveyed acknowledged some threats to their safety. Alcohol abuse, natural disaster, and crime were the leading threats, accounting for 31.9, 16.6, and 14.3 percent of responses, respectively.<sup>37</sup> Data from the Nepal Police shows that crime incidents jumped from 28,070 in 2014–15 to 39,389 in 2018–19. Security officials attribute the rise in reported incidents to unemployment and poverty.<sup>38</sup> The homicide rate stood at two per 100,000 population in 2016 (the most recent available dataset), well below the global average.<sup>39</sup>

Youth involvement in violence is an ongoing public concern. Policymakers and regional experts have emphasized the importance of addressing issues affecting urban youth, such as unemployment and crime.<sup>40</sup> Some young men are drafted by the youth wings of political parties to engage in protests, strikes, and shutdowns. They are also recruited by underground armed groups and criminal gangs to carry out violent activities, including extortion and kidnapping.<sup>41</sup> For some youths, joining an armed group can instill a sense of power and purpose, especially those who are unemployed and who have migrated from rural areas.

## Domestic and gender-based violence

Data from Nepal Monitor shows gender-based violence to be the country's leading cause of death through violence or conflict. In 2018 and 2019, for example, 176 and 414 deaths, respectively, were attributed to gender-based violence, close to 40 percent of the violent deaths recorded in those years.<sup>42</sup> A significant number of women and girls in Nepal face domestic violence, rape, trafficking, dowry-related violence, child marriage, and violence from being accused of witchcraft. This is driven by social, cultural, and religious norms, compounded by years of conflict and underdevelopment.



**Figure 18:** Reported gender-based crimes in Nepal  
 Source: Nepal Police<sup>43</sup>

Nepal Police reports of crimes against women and children increase every year across most categories (Figure 18). Between 2015–2016 and 2018–2019, reported incidents of rape more than doubled, from 1,089 to 2,230 cases, while domestic violence rose 57 percent, from 9,398 to 14,774 cases.<sup>44</sup> The extent to which these trends represent changes in reporting is unclear.

More than half of recorded rape victims are children.<sup>45</sup> Sexual violence disproportionately affects women and girls from the minority Madhesi ethnic group and Dalit communities. Nepal Monitor reports that, in 2020, three of the seven Nepali woman and girls raped daily are Dalit.<sup>46</sup> A study by the Feminist Dalit Organization Nepal found that 21 percent of sexual violence victims were low-status Dalits.<sup>47</sup> In late 2018, public anger over a perceived police cover-up to protect senior personnel in the case of the rape and murder of 13 year-old Nirmala Panta led to widespread protests across the country. The incident has not led to a legal case.

Even though police records indicate that reporting of domestic violence cases is increasing, and the time limit for reporting a rape was changed from 35 days to 6 months in 2015, social stigma, trauma, and mistrust of the police discourage women from seeking help or justice. Most sexual violence recorded by the police occurs in the Terai districts, suggesting that reporting is particularly deficient elsewhere.<sup>48</sup> Efforts are being made, however, to ensure that reporting rates increase. One of the effects of an ordinance approved by President Bhandari in December 2020 is to penalize those who try to settle the rape cases at the village level, putting pressure on victims and their families to report to the police.

Survey data from 2016 showed that more than one in five women (22 percent) have experienced physical violence since the age of 15, while seven percent of women have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime. Among married women, a current husband is by far the most common perpetrator of physical and sexual violence. Two-thirds of women who experience such violence do not seek help and do not discuss the crime.<sup>49</sup>

Child marriage has been illegal in Nepal since 1963. A recent legal change raised the legal age of marriage to 20 for both men and women. Police reporting of the practice has also significantly increased in the last two years.<sup>50</sup> It is still commonplace, however: 37 percent of girls are married by the age of 18, and 10 percent are married before the age of 15.<sup>51</sup>

Witch hunts are still found in Nepal, with disadvantaged women such as widows particularly vulnerable to violence. Women accused of witchcraft are burned, tortured, or assaulted. The violence can often be connected to family or community disputes over land and property, with women used as scapegoats.<sup>52</sup> There were 46 reports of witch hunts over the year 2018–2019.<sup>53</sup>

### **Covid-19 and its consequences in Nepal**

Women workers have been particularly affected by Covid-19 because of their disproportionate representation in the domestic and hospitality sectors and in informal and insecure jobs, and because of the gender pay gap. School closures and the unequal distribution of unpaid work limit women's available time for work, leaving them economically vulnerable. The economic strain on many families from Covid-19, as well as the fear and anxiety arising from extended lockdowns, have exacerbated unequal power relations between women and men and contributed to a severe increase in gender-based violence (GBV), including domestic violence. According to the Nepal Women's Commission, their 24-hour toll-free helpline, provided in coordination with agencies such as the Nepal Police, received 1,267 calls related to domestic violence during the March 24 to May 1, 2020, lockdown.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, the Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC) Nepal reported 176 cases of violence against women and girls in just 18 districts during this period.<sup>55</sup> At the same time, services for survivors of violence have been weakened or disrupted, or are at maximum capacity. Many survivors face economic insecurity and lack livelihood support, creating more barriers for them to safely escape GBV.

The pandemic has also resulted in an increase in child marriage. Several NGOs have reported this trend, especially in Sarlahi district, where there have been 30 child marriages during the lockdown.<sup>56</sup>

Migrant workers have also been particularly affected by the pandemic. Some lost their jobs, compelling them to return to their country of origin with meager savings and an uncertain future.<sup>57</sup> On March 22, 2020, the government of Nepal closed its borders and imposed a ban on all international flights. After March 24, when India announced a complete lockdown, thousands of Nepalis in India sought to return home, many by foot.<sup>58</sup> Despite their right to return, over 500 migrant workers were left stranded at the border. Three migrant workers were reported swimming across the bordering Mahakali river.<sup>59</sup> By September 2020, nearly 63,347 migrants had returned home, and nearly 200,000 Nepalis were waiting to be repatriated<sup>60</sup>. Those who did not leave destination countries were faced with exploitation in the form of unpaid labor and long working hours as a result of the pandemic.

Upon their return to Nepal, migrant workers were often stigmatized on suspicion of being infected by Covid-19, and had to stay in quarantine facilities under poor conditions with no access to healthcare. The government has not addressed the issues faced by migrant workers, though they are a large part of the population. If the global pandemic continues, employment abroad will become increasingly unsafe and difficult to manage, but the failure of the government to provide reintegration plans for returnees has compelled migrant workers to again look for foreign employment despite the risks.

Among returning migrant workers, women have been particularly vulnerable during the pandemic. During repatriation, the Ministry of Women, Children, and Senior Citizens had to intervene to assure the safety of women in quarantine facilities after three alleged incidents of rape.<sup>61</sup> After returning home, many women migrants resume premigration domestic roles, as the traditional gendered division of labor persists. They also struggle to match the new skills they have acquired abroad with the demands of the domestic labor market, often resulting in them going abroad for employment again.



## New media, conflict, and violence

In 2019, Nepal had an internet penetration rate of 63 percent.<sup>62</sup> The number of internet and social media users has rapidly increased. Facebook is the most popular platform, with 8.7 million users out of a total Nepali population of 28 million.<sup>63</sup> According to one web traffic analysis tool, 94 percent of Nepalis engaging in online activities are Facebook users.<sup>64</sup>

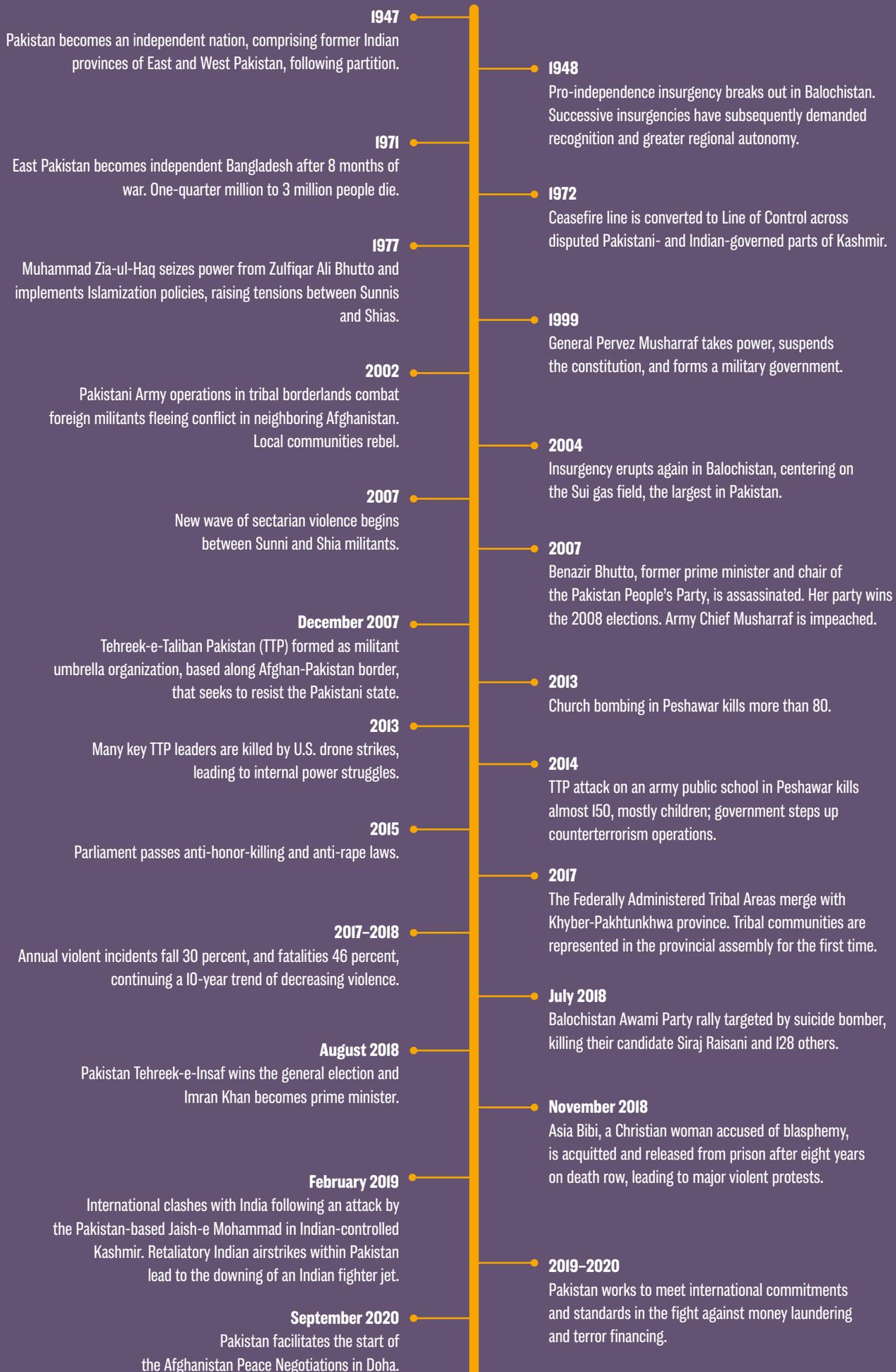
In February 2019, the government introduced a bill to regulate social media posting. The proposed law, if approved by parliament, would give authorities the power to block social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube if they do not register in Nepal. Users posting content deemed defamatory or against national sovereignty would face a maximum prison sentence of five years and a fine of 1.5 million rupees. The government could instruct social network operators to remove posts. Violators of the instruction would be subject to three years in prison and a fine of 30,000 rupees. Activists and journalists have criticized the bill as a potential tool to suppress dissent. The government has on occasion used another law, the Electronic Act of 2006, to punish criticism online. The law prohibits electronic publication deemed illegal under existing laws, including vaguely defined material “which may be contrary to the public morality.”<sup>65</sup> Under this act, authorities detained the editor of an online weekly that reported on allegedly fraudulent business practices in the city of Pokhara. At least five others have been detained by the Oli government under this act.

## Notes

- 1 The major communist parties in Nepal claim some ideological commitment to socialist principles and follow broadly democratic practices. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) signed the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Accord, ending a long period of armed struggle.
- 2 Tika R. Pradhan (2020) “Nepal Communist Party’s Fragile Unity Falls Apart,” *Kathmandu Post*, December 23, <https://kathmandupost.com/politics/2020/12/23/nepal-communist-party-s-fragile-unity-falls-apart>.
- 3 Nepal Monitor, accessed January 14, 2021, <https://nepalmonitor.org/>.
- 4 Human Rights Watch (2019), “Nepal: End Attacks on Free Expression,” Human Rights Watch website, April 18, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/18/nepal-end-attacks-free-expression>.
- 5 Nepal Monitor (2021), data filtered by “Actor–Political Organization–CPN (Chand)” and affiliated organization, accessed January 15, <https://nepalmonitor.org/>.
- 6 See previous note.
- 7 Mint (2017), “Hizbul Mujahideen terrorist, Naseer Ahmed, arrested from Nepal border,” *Mint*, May 17, <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/RcwfkG4j98kXvgjvW8QbM/Hizbul-Mujahideen-terrorist-Naseer-Ahmed-arrested-from-Nep.html>. There have been occasional apprehensions of militants belonging to groups targeting India, such as Indian Mujahideen (IM), Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), and Hizbul Mujahideen, at the Indo-Nepal border or inside India. The first took place at a border post in Uttar Pradesh in 2017, when a Hizbul Mujahideen militant tried to enter India as a shawl and carper vendor.
- 8 See Munish Chandra Pandey (2018), “Arrested IM terrorist Qureshi had been living in Nepal with fake documents,” *India Today*, January 22, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/arrested-im-terrorist-qureshi-had-been-living-in-nepal-with-fake-documents-1151283-2018-01-22>; The Economic Times (2018), “Delhi Police arrests Batla Terrorist near Indo-Nepal border,” *Economic Times*, February 15, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/suspected-indian-mujahideen-terrorist-arrested/articleshow/62920396.cms?from=mdr>.
- 9 See Business Standard (2019), “Four arrested in Lkhimpur for terror funding: UP DGP,” *Business Standard*, October 11, [https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/four-arrested-in-lkhimpur-for-terror-funding-up-dgp-119101100841\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/four-arrested-in-lkhimpur-for-terror-funding-up-dgp-119101100841_1.html).
- 10 Observer Research Foundation (2013), “Nepal: Terrorist arrests and cooperation with India,” Observer Research Foundation website, September 6, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/nepal-terrorist-arrests-and-cooperation-with-india/>.
- 11 See, for example, Rahul Tripathi (2019), “Nepal bank probe unearths Pak-sponsored terror racket,” *Economic Times*, October 14, <https://m.economictimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/nepal-bank-probe-unearths-pak-sponsored-terror-racket/articleshow/71573154.cms>.
- 12 This response should be seen in the context of reaction in Nepal to a new map of India released in November 2019 to reflect the changed domestic status of territories in Jammu and Kashmir. Nepali commentators noted that the map now included the area of Kalapani, which Nepal claims. Until the Lipulekh road was opened, Kathmandu had responded to the map primarily through diplomatic notes.
- 13 The Record (2020), “Damning report from the ground backs earlier media stories about China’s encroachment of Nepali territory,” *The Record*, October 14, <https://recordnepal.com/wire/features/damning-report-from-the-ground-backs-earlier-media-stories-about-chinas-encroachment-of-nepali-territory/>; Amish Raj Mulmi (2020), “What a ‘missing’ border pillar tells us about Nepal-China relations,” *Kathmandu Post*, October 1, <https://kathmandupost.com/columns/2020/10/01/what-a-missing-border-pillar-tells-us-about-nepal-china-relations>.
- 14 Tharu are an ethnic group from the Terai.
- 15 Nepal has 125 castes / ethnic groups (2011 census), and many of these groups live in the Terai region, the lowland plain along the Indian border, which accounts for roughly half of the Nepali population. Central Bureau of Statistics (2012), *National Population and Housing Census 2011* (Kathmandu: Government of Nepal), 3, <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sources/census/wphc/Nepal/Nepal-Census-2011-Voll.pdf>.
- 16 *Dalit* refers to low-status groups in the caste hierarchy; *Janajati* means indigenous or ethnic.
- 17 Informal Sector Service Centre (2013), *Nepal Human Rights Yearbook 2013* (Kathmandu: INSEC), 4, <http://www.insec.org.np/index.php?type=publication&ptype=R&lang=E&tid=1>.
- 18 Nepal Monitor, data filtered by “actors: Terai-based separatist organizations,” accessed November 26, 2019, <https://nepalmonitor.org/dashboard/expert-filter-result?startdate=2017-01-01&enddate=2019-12-04&actor%5B%5D=446>.
- 19 Shereena Qazi (2019), “Nepal: CK Raut joins mainstream politics averting conflict?” *Al Jazeera*, March 22, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/03/nepal-ck-raut-joins-mainstream-politics-averting-conflict-190320055647567.html>.
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- 21 Nepal’s history as a Hindu state is entwined with the monarchy, and Hindu nationalist groups and the right-wing, royalist Rastriya Prajatantra Party have continued to demand a Hindu state. See Luke Wagner (2017), “The Rise—and Fall?—of Hindu Nationalism in Nepal,” Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs website, July 20, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/the-rise-and-fall-of-hindu-nationalism-in-nepal>.
- 22 Office of International Religious Freedom (2018), *2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Nepal* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/nepal/>.
- 23 Nepal Monitor, data filtered by “identity: religious sectarianism imported from,” accessed November 26, 2019, <https://nepalmonitor.org/>.
- 24 Peter Gill (2018), “As Nepal Strives to Become More Inclusive, Are Muslims Being Left Behind?” *World Politics Review*, January 30, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/insights/24085/will-an-incident-of-anti-muslim-violence-upend-nepals-bid-for-inclusivity>.

- 25 Arun Budhathoki (2020), "India's Islamophobia Creeps into Nepal," *Foreign Policy*, June 16, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/16/india-islamophobia-hindu-nationalism-nepal/>.
- 26 The Dalit community constitutes 13.6 percent of Nepal's population. International Dalit Solidarity Network, "Nepal," accessed December 5, 2019, <https://idsn.org/countries/nepal/>.
- 27 Kathmandu Post (2016), "Cases of caste-based discrimination rarely reach court: Report," *Kathmandu Post*, June 4, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2016/06/04/cases-of-caste-based-discrimination-rarely-reach-court-report>.
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# PAKISTAN

## Overview

Pakistan's conflict landscape remains volatile and complex, although recent trends are generally positive. The overall number of violent incidents fell by roughly 13 percent from 2018 to 2019, and fatalities fell by 32 percent in the same period.<sup>1</sup> This change is a continuation of a downward trend over the past decade as Pakistan has reduced the pervasiveness of both terrorist and sectarian violence in the country.

In 2019, Pakistan saw 433 incidents that killed 588 people and injured 1,030 in various forms of violence related to politics and elections, terrorist attacks, security operations against terrorist groups and armed insurgents, ethno-political tensions, sectarian cleavages, and cross-border clashes. International terror involving ISIS and other groups remains a major security risk. The areas that today comprise the new province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have been the most affected by terrorist attacks, accounting for 48 percent of all attacks and 32 percent of deaths from terrorism.<sup>2</sup>

Sectarian violence and tensions remain high throughout Pakistan, with minority groups such as the Hazara, Ismaili, Ahmadis, and Christians most commonly targeted. Separatism in Balochistan remains a threat to stability, given increased attacks and concerns over the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor deal. In June 2020, members of the Baloch Liberation Army, a nonstate armed group, claimed responsibility for an attack on the Pakistan Stock Exchange in Karachi. Four armed gunmen killed two guards and a policeman before being killed by security officers.

Pakistan has looked to improve regional relationships and played a role in facilitating dialogue within Afghanistan. Relations with India have remained tense, leading to clashes in 2019. New initiatives in Pakistan to combat gender-based violence have included the establishment of over a thousand courts designated to address the problem throughout Pakistan and the launching of a helpline application by the Ministry of Human Rights.



## National political context

Pakistan has made great strides over the last couple of years in reducing political violence. Certain issues, however, still persist. The dominance of Punjab and the political, social, and economic exclusion of other provinces, particularly Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), are major drivers of political violence in the country.<sup>3</sup>

In 2018, Pakistan held a general election in which the opposition party Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) won the majority of seats and Imran Khan became prime minister.<sup>4</sup> The election followed the Supreme Court's 2017 ousting of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif after the exposure of business deals through the "Panama Papers" scandal. It marked the third consecutive elected civilian government and second consecutive peaceful transition of power in Pakistan.

Criticism of PTI actions in 2020, particularly amid the coronavirus pandemic, mobilized a unified opposition movement, with 11 parties collaborating to form the Pakistan Democratic Movement. The movement demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Khan, though the PTI has managed to weather the opposition. In November 2020, the party won 22 of 33 seats in the Gilgit-Baltistan legislative assembly, despite allegations of vote rigging leading to violent protests.<sup>5</sup>

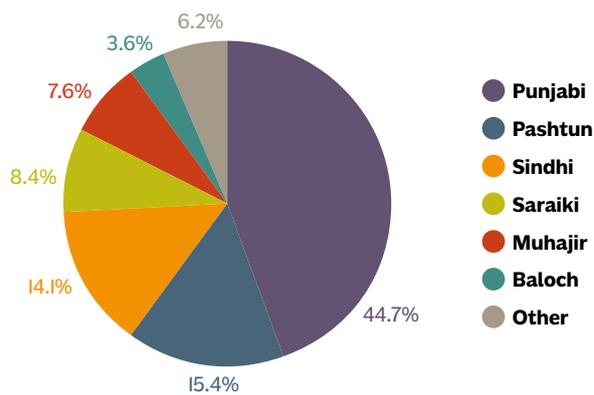
The 2018 election cycle witnessed 145 election-related political violence events, compared to more than 210 in 2013.<sup>6</sup> Whereas in 2013 a significant number of attacks were attributed to Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) (46 attacks), there was only one in 2018. Three attacks were attributed to ISIS. The drop in election-related political violence appears to demonstrate a curtailing of militant capabilities following concerted operations by the Pakistan military. Government efforts to support historically excluded provinces have been deployed to strengthen political stability. In November 2020, members of the federal cabinet announced a Rs 600 billion package for development projects in South Balochistan, shortly after Prime Minister Khan became the first premier in 50 years to visit the area.<sup>7</sup>

Terrorist attacks have declined in number but remain frequent. Political involvement in violence also remains a concern. In 2018, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa was the region most affected by terrorist attacks, accounting for 48 percent of all attacks and 32 percent of deaths from terrorism.<sup>8</sup> Pakistan's military has conducted successful counterterrorism operations. In 2015, for instance, the government implemented the National Action Plan to crack down on militant strongholds in North Waziristan and FATA. As a result of such initiatives, Pakistan recorded its lowest number of civilian deaths from terrorism in over a decade in both 2019 (142 deaths) and 2020 (169 deaths).<sup>9</sup> Partly due to heavy crackdowns on terrorist and militant groups in these border areas, however, terrorist activity is spreading to other parts of the country.<sup>10</sup>



## Identity-based tension and conflict

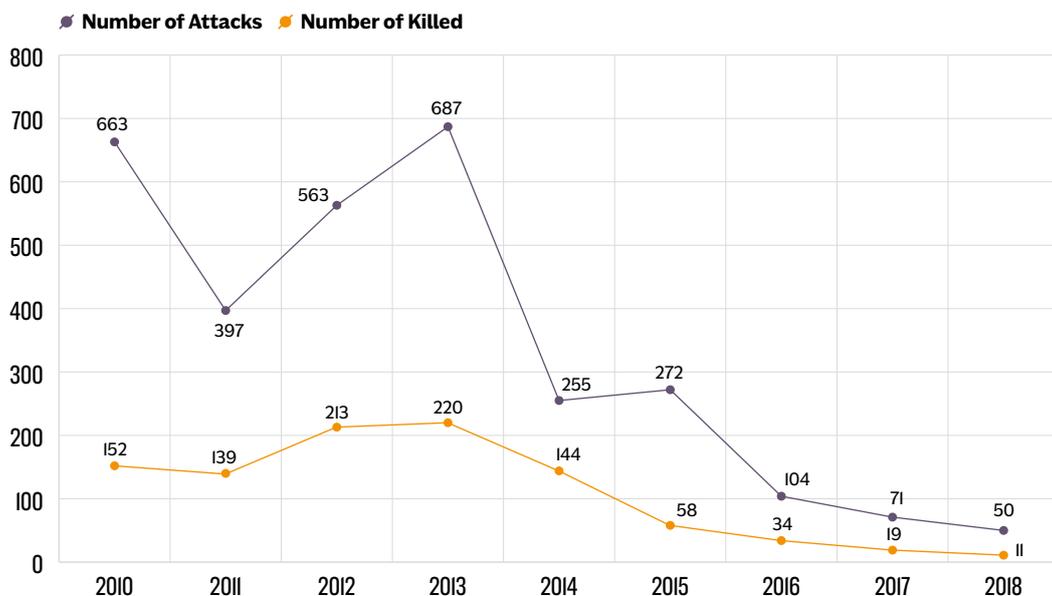
While sectarian and ethnic violence have been a recurrent feature of Pakistan's history, the last 10 years have witnessed an encouraging drop in sectarian attacks. Continuing violence involves both conflict between religious and ethnic groups and violence against religious and ethnic minorities by the state and Islamic extremists. Home to an estimated population of more than 207 million, Pakistan has many different ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian groups.<sup>11</sup> Ethnic composition roughly corresponds to the linguistic distribution of the population, at least among the largest groups:



**Figure 19:** Main ethnic groups in Pakistan  
 Source: CIA World Factbook<sup>12</sup>

The vast majority of the population (96.3 percent) is Muslim, with small minorities of Christians (1.6 percent), Hindus (1.6 percent), and other religions.<sup>13</sup>

Sectarian violence between majority Sunni and minority Shia Muslims continues throughout the country, but incidents have decreased since 2013, even as outbursts of violence remain common (Figure 20).<sup>14</sup> In 2019, there were 14 sectarian attacks, perpetrated mostly by banned Sunni and Shia militant groups, which killed 38 people. This is an increase from the number of attacks in 2018 (11 sectarian attacks), but a sizeable decrease in the number of people killed by sectarian violence from 2018 (104 people).



**Figure 20:** Sectarian violence in Pakistan (2010–2018)  
 Source: PIPS

Tensions surrounding the Shia minority in Pakistan rose when Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, the military dictator, seized power from Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto in 1977. His Islamization policies favored the Sunni interpretation of Islam, causing a rift between the two denominations. A Sharia court and a Sharia bench of the Supreme Court were established, leading to a demand from the Shia community to follow their own interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence. The rise of the TTP in the mid-2000s, and its growing ties with militant sectarian groups such as the Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, led to more violence. In recent years, ISIS has sought to exploit sectarian tensions and target Shia communities in the country, as well as moderate Sunnis such as Sufi.

Pakistan's other religious minorities, including Christians, Hindus, Sunni Ahmadis, and both Ismailis and Hazara, continue to suffer significant discrimination and violence. The Christian community has also been a victim of Pakistan's strict blasphemy laws, the most famous example being the Christian woman Asia Bibi, who was released in 2018 after eight years on death row. Her release sparked major protests, and further tensions were stoked by the political party Tehreek-i-Labaik Pakistan.<sup>15</sup>

In May 2018, for the second time in two years, a mob of several hundred led by right-wing clerics besieged and then tore down a 100-year-old Ahmadi mosque in Punjab province.<sup>16</sup> At the time, the Ahmadi community voiced accusations of collusion between the mob and local authorities. Their concerns were reiterated by a social media video showing one of the clerics leading the mob publicly declaring his thanks to the local police and government.<sup>17</sup>

In the run up to the 2018 election, Ahmadi were once again targeted as local governments ran advertisements in major newspapers claiming that those following such beliefs were not permitted to stand for elected positions.<sup>18</sup> A ruling by the Islamabad High Court that all citizens must report their religion, with a specific requirement for government and semigovernment positions, also raised concerns.<sup>19</sup>

The Ismaili minority endured major sectarian prejudice during the recent 2018 election cycle, when many Ismaili candidates in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province were labeled as nonbelievers and the elections were framed as pitting Muslims against non-Muslims.<sup>20</sup> In May 2019, a suicide bomber killed 10 outside a Sufi shrine in Lahore.<sup>21</sup> The government has long been criticized for its general apathy towards the plight of ethnic Hazara, who have also been repeatedly targeted by extremists. The government response for the past decade has largely been to move the Hazara people rather than target the militant groups themselves. This has not ended violent attacks and has led to the ghettoization of Hazara on the outskirts of Quetta, Balochistan, where they are prevented from leaving residential areas without armed convoys.<sup>22</sup>



## Transnational terrorism and international tensions

Pakistan has continued to see significant declines in the rates of terror-related deaths since 2006, though the country still ranks as one of the 10 most impacted by terrorism worldwide. Transnational terrorism has been most common in areas bordering Afghanistan. Groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan have largely been eradicated in the area, but with the decline in their influence, the strength of ISIS in Pakistan has grown. Between 2017 and 2018, ISIS increased their capabilities and were responsible for as many as one hundred attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan.<sup>23</sup> In May of 2019, the group sought publicity by declaring a separate province in Pakistan.<sup>24</sup> Many domestic organizations operating in and from Pakistan also employ terror tactics. Three of the largest are the TTP, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and the Khorasan chapter of the Islamic State.<sup>25</sup>

Kashmir has long been a base for armed movements. Conflict over the territory has persisted since the end of colonial rule in 1947, and several wars have been fought between India and Pakistan over the region. Following a ceasefire originally negotiated in 1948, hostilities resumed in the 1990s with

increased securitization of the border line. A new ceasefire ended fighting in 2003, yet there have been regular violations from each side's military and paramilitary forces, as well as frequent incursions by separatist and militant groups tacitly supported by each country.

In February 2019, a suicide bomber belonging to the Pakistani Kashmiri separatist group Jaish-e-Mohammed attacked an Indian military convoy in Indian-controlled Kashmir, killing 44 troops—the deadliest attack in the region in the last 30 years.<sup>26</sup> The cross-border attack sparked violence between the two nations, with India responding with airstrikes on a supposed militant training site in Balakot and Pakistan downing an Indian fighter jet and capturing the pilot. Social media and news coverage of the events exacerbated tensions.<sup>27</sup> Pressure increased in August 2019, when the Indian government revoked the constitutionally guaranteed autonomy of Indian-administered Kashmir. In November 2019, Pakistan objected to new maps of the region published by India that assert Indian sovereignty over contested regions.<sup>28</sup> More positively, a joint ceasefire announcement in February 2021 was followed by a call from Pakistan's powerful army chief, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, for his country and India to “bury the past” and seek further cooperation.<sup>29</sup>

The geopolitical situation in the region continues to complicate Pakistan's approach to terrorist/separatist organizations. The International Crisis Group points out that the Pakistani military still distinguishes between “bad” jihadi groups, which target the government and security forces, and “good” jihadi groups, which are perceived to promote Pakistan's strategic objectives in India and Afghanistan.<sup>30</sup> For example, anti-India groups such as Jamaat-ud-Dawa have not been targeted in ongoing operations in FATA, while the Baloch insurgent movement has been targeted because, the military states, it receives support from India.<sup>31</sup>

The Hindu population in Pakistan continues to be targeted by extremists, leading to international tensions. In September 2019, a high school student accused his Hindu teacher of blasphemy, which in turn sparked a mob attack on a Hindu temple, a school, and shops.<sup>32</sup> Increasing numbers of Pakistani Hindus have moved to India, partly influenced by strident Indian nationalism.<sup>33</sup>



## Separatism and autonomy

Balochistan, the largest but least populous province of Pakistan, continues to be affected by separatist conflict.<sup>34</sup> Baloch nationalists led a series of unsuccessful insurgencies against the federal government up to the 1970s. A fifth insurgency, which began in 2004, is still ongoing and has escalated.<sup>35</sup> The conflict is driven by a number of grievances and inequities associated with the decolonization process and partition, including lack of autonomy, lack of Baloch representation in the government and military, and economic oppression. Government suppression has further alienated members of the local population.

The major separatist groups in the region have publicly voiced their opposition to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor agreement, and in recent years have begun to actively target those connected to it. In November 2018, the Balochistan Liberation Army sent a violent message by attacking the Chinese consulate in Karachi.<sup>36</sup> Then, in April 2019, a bus traveling from Gwadar, carrying Pakistani Navy and Coast Guard personnel, was stopped, and 14 passengers were shot.<sup>37</sup>

Alleged foreign interventions have added to the conflict's complexity. Pakistani officials claim that India has been involved in perpetuating the conflict by providing Baloch militants with training and financial support through its 26 consulates established along the Balochistan border in Afghanistan and Iran.<sup>38</sup> After India provided a dossier to some UN Security Council members accusing fighters from Pakistan of attempting an attack in the disputed Kashmir region, Pakistan sent the UN secretary general a dossier accusing India of stoking terrorism in Pakistan. The Pakistani parliament has made some attempts to resolve the conflict, but negotiations have fallen through, and fighting has continued.



## Local political conflict and electoral violence

Local electoral violence has been relatively limited in Pakistan. In 2010, Balochistan was the first province to hold local government elections after the provincial assemblies passed the Local Government Acts.<sup>39</sup> In 2019, Punjab's provincial assembly passed a new Local Government Act that would increase local governments' ability to raise revenue, making them less dependent on provincial governments for funding. Such moves toward decentralization can also enable greater political representation for minority and marginalized groups.

On May 31, 2018, the Federally Administrated Tribal Areas were integrated into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province after having been governed directly by national authorities for decades. This area, bordering Afghanistan in the west and Kashmir in the east, was internationally regarded as a hotbed of violent armed groups, including the Taliban and international terrorist organizations. A combination of archaic colonial governance systems, a political vacuum, the troublesome border with Afghanistan, and military engagement generated entrenched instability and poverty and limited access to justice for the area's inhabitants.<sup>40</sup>

The integration of policing, justice, administrative, and political systems into provincial and national systems has been complex. The Supreme Court of Pakistan and the Peshawar High Court have extended their jurisdictions to the tribal districts, and a roadmap has been developed to construct courthouses and set up district and session courts. Persistent insecurity in the area poses continual risks for such developments. Vestiges of FATA's former policing system add further challenges. Each of the seven tribal agencies had a different policing system, run by the chief administrator—a representative of the president of Pakistan—and deferential to local Maliks (traditional leaders).

The national government in Islamabad has adopted a 10-year plan to develop major infrastructure, establish industrial zones, set up modern urban hubs in all tribal districts, establish universities and medical colleges, develop the mineral and agriculture sectors, create job opportunities for youth, and support displaced people. Up to 30 percent of the allocated funds would go to efforts to counter radicalization and transform local communities. Bringing local bodies on board at the grassroots level will be of critical importance to the success of these initiatives.

Disconcertingly, the development plan includes no binding agreement between levels of government on the allocation of central funding. This issue arose in the first year of the plan's implementation, 2020, as the federal government had pledged Rs 142 billion for various projects, of which only Rs 24 billion was released.<sup>41</sup> Other challenges included complications in the merger of government departments, the absence of baseline data to launch development schemes, and problems in land acquisition for construction of government buildings. Despite these challenges, local elections for 16 general seats in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Provincial Assembly were successfully held in former FATA districts in 2019. A total of 285 candidates, including two women, ran for office.



## Local conflict over resources and community rights

While progress has been made in Balochistan, many of the issues that still exist relate to resources. Balochistan is rich in natural resources, meeting more than 40 percent of Pakistan's energy needs through its gas and coal reserves, and yet it is the least economically developed of Pakistan's provinces.<sup>42</sup> It has the country's lowest rate of economic growth, highest rate of poverty, and lowest health and education indicators.<sup>43</sup> One of the primary drivers of the current conflict within Balochistan is the federal government's failure to distribute a fair share of natural resource revenues to the local population.

The International Crisis Group notes that Baloch anger over central control and exploitation of the province's economic resources reached new heights as the federal government excluded local

communities from the development of the Gwadar port, which is transforming a small fishing village into a major regional transportation hub.<sup>44</sup> Trade through the corridor, which connects Gwadar port with China's largest province by area, Xinjiang, is seen to be a key component of the Chinese Belt and Road strategy. In response to local frustrations, the federal government unveiled a Rs 600 billion package for development projects in South Balochistan in November 2020. The project features the construction of 1,100 kilometers of road, skills training for up to 35,000 youth, and the expansion of gas and power supply networks, among other benefits. The announcement, however, was opposed by mainstream Baloch nationalist parties, who see such projects as attempts by the government to increase federal control. Previous promises of federal development packages have failed to materialize or were disregarded when former governments completed their tenure, contributing to local mistrust.

Outside of Balochistan, a continuing challenge has been water allocation. Pakistan remains among the most water-stressed countries in the world, due to a combination of natural and manmade challenges. The country receives average rainfall of no more than 250mm per year. The government has struggled with water-management issues, including limited storage capacity and infrastructure maintenance, inefficient and inequitable agricultural distribution systems, and groundwater depletion and contamination. Many of the challenges persist as a result of government inefficiencies and politically vested interests, such as the influence of powerful farmer associations that claim a significant portion of the available water. As a result of these challenges, local farmers have engaged in protests over water scarcity. Most recently, in July 2019, 1,500 farmers demanded the government declare a water emergency and resolve the water crisis.

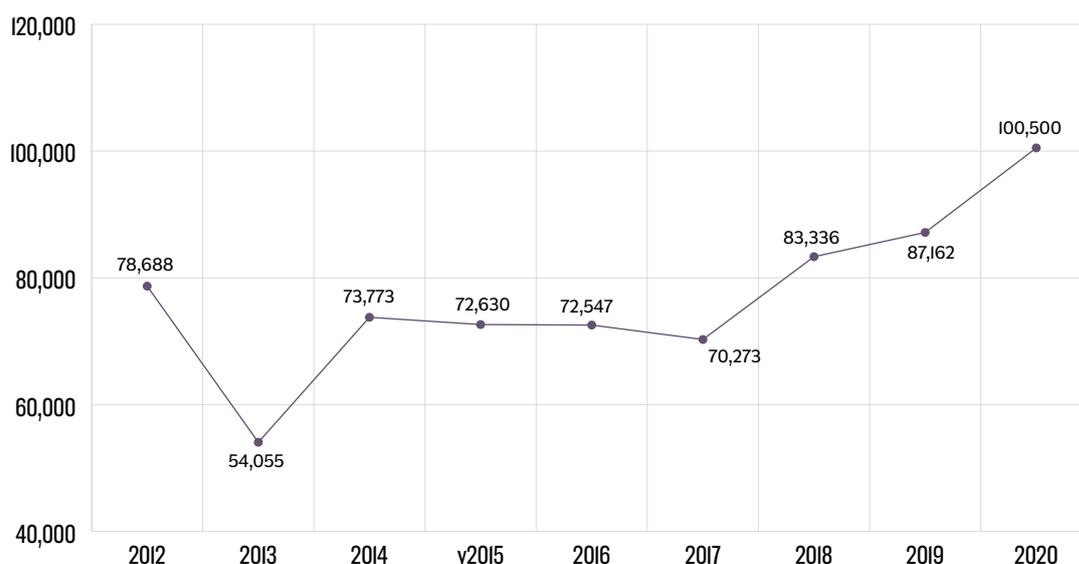


## Violent crime

Underrepresentation of migrants, intensifying ethno-political conflict, and the migration of hardline and extremist groups from other parts of the country are key factors driving violence and urban crime in Karachi, Pakistan's largest city, with a population approaching 16 million. Today, Karachi has an ethnically mixed population, a factor in resurgent political rivalries and sectarian violence associated with intense competition for control of land and resources.<sup>45</sup> Much of the violence has involved turf wars between rival criminal groups backed by political parties such as the Pashtun nationalist Awami National Party and the Muttahida Qaumi Movement, which represents the interests of the Muhajir community. Karachi is also a major target of sectarian violence by militant groups such as the TTP.

Sindh Province, which includes Karachi, has seen crime rates increase (Figure 2I). Most recently, total reported crimes increased from 87,162 in 2019 to 100,550 in 2020, the highest numbers in almost a decade. Part of this increase can be attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic. As resources were shifted away from routine policing work towards enforcement of lockdowns, criminal activities could be more easily pursued. Increased socioeconomic pressures as a result of the pandemic also incentivized people to turn to illegal activities, particularly profiteering and hoarding.<sup>46</sup> In October 2020, the Sindh chief minister unveiled new attempts to reduce crime rates through the Safe City Project. The project, pending since 2011, allows for real-time electronic surveillance of the city through a network of 10,000 cameras. Project implementation began at the end of 2020, with the chief minister also directing the police chief to design a smartphone application to allow the residents of Karachi to promptly report robberies.

Beyond Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, and Quetta are operational and financial bases for various extremist groups and criminal gangs that exploit poor governance and failing law and order to establish recruitment and patronage networks.<sup>47</sup> These groups attempt to lure youth into their violent activities by providing services, work, and a purpose in life. Criminal gangs and jihadi networks continue to inflict violence in big cities. Lack of political representation and the neglect of some ethnic groups have also exacerbated conflict in some cities, as seen in Balochistan.



**Figure 21:** Total reported crime Sindh Province

Source: Sindh Police<sup>48</sup>



## Domestic and gender-based violence

The Pakistan government has begun focusing more strategically on the issue of domestic and gender-based violence. In June 2019, the chief justice of the Pakistan Supreme Court announced the creation of more than one thousand courts throughout the country dedicated to gender-based violence.<sup>49</sup> The courts follow a pilot program begun in Lahore in 2017, which human rights campaigners have lauded as a major success. They will be based in existing courthouses, but cases will be heard separately in order to allow victims to speak out without fear of retaliation.<sup>50</sup> In August 2019, parliament closed a pardon loophole that allowed families to protect perpetrators of "honor killings." In the same month, the Sindh provincial cabinet approved a new law providing women agricultural workers the right to have a written contract, a minimum wage, welfare benefits, and gender parity in wages. The law marked the first time that Pakistan recognized the rights of women agricultural workers to unionize.

Despite this progress, significant challenges persist. The Thomson Reuters Foundation listed Pakistan as the sixth most dangerous country in the world for women.<sup>51</sup> Crimes targeting women, such as abduction, murder, and rape, are among the most common in the country. According to the Aurat Foundation, a women's rights organization based in Islamabad, while rates of most crimes ebb and flow, rape and gang rape are increasing.<sup>52</sup> Even though Pakistan passed the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act in March 2013, cases of domestic violence continue to be underreported and often are not investigated. This is assumed to be particularly the case for Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces, where tribal culture and the jirga court system (in which community leaders, almost exclusively male, make decisions by consensus according to local social practice) may discourage reporting of violence against women even more than in other parts of the country.

The Women, Peace, and Security Index of 2017–2018 reported that roughly 27 percent of women in Pakistan had experienced "intimate partner violence" and that up to 51 percent of women in the country did not feel safe in their own communities.<sup>53</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated issues of domestic violence, as individuals were unable to escape their abusers due to lockdowns. This

was manifested by a rise in cases throughout Pakistan. Government officials reported a 25 percent increase in domestic violence cases during the lockdown across eastern Punjab Province (not including Lahore), with 3,217 cases occurring between March and May 2020.<sup>54</sup> Within Lahore specifically, 13,478 calls reporting domestic violence were received between January and May 2020, with the numbers gradually increasing from 2,096 calls in January to a high of 3,090 calls in May. Women’s protection organizations stated that they were unable to take new residents into their facilities, due to financial, infrastructural, and technical deficiencies.<sup>55</sup>

Other forms of domestic violence—including dowry-related violence, acid attacks, burning, kidnapping, and honor killings, where women are killed because they are believed to have brought shame to their family—are also prevalent. As many as 108 women fell victim to such killings in Sindh Province in 2019, while the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reported that the country witnessed more than 15,000 honor crimes between 2004 and 2016. Men who have been supportive of domestic violence victims have also been punished. The man at the center of a campaign to expose one of Pakistan’s most notorious honor killing cases was shot dead nearly seven years after he brought it to national attention. Other forms of violence, such as dowry- and family-related disputes, often result in women’s death or disfigurement by acid attack or burning. The Asia Foundation has recently provided support to Punjab Province to draft an act, on the sale and purchase of acid, to reduce violence against women. Women are also particularly vulnerable to violence in areas of ethnic and sectarian tension. Pakistan has major problems with the kidnapping of Hindu and Christian women and subsequent forced conversions.



### New media, conflict, and violence

Internet connectivity and the use of social media have continued to increase in Pakistan. Roughly 70 million people, around 35 percent of the population, are now using 3G, 4G, or landline internet connections throughout the country.<sup>56</sup> Further, there are roughly 161 million cellular subscribers in a population of 220 million.<sup>57</sup> This increase in connectivity and internet use has led to growing concern over government control and censorship, as well as rising awareness of the risks posed by online hate speech and misinformation.

Misinformation emerged as a major concern during the 2019 flare-up between India and Pakistan. Videos and images were used to escalate rhetoric and sensationalize conflict.<sup>58</sup> Fake or doctored material was commonplace—for instance, mislabeled images shot in Iraq or Syria and even recordings from a video game being passed off as genuine footage of a fighter jet being shot down.<sup>59</sup> As the conflict escalated and disinformation (or intentionally misleading information) became rampant on platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp, both Indian and Pakistani media outlets published “how-to” guides for recognizing fake news.<sup>60</sup>

The Pakistani government has actively tried to limit and control the use of social media platforms. A new authority, the Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority, was established in 2019.<sup>61</sup> In the first half of 2018, the government reported roughly 3,000 Twitter accounts and asked the company to remove 243 accounts for spreading hate material and inciting violence.<sup>62</sup> There are concerns over whether this crackdown on hate speech is also being used to silence activists and dissenters against the Pakistani government itself.<sup>63</sup> Tech giants Google, Facebook, and others have written to the Pakistani government criticizing what they see as broad censorship and widespread surveillance without judicial oversight.

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# THE PHILIPPINES

## Overview

In early 2019, a new step was taken towards resolving the long-term subnational conflict in the southern Philippines. Following negotiations between the national government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the landmark Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) was endorsed in a two-stage plebiscite. This inaugurated the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. This governance structure endows the region with a degree of autonomy in religion and cultural rights, some fiscal control, and greater control of its natural resources. While the law was intended to install the Bangsamoro Transitional Authority until May 2022, and then to make way for the region's first elections, there are proposals to postpone the elections until 2025 or 2028.

The Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro, signed in 2014, built a path towards peace, although it did not incorporate all armed groups in the region. The Agreement led to the passage of the Bangsamoro Organic Law in 2018, following the 2017 siege of Marawi in Lanao del Sur Province of Mindanao. The battle, between government forces and an alliance of armed nonstate actors who had seized the city, lasted for five months, killing more than 1,300 and displacing 360,000. Key ISIS-affiliated organizations involved in the siege, including elements of the Abu Sayyaf Group and the Maute Group, were weakened but remain active.

Rates of local electoral violence, resource conflict, and criminal violence are high compared to many countries in the region. President Rodrigo Duterte pledged to continue the War on Drugs campaign until the end of his term in 2022, despite international scrutiny of human rights abuses. Journalists and publications in the Philippines have faced growing pressure from the government. Since President Duterte assumed office, there have been at least 171 incidents of attacks and threats against the media, including the deaths of 15 journalists.

The conflict between the Philippine government and the Communist Party of the Philippines continues at a low level of intensity. Over 120,000 combatants and civilians have died in the struggle since 1969, and multiple peace efforts have been unsuccessful. In December 2018, President Duterte created the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict, but two years later he stated that he would not allow any ceasefire with the New People's Army, the armed wing of the Communist Party, until the end of his term in 2022.

The Covid-19 pandemic spread across the Philippines in 2020 and the government imposed strictly enforced lockdowns as infection rates rose. The resulting economic damage was particularly significant for disadvantaged groups, including those displaced by conflict. The pandemic appears to have exacerbated existing conflict tensions across Mindanao.



## National political context

Rodrigo Duterte, the former mayor of Davao, won the 2016 presidential election. He appealed to a wide spectrum of voters across the nation, including in the capital region of Metro Manila, where his strong anticrime message and promise to restore order resonated.<sup>1</sup> President Duterte vowed to suppress crime, illegal drugs, and corruption within his first six months in office, and throughout his presidency he has retained high popularity ratings. His government has aimed to promote security by seeking to end conflict with non-state armed groups, reduce the risk of terrorism, strengthen diplomatic relations with traditional allies, engage non-traditional partners, and pursue an independent foreign policy.<sup>2</sup>

There were over 150 incidents of attacks and threats against Philippine media between 2016 and 2019.<sup>3</sup> Nearly half of the cases were linked to state agents, including public officials from the executive and legislative branches, uniformed personnel, and Cabinet appointees. Fifteen journalists were killed over this period.<sup>4</sup> In addition to violence, threats, and attacks on journalists' reputations, media organizations have been forced to close. The national media giant ABS-CBN had to stop broadcasting in 2020 after its franchise was not renewed and its broadcast rights were withdrawn by the government.

Over the last five years, President Duterte has sought to bolster his power in different branches of the government. Pro-Duterte candidates dominated the May 2019 midterm elections for the Senate, a strong indication of the president's public support. His allies won 12 out of 12 Senate seats and control both chambers of the Philippine Congress.<sup>5</sup> By the end of 2019, he had appointed 12 of the Supreme Court's 15 justices.<sup>6</sup>

One of Duterte's most prominent critics and rivals, Senator Leila de Lima, was jailed in 2017 on drug-trafficking charges, which she claimed were trumped up to punish her for questioning the state's War on Drugs campaign. Though officials from the anti-Money Laundering Council and the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency testified that she was not involved, Senator Lima had yet to be released as of June 2021.<sup>7</sup>

Communist guerillas have been fighting for decades across the Philippines with the ultimate goal of overthrowing the government. From 2010 to 2020, conflict between communists and the Philippine government resulted in more than 1,800 deaths, and targeted attacks on civilians attributed to the guerillas claimed more than 120 lives.<sup>8</sup> In November 2017, after initial moves towards reconciliation, President Duterte signed Proclamation No. 360, which formally terminated negotiations with the communist rebels, calling off peace talks.<sup>9</sup> In December 2018, he requested the creation of a national task force to address the causes of armed conflict with communists at the local level.<sup>10</sup> Subsequently, in 2019, the Duterte administration ramped up efforts against communist rebels. He instructed the Philippine military to pursue "all-out war," hoping to end the communist insurgency within his term.<sup>11</sup> In December 2020, Duterte stated that he would not allow for any ceasefire between the government and communist rebels during the rest of his administration, through 2022.



## Separatism and autonomy

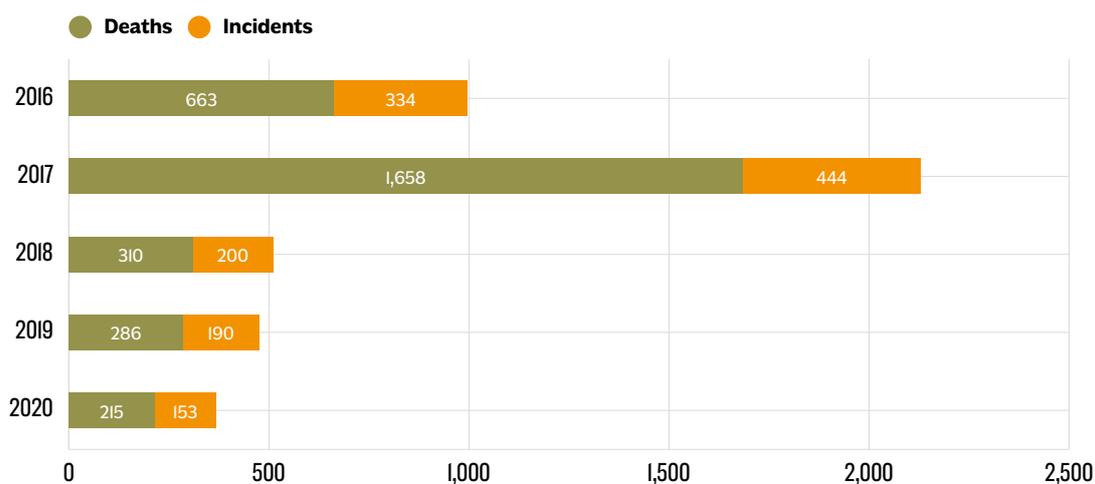
Since the 1960s, Moro (or indigenous Muslim) nationalist groups in Mindanao have engaged in rebellion against the Philippine state, calling for greater rights and self-determination.<sup>12</sup> A low degree of political autonomy in the south, along with the inability of the highly centralized state to improve socioeconomic conditions in the Muslim community, contributed to escalating tensions and generated a persistent, bloody subnational conflict that involves many different armed groups or factions and has cost more than 120,000 lives.

Although two prominent groups, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), signed peace deals with the government in 1996 and 2014, respectively, violence has continued. Extremist factions that are not involved in the peace deals are the main protagonists. On May 23, 2017, violence between Philippine security forces and armed fighters from the Abu Sayyaf Group and the Maute Group dramatically escalated into the longest urban combat in the history of the country. The Battle of Marawi was triggered when the military raided a house occupied by Isnilon Hapilon, then leader of a faction of the Abu Sayyaf Group and the anointed *emir* of ISIS for Southeast Asia.<sup>13</sup> An estimated 919 militants were killed along with 165 soldiers and police, and much of the central business district of Marawi remained in ruins following the use of heavy artillery, air strikes, and improvised explosive devices.<sup>14</sup> An extended period of martial law was finally lifted at the end of 2019.<sup>15</sup> Approximately 120,000 residents from Marawi were still living in temporary shelters or with relatives in late 2020.<sup>16</sup>

Following decades of negotiations between the Philippine government and Muslim secessionist fronts—first the MNLF and then, since 1997, the MILF—the Bangsamoro Organic Law was ratified in 2018.<sup>17</sup> The law in principle ends conflict between the signatories and is the result of decades of dialogue.<sup>18</sup> It was endorsed in a 2019 local plebiscite, and paved the way for the inauguration of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.<sup>19</sup> The new Bangsamoro government supersedes an earlier, less comprehensive local autonomy agreement and enjoys more authority than other regions in the Philippines.<sup>20</sup>

Under the law, a newly created Bangsamoro Transition Authority will govern the region until parliamentary elections in May 2022 and the formation of an elected regional Bangsamoro government in June 2022. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and delays in the passage of key legislation, both the transitional authority and the Duterte government have moved to postpone the elections until 2025.<sup>21</sup> The current 80-member interim governing body includes 41 figures nominated by the MILF and 39 selected by the national government. Its first steps entail crafting the legal foundation for the governance of the Bangsamoro and building a bureaucracy capable of delivering basic social services.<sup>22</sup> An Independent Decommissioning Body has continued to oversee a phased handover of weapons and the demobilization of former MILF combatants.<sup>23</sup>

Some members of the MNLF have been appointed to the Bangsamoro Transition Authority. However, the MNLF faction under founding chairman Nur Misuari is not part of the process. President Duterte met Misuari in 2018 and noted that efforts to amend the constitution and replace the current presidential system with federalism could provide the group more autonomy.<sup>24</sup> Later, in mid-2019, President Duterte ordered the creation of a coordinating committee with the MNLF.<sup>25</sup> In December 2019, he appointed Misuari as special economic envoy on Islamic affairs to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.<sup>26</sup>



**Figure 22:** Number of conflict incidents and fatalities in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao

Source: *Conflict Alert, International Alert Philippines*<sup>27</sup>

Against this backdrop, violent incidents across the autonomous Mindanao region continued to decline in 2020. There were 153 violent incidents in 2020, a drop of about 19 percent from 2019 (Figure 22). Fatalities dropped substantially, from a high of 1,658 in 2017 to a low of 215 in 2020. Violence in 2019 forced 117,000 people from their homes. In the first half of 2020, there were 66,000 new displacements as a result of incidents of conflict.<sup>28</sup>



### Transnational terrorism and international tensions

Various local armed groups have a long history of violence in the Philippines. The most prominent is the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), a loose confederation of small networks based in Sulu and Basilan, which splintered from the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in the 1990s. Heavily influenced by Al-Qaeda and Indonesia-based Jemaah Islamiyah in its early stages, the ASG has engaged in kidnap-for-ransom, piracy, and other forms of criminality across the seas and islands between the Zamboanga Peninsula and Borneo (Malaysian Sabah and Indonesian Kalimantan).<sup>29</sup> Under this strategy, the group usually targets large freight ships and private vessels passing through the Sulu seas, as well as kidnapping Malaysian fisherman off the coast of Sabah. The highly lucrative kidnap-for-ransom business has allegedly been used to bribe officials, the military, and law enforcement agencies, as well as to pay for essential services for local communities.<sup>30</sup>

Although its long-time leader, Isnilon Hapilon, was killed in 2017, the ASG continues to pose threats to the southern Philippines. In January 2019, two bombs killed 20 and injured over 100 at a Catholic cathedral in Jolo, Sulu. In January 2020, joint police and military forces successfully foiled an alleged plot to bomb a cathedral in Basilan, while arresting two ASG suspects.<sup>31</sup> Later, in August 2020, two female suicide bombers affiliated with ASG launched two attacks, once again in Jolo. This time, at least 14 people, including troops and civilians, were killed.<sup>32</sup> An offensive by the Armed Forces of the Philippines in November 2020 led to the deaths of seven members of ASG, who were believed to be planning kidnapping activities in mainland Mindanao.<sup>33</sup>

Another group, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF), had previously broken away from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in 2008, after the Supreme Court's nullification of the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain—a decision seen as betraying local interests.<sup>34</sup> BIFF suffered several leadership losses in 2015 and later splintered into three separate factions. Only the Abu Toraife faction is known to have pledged allegiance to ISIS. In September 2019, this faction planted an explosive device at a parking space in Isulan, wounding eight.<sup>35</sup> In the same month, the BARMM established a special committee to negotiate with other BIFF factions. By January 2020, more than 110 BIFF members had surrendered to military authorities.<sup>36</sup>

The Maute Group, based in Lanao del Sur, was the primary instigator of the Marawi siege. Many of its members, including brothers Abdullah and Omar Maute, were killed during the battle and subsequent clashes.<sup>37</sup> The current de facto leader is Faharudin Hadji Satar, alias Abu Bakar.<sup>38</sup> The Philippines also faces the challenge of newly arrived combatants, adding to those foreign fighters from the Battle of Marawi who are still unaccounted for. In late 2018, authorities claimed that more than 100 foreign militants had entered Mindanao since the end of the Marawi siege.<sup>39</sup>

In 2020, Philippine lawmakers approved the controversial Anti-Terrorism Act, granting security forces new powers in the fight against militant groups. The law revives a dormant antiterrorism council appointed by the president, which can designate individuals and groups as terrorists and detain them without charge for up to 24 days. The law also allows for 90 days of surveillance and wiretapping, as well as punishments that include life imprisonment without parole.<sup>40</sup> The government also receives U.S. counterterrorism assistance, including \$29 million of military equipment delivered in December 2020.<sup>41</sup> Civil society groups have also played an active role in counterterrorism efforts such as the demobilization and reintegration of former fighters, two key elements of the government's security agenda.<sup>42</sup>

The Philippines ranked 10<sup>th</sup> in the Global Terrorism Index in 2020, reflecting the continued challenges from all these groups.



### Identity-based tension and conflict

The Philippines is home to an estimated population of over 106 million.<sup>43</sup> Around 80 percent of the population is Roman Catholic and 9 percent belong to other Christian groups.<sup>44</sup> Moros, comprising the 13 Islamic ethnolinguistic groups native to Mindanao, Sulu, and Palawan, make up about 6 percent of the total population but form a majority in some of their traditional homelands.<sup>45</sup> Other substantial Muslim populations reside in Metro Manila and elsewhere in Luzon. While the official languages in the country are Filipino and English, there are eight major dialects and approximately 183 spoken languages in total.<sup>46</sup>

Conflict in Mindanao has deep roots and relates to the intentional expansion of a national culture shaped around the Christian majority following independence in 1946. In the 1960s, the government increased the resettlement of Catholic Filipinos to Mindanao and Sulu,<sup>47</sup> as Manila sought under “Filipinization” policies to civilize and assimilate the supposedly backward local population. Moro communities, and especially their traditional leaders, became further marginalized and alienated.<sup>48</sup>

Much of Mindanao is also affected by *rido*, or violent inter- and intraclan feuds.<sup>49</sup> Rido typically involves recurring hostilities between families and kinship groups, characterized by serial acts of violent retaliation to avenge perceived affronts or injustices. Conflicts can erupt over land, marriage, elections, business deals, or personal grudges and often cut across and through families, clans, and insurgent groups.

Rido has a history of interacting with separatist conflict and other forms of armed violence, especially when the conflicting parties are aligned with armed groups. Past survey research has shown that most people are more concerned about the prevalence of clan conflict and its negative impact on their communities than the conflict between the state and rebel groups in Mindanao.<sup>50</sup> Rido remains a persistent challenge to peace processes and to local well-being; for example, it was the primary cause of forced displacement in Mindanao during November 2020.<sup>51</sup>



## Local political conflict and electoral violence

Philippine elections remain some of the most violent in Asia. Almost 8,000 of more than 42,000 barangays (villages) nationwide have been labeled as dangerous areas with a high presence of militias and a long history of violence.<sup>52</sup> At least 33 individuals were killed and 19 wounded in several poll-related incidents ahead of the 2018 barangay elections.<sup>53</sup>

During the 2019 Philippine general election, the national police recorded 43 incidents of election-related violence and 73 fatalities, a drop in the death rate of 60 percent from the 2016 elections.<sup>54</sup> An unprecedented number of mayors and vice mayors have been killed since President Duterte took office. Based on media reports, at least eight vice mayors and 12 mayors were killed between July 2016 and August 2019. Some of the mayors killed were on a “narco-list” of 46 “drug personalities” that Duterte released ahead of the May 2019 elections. After Mayor Caesar Perez was killed by unidentified gunmen on December 2020, President Duterte distanced himself from the list.<sup>55</sup>



## Local conflict over resources and community rights

Conflict over land continues to be a common occurrence in the Philippines. The country continues to grapple with the contentious issues of landlessness and extreme poverty that have fueled a 50-year communist insurgency. President Duterte has declared that he will order the distribution of land and establish land reform.<sup>56</sup> The Duterte administration has resolved over 70,000 pending legal cases and awarded approximately 160,000 hectares of land to beneficiaries of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program.<sup>57</sup>

Against this backdrop, around 30 percent of the land-rights activists, farmers, and environmental defenders murdered since President Duterte took power in 2016 were indigenous, even though they represent only 14 percent of the country’s total population.<sup>58</sup> The country has consistently ranked as one of the deadliest in the world for people protecting their land and the environment, although the number of victims murdered fell from 48 in 2017 (the highest ever recorded in an Asian country) to 30 in 2018. Of the deaths, one-half were related to agribusiness, while one-third took place on the island of Mindanao, which is at the heart of the Duterte administration’s plans to allocate 1.6 million hectares of land to industrial plantations.<sup>59</sup> In 2019, the number rose again to 43 killings.

On October 20, 2018, gunmen shot and killed nine sugarcane farmers (including women and children) in Negros Occidental. The victims of the “Sagay Massacre” were members of a leftist labor group, the National Federation of Sugar Workers. The police identified a range of possible suspects behind the bloodshed, including plantation owners and communist New People’s Army rebels.<sup>60</sup> The lawyer who represented the victims’ families, Benjamin Ramos, was himself shot dead by hitmen days later.<sup>61</sup>

Activists have noted a pattern of “red-tagging” by Philippine forces, in which living and murdered activists, journalists, and environmental defenders are accused of holding communist sympathies and providing support for rebel groups. When a leader of the Manobo indigenous group who had campaigned to prevent encroachment in the Pantaron Mountains was killed by aerial bombardment, armed forces posted a photograph of his body online and stated he was killed during a clash with local communist militants.<sup>62</sup>



## Violent crime

The Philippines is ranked by ACLED as the fourth most dangerous place in the world for civilian-targeted violence, and the second worst in Southeast Asia, after Thailand, for civilian possession of firearms.<sup>63</sup> In 2018, the Small Arms Survey provided an estimate of 3,776,000 civilian-owned legal and illicit firearms in the Philippines, amounting to 3.6 firearms per 100 inhabitants.<sup>64</sup>

In July 2018, Duterte pledged to continue his War on Drugs campaign, expanding its reach outside the capital.<sup>65</sup> The Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency stated in December 2020 that 5,980 suspects had been killed and 269,046 arrested in antidrug operations since July 2016.<sup>66</sup> These figures are disputed; Human Rights Watch estimated a death toll of 20,000, leading to an allegation of “crimes against humanity.”<sup>67</sup> Human Rights Watch also noted that “drug war” deaths increased by 50 percent during the 2020 Covid-19 lockdown.<sup>68</sup>

The International Criminal Court (ICC) conducted a preliminary inquiry into accusations that President Duterte and other officials committed mass murder and crimes against humanity throughout the antidrug campaign. In March 2019, the country officially withdrew from the ICC, after its Supreme Court declined to overrule President Duterte’s decision to leave the tribunal. On December 15, 2020, the ICC released a report concluding that there was a “reasonable basis to believe” that crimes against humanity were committed in the course of President Duterte’s years-long crackdown on drugs.<sup>69</sup> In June 2021, an ICC prosecutor asked the court to allow a full investigation.<sup>70</sup>

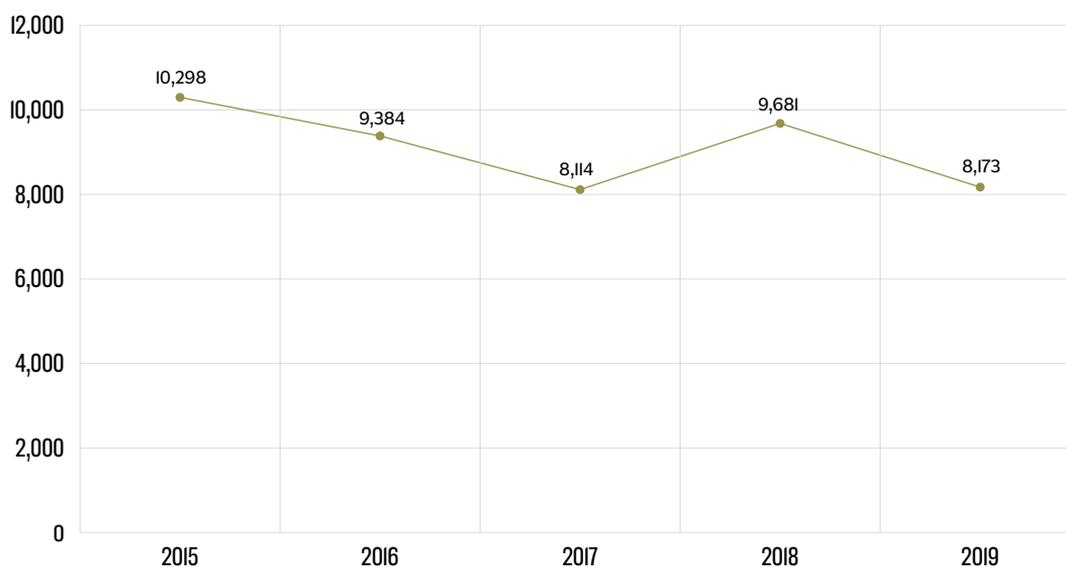
In 2017, the Duterte administration called for a reinstatement of the death penalty for “heinous” crimes—ranging from treason to piracy and from bribery to drug-related crimes.<sup>71</sup> In mid-2019, the House of Representatives asked the Congress to reimpose capital punishment for the importation, dispensation, delivery, and distribution of dangerous drugs.<sup>72</sup>

A 2019 study drew attention to the problem of online sexual exploitation of children in the Philippines. It found that the estimated number of IP addresses used for online child sexual exploitation rose by over 250 percent in the period 2014–2017, from about 23,333 to 81,723. Victims were on average just 11 years old. Abusers tended to be foreigners, while traffickers tended to be younger Filipina women, often family members of the victims who were motivated by financial gain. The commercial sexual exploitation of children through establishments such as brothels and bars is also a major problem.<sup>73</sup> In 2020, tech companies identified more than 1.29 million images and videos of child-abuse materials from the Philippines, triple the 2019 figure.<sup>74</sup>

## Domestic and gender-based violence

Violence against women and children remains a national epidemic. A 2017 survey shows that almost one in four women aged 15–49 who have ever been married have experienced some form of physical, sexual, or emotional violence from their current or most recent husband or partner. Only one-third of those women (34 percent) who experienced violence sought help, mostly from their own family, friends, or neighbors, while only 6 percent of women victims sought help from the police.<sup>75</sup> In 2019, some 8,173 rape cases were reported to the police (Figure 23).<sup>76</sup> Due to the associated cultural and social stigma, many victims prefer to remain silent and do not report their ordeal to the authorities.

Various measures have been taken to tackle the problem. For example, the government has coordinated with the Child Protection Network, a nonprofit organization, in running 113 Women and Children Protection Units covering 57 provinces to provide medical intervention and 24-hour services to facilitate recovery from trauma and stigmatization.<sup>77</sup>



**Figure 23:** Reported rape cases (2011–2017)

Sources: *Philippine Statistics Authority*<sup>78</sup> and *Philippine National Police*<sup>79</sup>



## New media, conflict, and violence

Approximately 76 million out of 108 million Filipinos were internet users in 2019. In one global comparison, Filipinos not only spent the most time online—an average of 10 hours daily (on any device)—but they also spent the most time on social media—an average of over four hours per day.<sup>80</sup> Almost all of those online, 98.7 percent, are active Facebook users.<sup>81</sup>

In July 2019, a proposed Senate bill outlined steps to eliminate the spread of fake news on websites and social media platforms by rendering it a crime to maliciously create or spread false information. Senate Bill No. 9, the Act Prohibiting the Publication and Proliferation of False Content on the Philippine

internet, imposes penalties of up to 20 years imprisonment for those who publish content containing misinformation.<sup>82</sup> The proposed legislation, sweeping in its scope, arguably threatens to stifle free and open online discussion. It would authorize the Cybercrime Office in the Justice Department to direct individuals, owners, or operators of online platforms, and internet intermediaries (no matter where they are based) to correct, take down, or block access to any content that the office determines is false or “would tend to mislead the public.”

The bill does not clearly specify the standards for identifying whether a statement is true or false.<sup>83</sup> The manipulation of social media through the use of trolls, bots, and fake accounts is thought to be widespread in the Philippines. Having harnessed social media as a powerful campaign tool in 2016, President Duterte’s government has continued to use it intensively.<sup>84</sup> Journalists and others who criticize the government are regularly subjected to online and physical threats.<sup>85</sup>

Extremist groups in the Philippines have used social media platforms including Facebook, WhatsApp, and Telegram as tools to search for new recruits, spread radical beliefs, and engage with local sympathizers. Extremist messaging in the country is often “hyperlocal,” in that groups garner support by exploiting grievances and cleavages at the municipal or provincial level.<sup>86</sup> Throughout the Marawi siege, militants produced sophisticated, in-house video coverage, including drone footage of the ruined city and pleas from prominent hostages. Meanwhile, the Armed Forces of the Philippines conducted their own social media operations to discredit these claims and promote their humanitarian efforts in the city, battling the militants both online and offline.<sup>87</sup>

## Notes

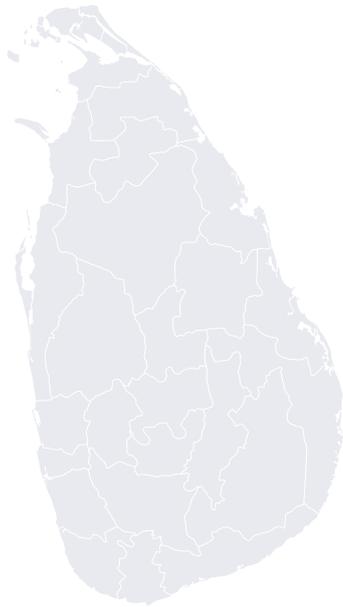
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# SRI LANKA

## Overview

Since the end of the civil war between government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009, Sri Lanka has been comparatively peaceful. Yet the legacy of 25 years of bloody conflict and the limited progress made in addressing deep-seated political and social problems continue to generate ongoing tensions and bouts of violence. On Easter morning, 2019, the country was rocked by a series of six coordinated and deadly terrorist attacks by Islamic extremists on Catholic churches and luxury hotels. The attacks followed years of increasingly virulent rhetoric and violent attacks against the country's minority Muslim population and a long legacy of anti-Muslim chauvinism.

The attacks also occurred against the backdrop of a government in a state of disarray and an erosion of democratic institutions. Political drift and discord eventually led to an attempt by the president to replace the prime minister, which was soon overturned by the Constitutional Court. Elsewhere, land disputes and local resource conflicts persist, especially in rural areas where local political and business interests are closely aligned. Various minority groups feel threatened by belligerent displays of exclusionary nationalism, and many Tamils in the North and East still maintain an uneasy relationship with state authorities.



## National political context

In 2015, Maithripala Sirisena shocked his former cabinet ally by beating Mahinda Rajapaksa in the general elections. In the first six months of his presidency, President Sirisena began an ambitious plan to reform Sri Lankan politics. He was aided by an initially supportive parliamentary coalition government and the new prime minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe. The coalition government pushed for reducing presidential powers and the institutionalization of independent oversight commissions. However, the relationship between Sirisena and Wickremesinghe began to deteriorate as the government struggled to cope with Sri Lanka's debt crisis, and cooperation within the coalition ground to a halt. In the 2018 local elections, the landslide victory by Mahinda Rajapaksa's party demonstrated the growing fragility of the coalition government.

By late 2018, Sri Lanka had plunged into full political turmoil. In October 2018, President Sirisena attempted to dissolve parliament and remove Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe from office. In his place, the President installed Mahinda Rajapaksa—the leader he had directly campaigned against in 2015—creating a new coalition. Confusion ensued as individuals and parties fought for position in the newly constituted government amidst political infighting and even exchanges of physical blows between opposition politicians on the floor of the parliament.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, Sirisena failed to remove Wickremesinghe, and in December 2018 Wickremesinghe was reinstated in his position by the Sri Lankan courts. Distrust and tensions lingered, and the working relationship between the president and the prime minister remained poor. The repercussions of this rift have led to major bureaucratic gridlock and a lack of trust between the parties in parliament.

In December 2018, just after Wickremesinghe was reappointed prime minister, President Sirisena took direct control of the national security and intelligence apparatus.<sup>2</sup> He reassigned the police service to the Ministry of Defense—a Ministry run by the sitting Sri Lankan president. The former defense secretary was then ordered not to invite the prime minister, the state minister of defense, or the inspector general to National Security Council meetings, which were held less frequently.<sup>3</sup> It was later alleged that political maneuvers led to a series of mistakes that allowed warnings related to the 2019 Easter Bombings to fall through the cracks.

In the general election of November 16, 2019, Gotabaya Rajapaksa became president. Formerly the secretary to the Ministry of Defense, and responsible for the military campaign that ended the civil war with the LTTE, he is also the brother of former president Mahinda Rajapaksa. He holds a strong popular mandate, with support from the majority Sinhalese Buddhist community, and has promised that national security and intelligence will be focal points of his presidency, including a new investigation into the Easter Bombings.<sup>4</sup>



## Transnational terrorism and international tensions

There is little history of transnational terrorism within Sri Lanka, and few Sri Lankans have participated in transnational terrorism. Only 32 Sri Lankans reportedly left the island to fight in Syria for the Islamic State, a low figure by regional comparisons.<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, the country was thrown into the spotlight after the Easter Bombings, which were carried out by a little-known, hardline Salafi-Islamist group called the National Thowheed Jamath (NTJ), based in eastern Sri Lanka in the town of Kattankudy. The NTJ had previously signaled their plans in December 2018, when several Buddhist statues were vandalized in Manwanella. A group of suspects were arrested, and security forces discovered a weapons cache.<sup>6</sup>

Following the attacks, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of ISIS, claimed responsibility for the attacks and publicly called them a “blessed raid.” In July 2019, the head of the Criminal Investigation Department in Sri Lanka concluded that, while the NTJ attackers were likely inspired by ISIS, there was no tangible proof to indicate that ISIS was directly linked to the attack itself.<sup>7</sup> Instead of transnational terrorist motives, analysts have pointed to the toxic atmosphere of anti-Muslim sentiment and the treatment of the Sri Lankan Muslim population as sources of motivation for the attack.<sup>8</sup>

China’s growing involvement in Sri Lanka, and its implications for Sri Lanka’s relationship with India and other nations, is controversial. Under President Mahinda Rajapaksa, Sri Lanka took on more than \$44 billion in debt, including loans from the Chinese government, for large-scale construction projects.<sup>9</sup> The most ambitious project was the Hambantota Port project, which Sri Lanka’s current government was forced to hand over to the Chinese-government-run China Harbor Engineering Company after being unable to make debt repayments.<sup>10</sup> The port is a major part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative and demonstrates China’s rising interest and influence in the region. The land promised for the port’s development project is owned by Sri Lankan citizens, not the government, and many of them have protested. In January 2017, hundreds of protestors clashed with Sri Lankan police over the issue.<sup>11</sup>

The severity of the country’s indebtedness to China has perhaps been overstated. While there has been significant borrowing from China, it makes up only around 10 percent of the national debt. Commercially sourced loans, which carry higher rates of interest, are more significant in financial terms, even if less controversial politically.<sup>12</sup>



## Separatism and autonomy

Since independence in 1948, Sri Lanka has been gravely affected by conflict between its two principal ethnolinguistic groups, Sinhalese and Tamils. Sinhalese, who are predominantly Buddhist, make up 75 percent of the population, while the mostly Hindu minority of Sri Lankan and “upcountry,” Indian-origin Tamils represent 15 percent of the population. The desire of many Sri Lankan Tamils for greater recognition and autonomy spiraled into a civil war that lasted from 1983 to 2009.

Divisions between Sinhalese and Tamils can be traced back to policies from before and after independence. During the colonial period, Tamils were over-represented in both Sri Lankan business and state administration. After independence, the balance of power shifted. In an attempt to reverse colonial imbalances, the Sinhalese-dominated government enacted a number of laws that increased tensions. Separatist movements led by Tamil youth began to campaign for an independent state in the mid-1970s. The conflict between the government and the LTTE lasted from 1983 until May 2009, when the latter’s leader, Vellupilai Prabhakaran, and other senior members were killed by the Sri Lankan military in a bloody endgame. Rough estimates suggest that more than 100,000 civilians and 50,000 military died during the conflict, the violence escalating significantly in the final four years.

Since the defeat of the LTTE, and particularly since the 2015 election, steps have been taken towards addressing Tamil grievances and the legacy of the war. Progress, however, has been slow, and the government has been reluctant to allow international involvement into allegations of war crimes committed by all conflict parties during the war. Meanwhile, tensions remain high in the north and east, where problems such as the continued military presence, conflicts over land, and resettlement of displaced Tamils and Muslims persist.

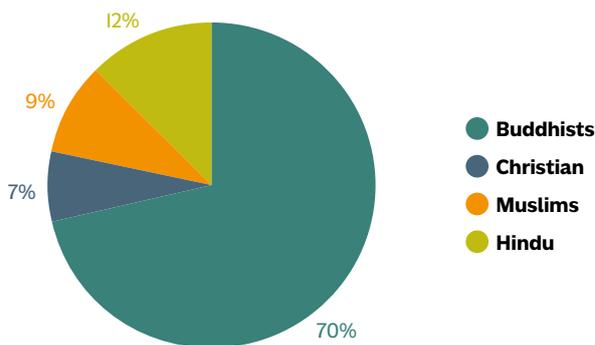
While no new separatist efforts have formed in Sri Lanka since the end of the Civil War in 2009, reminders of the war remain. In addition to the high casualty rates, the conflict displaced at least 300,000 people. With the war ending in complete military victory for the Sri Lankan government, more needs to be done to support the Tamil community rebuild and recover from their trauma and for effective reconciliation to take place. Many transitional programs, including the effective pursuit of human rights transgressors on all sides, have not made significant progress.



## Identity-based tension and conflict

Intergroup tensions, although not limited to the Sinhalese and Tamils, have repeatedly led to violence in Sri Lanka's recent history. As of the 2012 census, the religious make-up of the country was roughly 7 percent Christian, 9 percent Muslim, 12 percent Hindu, and 70 percent Buddhist. The population is also broken down into three main ethnic groups: 75 percent Sinhalese, 15 percent Tamil, and 9 percent Sri Lankan Moors. Along with religion and ethnicity, divisions of economic class and caste generate further cleavages across Sri Lankan society.

In the 10 years since the end of the civil war, Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism and militancy has escalated, and Sri Lanka's Muslim population has been targeted through violent rhetoric and, in some cases, physical attack. President Mahinda Rajapaksa's government offered tacit support for militant Buddhist groups and failed to prosecute those who committed acts of violence.<sup>13</sup> The replacement of Rajapaksa's party in 2015 by a coalition government briefly muted the rise of anti-Muslim attacks, but in 2017, organized groups targeted mosques and Muslim-owned businesses.<sup>14</sup> The attacks were headlined by the violent rhetoric of the Bodu Bala Sena, a Sinhalese Buddhist nationalist organization that had been active throughout Rajapaksa's administration.



**Figure 24:** The religious composition of Sri Lanka's population

Source: *Sri Lanka National Census 2012*

In 2018, anti-Muslim attacks escalated, incited by blatant anti-Muslim campaigning and justified by intentionally misleading online reporting and instigation of violence. In late February, in Ampara, militant Buddhist groups used a false rumor of a Muslim restaurant sneaking sterilization tablets into customers' food to raise the alarm against Muslims. Then, a few days later, in Kandy, the same groups mobilized crowds after what was described as a road rage incident. Within days, large and organized mobs targeted and burned Muslim homes, businesses, and mosques in several towns across central Sri Lanka.<sup>15</sup> At least one Muslim man was killed during the attacks.

The Sri Lankan government responded to the riots by declaring a state of emergency for 10 days, installing a curfew, and making several arrests. However, many within the Muslim community criticized the government for failing to intervene to prevent the violence.<sup>16</sup>

More recently, Sri Lankan Christians were targeted in a high-profile terrorist attack by a radical Muslim group. On April 21, 2019, Easter morning, three churches and three luxury hotels were targets of coordinated assaults carried out by NTJ. Some 269 people were reported killed, including at least 45 foreign nationals, and more than 500 were injured.

Prior to the Easter bombings, there had been little history of Muslim groups committing violence, least of all against Sri Lankan Christians. Much of the recorded Muslim violence had been between Muslim groups, while violence against Christians had typically been committed by militant Sinhalese Buddhist groups.<sup>17</sup>

In the wake of the bombings, Muslim community and religious leaders were quick to condemn the attacks and tried to distance the Muslim community as a whole from the isolated actions of a radical group.<sup>18</sup> Some mosques even stopped playing calls to prayer over speakers. Nonetheless, a harsh backlash against the Muslim community followed. A ban on face-coverings led to some discrimination against Muslim women, while the many suspects detained included some whose arrest was based solely on the existence of a copy of the Quran or other Arabic texts in their houses.<sup>19</sup>

Communal riots spread in May 2019. Most of the rioting was focused in a few specific towns in Gampaha district, north of the capital, Colombo. In one neighborhood that is barely 3 percent Muslim by population, a mob attacked 76 Muslim-owned businesses and homes. Authorities tried to stem the spreading attacks by declaring a temporary national curfew, shutting down social media and messaging platforms, and arresting 70 people.<sup>20</sup>

As in previous years, communal violence has been incited and fomented by the rhetoric of nationalist Sinhalese Buddhist leaders. They have taken to social media to push boycotts of Muslim-owned businesses, while national media outlets have also reported false and unsubstantiated rumors.<sup>21</sup> The government of President Sirisena had tried to clamp down on some of the more radical nationalist groups such as the Bodu Bala Sena, and in late 2018 the leader of that group, Galagoda Anththe Gnansara was sentenced to six years in prison for contempt of court. However, in May 2019, in the wake of the Easter Bombings, he was pardoned by the president and released.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the divisions between Buddhists and Muslims, the ethnic divides that underpin the 25-year civil war persist. The Tamil population continues to face barriers and exclusion in much of the country. There has been a lack of transitional justice or other measures to address unresolved concerns that fed decades of civil war, including feelings of marginalization within Sri Lankan society.



## Local political conflict and electoral violence

While preelection violence affected voting in 2015, there was demonstrably less violence in the February 2018 local council elections.<sup>23</sup> However, watchdog groups pointed out that there were still many incidents of violence and intimidation towards female candidates, as well as a spike in electoral violence in the days after the election. This postelection violence represented a moderate increase over the previous two elections in Sri Lanka. Female candidates were often targeted in “abusive” phone calls, through “the use of abusive language,” and through efforts to intimidate, discredit, and demoralize them on social media.<sup>24</sup> In Wellawaya, one female candidate was physically assaulted, and in Welikanda, a female candidate was sexually assaulted. The National Coordinator of the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence stated that despite the impressive work of police, it was likely that further incidents went unreported.<sup>25</sup>

The days leading up to the election of November 16, 2019, and election day itself, were marked by several instances of violence, including a group of gunmen opening fire on buses carrying Muslims to polling stations in the northwest of the country, as well as the stabbing of a journalist who had written a book critical of Rajapaksa.<sup>26</sup>

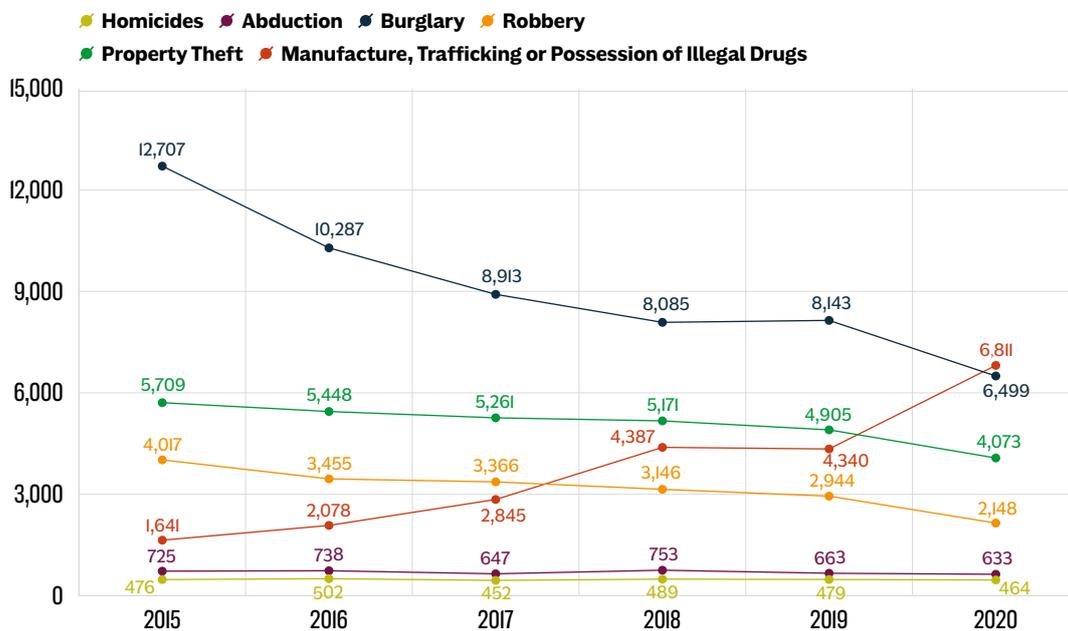


## Violent crime

Crime rates in Sri Lanka have remained relatively constant over the past few years. The most prevalent types of crime in the country are home burglary, theft, and robbery. Homicides and abductions occur at much lower rates. There has been a gradual decline from 2015 to 2018 across all of these categories (Figure 25).

The number of annual drug arrests in Sri Lanka, reported by the National Dangerous Drugs Control Board, rose from 65,998 in 2013 to 98,752 in 2018.<sup>27</sup> Data also indicate a rise in reported serious drug crimes through to 2020, as shown at Figure 25. Cannabis and heroin are the primary drugs involved, with heroin arrests increasing fastest. Although drug-related crime is a common concern in Sri Lanka, the growing number of arrests may represent changes in policing rather than trends in drug trafficking and use. Sri Lanka's Western Province—and Colombo in particular—report the highest rates of drug addiction and arrests. Youth and young adults are both the primary users of drugs and the preponderance of those arrested.<sup>28</sup> The government of the previous president, Maithripala Sirisena, sought popular support by reinstating the death penalty in the country after a 43-year moratorium, claiming that it would help stop addiction in the country.<sup>29</sup>

Along with drug trafficking, there are widespread concerns in Sri Lanka about gang-related violence and crime. In 2016, the Sri Lankan government reintroduced roadblocks and vehicle checks throughout Colombo after a spurt of gang related violence.<sup>30</sup> There have also been worries about youth unemployment leading to increased gang involvement—particularly amongst Tamil populations in northern Sri Lanka.<sup>31</sup> While few statistics specifically support this conclusion, and Sri Lankan authorities have downplayed the extent of the problem, locals continue to voice their concerns in the media.<sup>32</sup>



**Figure 25:** Serious crimes reported in Sri Lanka (2015–2020)  
 Source: Sri Lanka Police data<sup>33</sup>



## Local conflict over resources and community rights

Land- and water-rights issues in Sri Lanka hit lower caste and rural Tamil populations hardest. These two groups rarely own significant amounts of property, farming on small plots or laboring on plantations. This leaves them vulnerable to major development projects, which often buy up small plots of land or force the closure of longstanding plantations.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, many of these marginalized communities face major water issues; for example, in Uva Province, where the Uma Oya Multi-Purpose Development Project shifted water away from the region. The ensuing lack of water sources has led to desertification and threatened the well-being of thousands of families.<sup>35</sup>

While the civil war in Sri Lanka ended in 2009, the Sri Lankan government is yet to return all land that was confiscated during the conflict. While the government has said they have returned up to 80 percent of the land that was taken, the United Nations has pointed to the lack of data to support that claim.<sup>36</sup> The military maintains that it is continuing to hold some land for security measures, although there have been examples of such land being used for commercial purposes. By early 2019, despite many protests, roughly 30,000 acres of private land were still being held by the government.<sup>37</sup>



## Domestic and gender-based violence

There is no formal, national mechanism for collecting statistics on gender-based violence in Sri Lanka, and tracking the problem remains a difficult challenge.<sup>38</sup> Police statistics show relatively stable numbers of reported rape cases annually.<sup>39</sup> In 2019, a total of 1,779 women and girls were recorded as victims of rape in Sri Lanka.<sup>40</sup>

Independent reports describe how intimate partner violence, sexual harassment, and other forms of gender-based violence are pervasive. A 2019 survey found that 9.7 percent of Sri Lankan women over age 15 had experienced some form of sexual violence.<sup>41</sup> The LGBTI community also faces discrimination. While rarely enforced, the penal code calls for up to 10 years of prison for those caught committing same-sex sexual acts.<sup>42</sup>

Sri Lanka has also struggled with a history and continued presence of sexual violence against the Tamil population, along with continued impunity for crimes committed during the civil war. There have been few convictions or consequences within a transitional justice framework. The Sri Lankan military has denied such accusations.<sup>43</sup>



## New media, conflict, and violence

Social media and news media have played a significant role in driving tensions and violence in Sri Lanka in recent years. Nationalist Sinhalese Buddhist leaders have used social media platforms for mobilizing and spreading rumors, while traditional news media have reinforced the stereotypes spread on social media. The government has struggled to rein in social media and related technologies thus far.

Facebook and WhatsApp in particular have been used to disseminate misleading rumors about Muslim communities and to quickly mobilize groups to a particular region of the country—often for demonstrations and mob violence.<sup>44</sup> Notable examples have been the aftermath of the traffic incident that acted as a powder keg for the Kandy District violence in 2018. Various threats have been made against the Muslim community using Facebook videos of Sinhalese Buddhist monks with major followings on social media platforms.<sup>45</sup> The problems of misinformation and anti-Muslim sentiment also affect traditional media. Local and national newspapers, radio channels, and TV channels have helped fuel prejudice and stereotypes against minority populations in Sri Lanka.

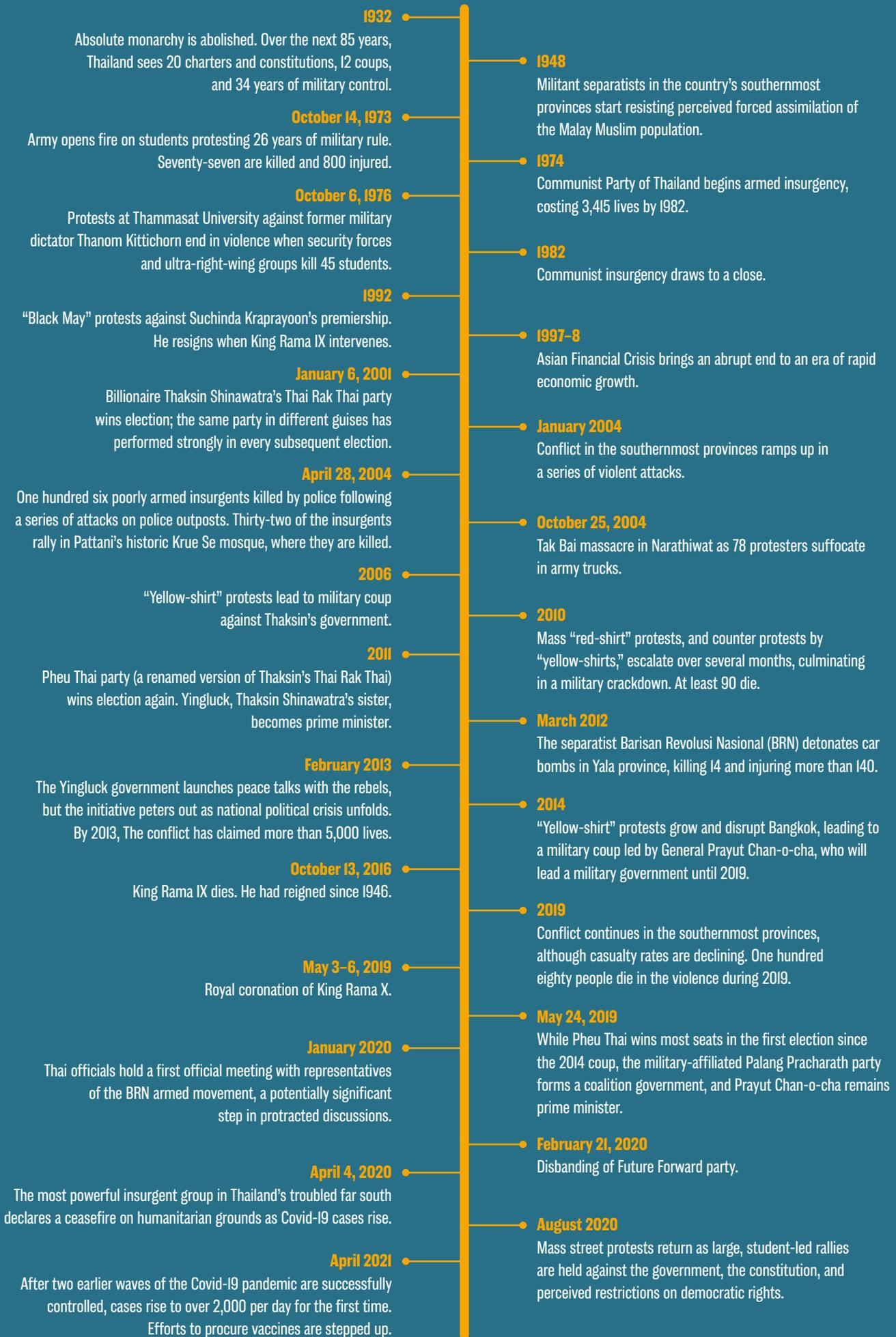
It is also likely that the radicalization of some of the Easter bombing attackers took place in part over social media. In 2018, radical Salafi preacher MCM Zaharan—one of the organizers of the attacks—posted a video on his Facebook page specifically calling for attacks on non-Muslims and Sri Lankan Police. Local Muslim community leaders apparently reported these videos to the police and Sri Lankan authorities.<sup>46</sup> While such reports did not lead to his arrest, they demonstrated the possibility of a successful method of monitoring dangerous hate speech.

The Sri Lankan authorities have attempted to combat hate speech and false rumors by completely banning major social media platforms, most notably for several weeks after the Easter bombings and again in mid-May 2019 after riots and violence. Such steps show awareness and the willingness to act, but human rights groups have protested such measures and questioned their effectiveness.<sup>47</sup>

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# THAILAND

## Overview

Thailand's political instability at the national level has continued despite a return to partial democracy. After multiple postponements, Thailand finally held its general election in May 2019. General Prayut Chan-o-cha, who led the 2014 military coup and the post-coup military government up to the election, emerged as prime minister following a lengthy process and delayed results, which were disputed by some actors. In February 2020, an emerging new political party that opposed traditional elites, Future Forward, was disbanded by the constitutional Court for funding irregularities.

In August 2020, a mass movement against the government formed large street protests that grew in size and ambition. Police arrested and pressed charges against a number of prominent student activists involved in organizing the protests. In October, the government imposed more severe restrictions on public gatherings under a state of emergency.

Thailand continues to be plagued by an ethnonationalist insurgency in its southernmost provinces. The conflict is rooted in the historical grievances of the area's Malay Muslim majority toward the Thai state. While the ongoing peace dialogue remains stagnant, violent attacks continue, although they have gradually decreased in number. The protracted conflict has resulted in over 7,000 deaths since 2004. Across Thailand, gender-based violence remains widespread, affecting a large part of the population.

Thailand confirmed its first case of Covid-19 as early as January 13, 2020, and responded quickly. After a strict national lockdown in April and May, the number of new local infections dropped to zero until December 2020, when cases began to rise once again. The tourism industry has been particularly affected, and Thailand saw its economy contract for the first time since 2014. Anti-immigrant sentiment flared up at various points during the pandemic, particularly in December 2020 as new local infections spread from Myanmar migrant workers. Positive cases rose to new highs starting in April 2021 as the pandemic began to establish itself across the country for the first time.



## National political context

Since the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in 1932, Thailand has had 20 charters and constitutions, 12 successful coups out of nearly 30 attempts, and almost 40 years of military rule. Political instability has persisted into the current era. Following years of unstable politics involving regular mass street protests, and six further months of political crisis beginning in late 2013, Thailand's military launched a coup in May 2014 that established a military administration, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO).

Unlike previous coup leaders, General Prayut Chan-o-cha appointed himself prime minister instead of nominating a civilian caretaker government. The 2014 interim charter, specifically Section 44, allowed Prayut to govern with little oversight and imposed only limited accountability on officials operating under his orders.<sup>1</sup>

The 2017 constitution grants past executive orders the force of law until they are revoked, and vests significant authority in unelected bodies.<sup>2</sup> For example, the constitution allowed the NCPO to select 250 senators, forming the upper house of parliament, who participate, along with the 500 elected members of the lower house, in electing the prime minister.<sup>3</sup>

Thailand finally held its first general election since the 2014 coup on March 24, 2019. Seven million people between the ages of 18 and 25 were eligible to vote for the first time.<sup>4</sup> The military-associated Palang Pracharath party received the most votes (23.7 percent), while Pheu Thai, still associated with Thaksin Shinawatra's enduring base of support, received 22.2 percent. The surprise performer was the new Future Forward party, led by tycoon-turned-politician Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit, which appealed to reform-minded voters and gained a 17.7 percent share. Many younger and older voters were dissatisfied with the status quo and disliked the recurring, polarized clashes between parties aligned with former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra and the old establishment.

Following the election, the Palang Pracharath Party was able to establish a coalition, and Prayut Chan-o-cha retained his position as prime minister. As set out in the 2017 constitution, appointed senators participated in the parliamentary vote to select the prime minister after the election, a process which greatly increased the likelihood that Prayut would retain his position.<sup>5</sup> In February 2020, The Future Forward party was dissolved, triggering a wave of protests led initially by high school and university students. While the demonstrations began by targeting the prime minister, they evolved to cover broader demands: revision of the constitution to allow for greater democratic participation, reforms to government institutions, and a new election. By late 2020, some protest groups were openly calling for reform of the monarchy, leading authorities to charge at least 33 protest leaders under lèse-majesté laws.<sup>6</sup> By the end of 2020, however, the protests were struggling to attract broad support from rural and working-class Thais. A second wave of Covid-19 put protests on hold,<sup>7</sup> until they resumed in mid-2021.



## Transnational terrorism and international tensions

International terror attacks have been rare in Thailand, and the country's principal vulnerability to international terrorism may be as a transit and facilitation hub.<sup>8</sup> In 2015, 20 people were killed when a bomb exploded at a popular tourist spot, the Erawan Shrine, in the center of Bangkok.<sup>9</sup> In 2020, Thailand was planning to amend laws on money laundering and counterterrorism financing.<sup>10</sup>

There have been recurring reports about international extremist threats to the country and rumors of activities in Thailand's southernmost provinces (an area consisting of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, and parts of Songkhla). Thai security officials remain concerned about the potential for ISIS and other groups to infiltrate domestic nonstate armed groups, although they have maintained that there is no firm evidence of any operational linkages.<sup>11</sup> For instance, in January 2016, authorities were investigating reports that three foreigners with suspected links to ISIS terrorists had visited a religious school in

Narathiwat. Intelligence units later confirmed that it was a false lead.<sup>12</sup> In April 2018, the government announced that a ceasefire “safety zone” would be set up as a pilot project in Narathiwat’s conflict-affected Joh I Rong district. The announcement coincided with a report from Malaysian intelligence sources that a Thai suspect was attempting to establish an Islamic State cell in southern Thailand.<sup>13</sup>



## Separatism and autonomy

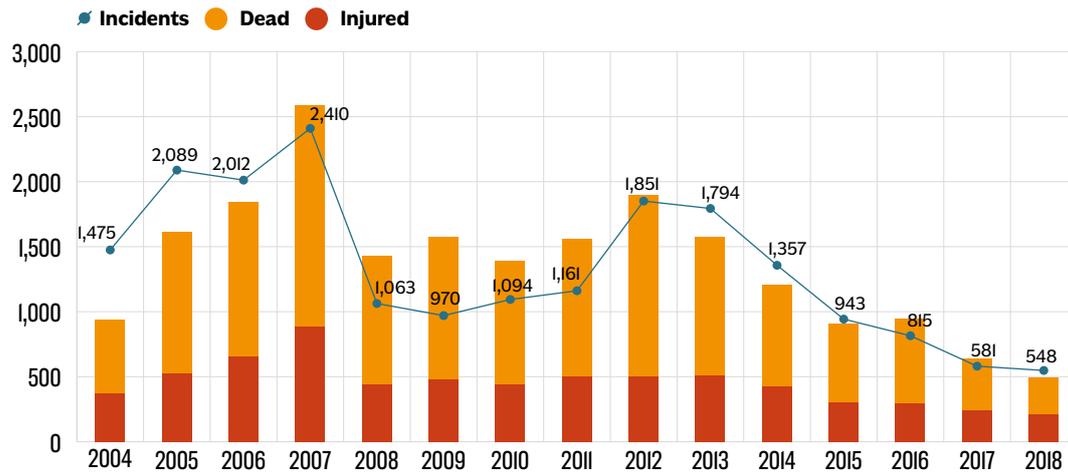
The Malay Muslim insurgency in Thailand’s southernmost provinces primarily seeks greater autonomy for the area. This subnational conflict is distinct from international jihadist extremism. The recent period of violence started in January 2004, during Thaksin Shinawatra’s period as prime minister, when armed insurgents launched a string of attacks. In April 2004, 106 poorly armed insurgents simultaneously attacked 10 police posts and a police station, having been made to believe that they were invincible. Thirty-two of them then retreated to the historic Krue Se mosque in Pattani, where they used the loudspeaker to call for revolt against the state. Thai security forces eventually overpowered them with heavier firepower. All 106 insurgents died in this suicidal mission, which reflected a mystical-leaning, parochial Islam influenced by local popular beliefs.

Later that year, in October, 78 local protesters died from suffocation after having been arrested and stacked five layers deep in army trucks, an incident which Prime Minister Thaksin blamed on the protesters’ fasting during Ramadan.<sup>14</sup> Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN) insurgents have committed numerous violations of the laws of war, which prohibit attacks on civilians or attacks that fail to discriminate between military personnel and civilians. The government’s security forces have continued to act with impunity under emergency legislation. Overall, around two-thirds of those killed or injured are civilians, and a majority of the victims are Malay Muslim.<sup>15</sup>

In February 2013, during the civilian government of Yingluck Shinawatra (Thaksin’s sister), an official peace dialogue was launched, the first time in history that the Thai state formally agreed to hold peace talks with rebel groups from the southernmost provinces. Talks later resumed, in December 2014, several months after the coup d’état, in a different format. The military government led the government of Thailand’s dialogue team, while representatives of separatist movements were formed into an umbrella body called Majlis Syura Patani (Patani Consultative Council, or MARA Patani). The main insurgency group, BRN, refused to take a formal part in this process.<sup>16</sup> Malaysia played a significant facilitating role. Progress was limited, however. Bangkok continued to prioritize its national sovereignty and showed limited interest in administrative changes. MARA Patani’s questionable status, and BRN’s limited involvement, also hindered progress.

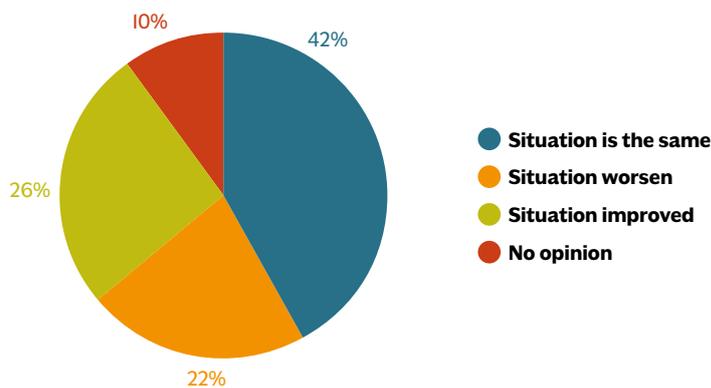
In April 2017, BRN issued a statement opposing a peace dialogue facilitated by Malaysia.<sup>17</sup> This served as a soft reminder to the government that BRN remains the organization with de facto power on the ground. Then, in January 2020, BRN met Thai officials for talks for the first time since 2013. After the meeting, the head of the BRN delegation stated that the two sides had agreed on a framework and terms of reference to guide future talks. A BRN statement elaborated that Malaysia would facilitate.<sup>18</sup> But the talks remained on shaky ground, as the BRN’s powerful military wing and local level militants continued to question their merit.<sup>19</sup>

The total number of fatalities attributed to the violence between January 2004 and the end of 2020 is 7,201 (Figure 26). Violence in the southernmost provinces has steadily declined over the past few years. There were 116 conflict fatalities in 2020. By comparison, there were 892 deaths in the conflict’s bloodiest year, 2007. While military sources attribute the change to improved counterinsurgency tactics and peace talks, commentators closer to the insurgents point to BRN’s attempts to adapt its strategies to gain support and increase its legitimacy within the international arena.<sup>20</sup> In response to an early outbreak of Covid-19 in the southernmost provinces, the BRN announced, on April 3, 2020, a unilateral ceasefire to enable humanitarian and medical access.<sup>21</sup> While the ceasefire ultimately did not hold, violence in the area was at a historic low, with 40 people killed over the rest of 2020.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 26:** Yearly incidents, deaths, and injuries in Thailand's southernmost provinces, 2004–2020  
 Source: Deep South Watch<sup>23</sup>

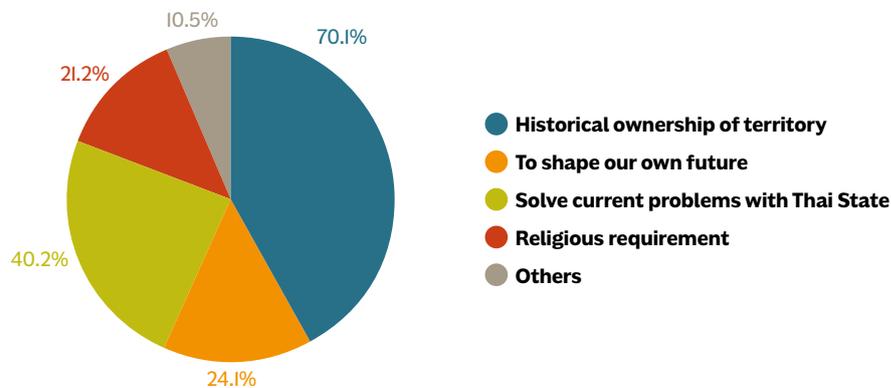
**What is your opinion on the current situation in the southernmost border provinces?**



**Figure 27:** Local attitudes to prevailing conflict conditions  
 Source: Deep South Watch<sup>24</sup>

**Why do you desire greater Autonomy?**

(survey of 1,000 activists in the southernmost provinces, percentages responding positively to each category)



**Figure 28:** Motivations among those desiring greater transfer of authority from the center to the southernmost provinces  
 Source: Mark Tamthai<sup>25</sup>

Despite the gradual decline in levels of violence, surveys suggest that most local residents do not feel that the situation is improving (Figure 27).

Data released in 2020 explores the motivations of people in the southernmost provinces who are committed to some form of independence. In a survey of 1,000 such local respondents, the top three reasons given were: (1) sense of ownership over the land, (2) self-determination or the desire to chart their own course for their homeland, and (3) moral obligation and religious duty. Collectively, the top three answers were labeled as “sacred values” (Figure 28).



## Identity-based tension and conflict

Home to an estimated population of almost 69 million, Thailand is officially composed of people classified as Thai (97.5 percent) with a much smaller combination of Burmese (1.3 percent) and others (1.1 percent). These statistics represent a nation-building process that has in most of the country forged a shared identity out of historically more disparate and varied populations. Descendants of Chinese migrants, and a large population in the northeast who share linguistic and cultural traits with neighboring countries, are well assimilated across much of the country.

Although 94.6 percent of Thailand’s population adheres to local interpretations of Theravada Buddhism, 4.3 percent are Muslim and around 1 percent Christian.<sup>26</sup> In the conflict-affected southernmost provinces, approximately 82 percent of the population is Muslim, and the remainder are mostly Buddhist.<sup>27</sup>

The years of separatist insurgency in the southernmost provinces, where the majority of people retain a distinct identity and culture as well as their Islamic faith, stem from long-term perceptions of enforced assimilation and political marginalization. Lack of progress in addressing these grievances, and the poor socioeconomic conditions in the region, have compounded popular discontentment with Bangkok. Most local people, including insurgent leaders, support greater cultural recognition and enhanced local political authority, including increased control of language and education policies in an area that was historically defined as a Malay sultanate until its incorporation into the Kingdom of Siam (later Thailand) in 1909.<sup>28</sup>

During the early 1900s, citizens of Siam were primarily viewed as those who spoke Thai and honored Buddhism.<sup>29</sup> Against this backdrop, modernization policies and laws sought to eliminate Islamic and other customs and dialects in order to create a homogeneous cultural and linguistic identity.<sup>30</sup> Over the decades, Malay Muslims have harbored resentment against Thailand’s security forces for human rights abuses past and present, including extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances. These tensions persist. For example, in September 2019 the Thai police requested that universities nationwide supply information on Muslim-organized student groups, after the arrest of three ethnic Malay Muslims in connection with a series of small-scale bombings in Bangkok. After rights groups complained that the request was discriminatory, the authorities postponed enforcement.<sup>31</sup>

At the national level, the current military-backed 2017 constitution sheds light on the government’s commitment to religious impartiality. The constitution prohibits discrimination based on religious belief, and there is no official state religion. Thailand has mostly avoided state-sponsored support for chauvinist or majoritarian attitudes, and religious identity is not a strong aspect of political campaigning. Section 67 of the constitution illustrates Bangkok’s willingness to conserve and shape Thailand’s national identity and could be used to infringe upon the freedoms of religious minorities in the country. Most notably, it states that the government should “promote and support education of dharmic principles ... and shall have measures and mechanisms to prevent Buddhism from being undermined in any form...”<sup>32</sup> In 2018, the Ministry of Education sought to develop compulsory Buddhist studies for national education programs in order to preserve Thai cultural heritage and promote critical thinking, a step which a UN envoy argued adversely restricts freedom of religion.<sup>33</sup>

In mid-2017, a small group of local Buddhists in Khon Kaen in the northeast of Thailand filed a petition to halt a Muslim community's efforts to register a recently constructed mosque, citing fears of violent incidents similar to those in the southernmost provinces.<sup>34</sup> A Facebook page, "Isan Says No to Mosque," declared that northeastern locals oppose the construction of any mosque, because it impairs traditional values and peace.<sup>35</sup> The movement made limited progress and had no significant government support.

In September 2017, an anti-Muslim Buddhist monk who declared that Islam is the enemy of Buddhism and urged Buddhists in the southernmost provinces to band together and destroy mosques, was taken into custody and disrobed at Wat Benchamabophit, the Marble Temple.<sup>36</sup> This step indicates that the government and elite Buddhist institutions typically seek to limit communal religious tensions.

The motivations for conflict in the southernmost provinces are primarily separatist rather than communal, and insurgents generally target state-associated assets or people rather than Buddhist neighbors. In 2019, attackers killed two Buddhist monks and injured two others at a temple in Narathiwat. It was the first time that a monk had been killed in the region since 2015.<sup>37</sup> The incident was interpreted as retaliation for the killing of three local Muslim clerics by the Thai military, as well as another warning to the Thai government not to pressure BRN leaders into peace talks. While the southernmost provinces, with their overwhelmingly Malay Muslim population, voted strongly against the constitution in the 2016 referendum, this is attributed by informed observers to a rejection of the military government that wrote the constitution, rather than concerns over its stance on religion.<sup>38</sup>



## Local political conflict and electoral violence

Local Thai politics were traditionally dominated by influential families and political patronage networks. A history of small-scale political violence, particularly intimidation and assassination of rivals, was driven by links between local businesses and politics and associated commercial rivalries.<sup>39</sup> In the early 2000s, Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's efforts to monopolize democratic politics raised the stakes and led provincial bosses to employ violent tactics to defeat their competitors.<sup>40</sup> One study of local political violence recorded 459 murders and attempted murders between 2000 and 2009.<sup>41</sup>

Local political violence has declined in the past 15 years as political parties and electoral processes have matured, and as the military coups of 2006 and 2014 largely suspended democratic competition. Several minor incidents occurred during the 2019 general election. On March 31, 2019, protestors gathered in Bangkok to demand the removal of election commissioners, while an online petition demanding their resignations collected 830,000 signatures.<sup>42</sup> The local elections on December 20, 2020, occurred without notable incidents of violence.



## Local conflict over resources and community rights

Conflicts over natural resource access and community rights occur frequently in Thailand. Local protest often coalesces around developments or policy changes that adversely affect residents. Activists face legal charges, and numerous cases of assault or murder have occurred over several decades.

On November 27, 2017, Thai authorities arrested 16 people who peacefully protested the construction of a large coal-fired power plant in Songkhla, part of wider plans for industrial development in the area. Activists objected to its expected detrimental environmental and health impact, and by the end of 2018 the project was put on hold.<sup>43</sup> Dissenters have faced pressure from government officials. When a July 2020 public hearing was to take place on the US\$600 million Chana industrial estate project, Thai officials visited the homes of at least eight people who had previously opposed the power plant.<sup>44</sup>

Rights groups say more than 200 women have been subjected to judicial harassment, and two have been murdered, as a result of the 2014 forest reclamation policy, which has turned some smaller farmers into transgressors.<sup>45</sup> In mid-2019, the government unveiled Thailand's new National Parks Act, seeking to impose stricter penalties to further limit the rights of Thai farmers and indigenous people. The power to grant permission to allow individuals who have traditionally settled in or lived near parks to access them and use resources rests solely with the authorities.<sup>46</sup> National parks officials can summon people for questioning, enter households without court orders, and destroy any dwellings deemed illegal.<sup>47</sup>

Thailand attracts criticism from human rights groups and local activists for the lack of legal recognition of forced disappearance as a criminal offence.<sup>48</sup> The most prominent recent environmental disappearance involved Porlajee “Billy” Rakchongcharoen, a Karen community activist who vanished in 2014. In 2019, his remains were identified, and the former chief of Kaeng Krachan National Park and three others were prosecuted on six counts, including murder. However, in January 2020, just one month later, public prosecutors recommended indictment for minor charges only.<sup>49</sup>



### Violent crime

Thailand's homicide rate was 2.6 intentional homicides per 100,000 people in 2017, the last year for which the UNODC data is available.<sup>50</sup> Data from the National Statistical Office shows a decline in all major forms of crime concerning life and bodily harm between 2007 and 2017 (Figure 29).

There has been an increase in the number of crimes involving violations of the Firearms Act,<sup>51</sup> which nearly doubled from 21,023 in 2007 to 30,333 in 2016, a 44 percent increase.<sup>52</sup> In 2018, the Small Arms Survey gave an estimate of 10,342,000 civilian-owned legal and illicit firearms in Thailand, amounting to 15.1 firearms per 100 inhabitants, the highest figure in Southeast Asia.<sup>53</sup> Murder by firearm is relatively common at 3.71 deaths per 100,000 people—higher than the United States but lower than the Philippines.<sup>54</sup> Even so, most people report feeling safe. In a large 2018 survey, the majority of respondents (78.4 percent) felt safe or very safe walking in their neighborhood at night.<sup>55</sup>

Year	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Murder	4,436	3,974	3,703	3,654	3,176	3,217	2,927	2,648	2,228	2,071	1,781
Attempted murder	6,713	5,564	5,452	4,852	4,141	4,331	4,421	4,112	4,001	2,786	2,231
Assault	22,667	18,802	18,359	16,066	12,338	13,152	12,349	12,966	15,153	12,436	10,871
Rape	5,155	4,644	4,676	4,255	3,537	3,431	3,303	2,968	2,848	2,259	2,546

**Figure 29:** Reported cases of crimes concerning life and bodily harm, 2007–2017  
 Source: National Statistical Office Thailand



### Domestic and gender-based violence

Between 2004 and 2018, emergency One Stop Crisis Centers under the Ministry of Public Health recorded a total of 247,480 cases of children and women seeking assistance for domestic abuse. Almost half of the victims (49 percent) were children.<sup>56</sup> Around one in six married or cohabiting Thai women have experienced psychological, physical, or sexual intimate partner violence at some point in their lives.<sup>57</sup>

Police data on recorded complaints of rape indicates 1,965 cases in 2019, a decline from earlier years.<sup>58</sup> However, research suggests that over 90 percent of gender-based violence is not reported to the police.<sup>59</sup> In 2019, for example, just one organization, the Pavena Foundation for Children and Women, recorded 786 cases of rape and indecent assault. Current societal, legal, and institutional policies and practices deter the reporting of sexual violence.<sup>60</sup> In May 2019, the government responded to mass media pressure by passing an amendment to the Criminal Code that prescribes harsher punishment for sex offenders.<sup>61</sup>



## New media, conflict, and violence

By January 2020, there were approximately 52 million internet users in Thailand, roughly 75 percent of the total population. Thailand has around 47 million registered Facebook users.<sup>62</sup> With this rate of penetration, social media platforms are transforming the ways in which Thais transmit or share information, especially in perpetuating and preventing violence.

In 2015, Phra Apichart Punnanjanatho, head preacher of Wat Benchamabophit and avowed admirer of the Burmese extremist preacher Ashin Wirathu, not only urged Buddhists, via his Facebook account, to burn one mosque for every monk killed by southern insurgents, but also posted anti-Muslim video clips on YouTube. This amounted to hate speech, inciting violence. National government and religious institutions responded strongly. Phra Apichart was detained by the military following his comments and subsequently disrobed.<sup>63</sup> Later, the Buddhist Sangha Council issued an order prohibiting monks from posts that could damage Buddhism on social media.<sup>64</sup>

Online hate speech flared up at times during the Covid-19 pandemic. After an outbreak was detected in December 2020 and attributed by the prime minister to undocumented migrant workers, hundreds of negative comments were posted on social media platforms. Comments such as “whenever you see Myanmar people, shoot them down” were intended to trigger discrimination and promote aggressive nationalism.<sup>65</sup>

The Computer-related Crime Act, enacted in 2007 and amended in 2017, criminalizes the distribution of false information.<sup>66</sup> As such, it provides the regime with broad powers to restrict free speech, enforce surveillance and censorship, stop antigovernment criticism, and retaliate against political opponents in order to tighten their grip. For instance, in January 2018, Thai authorities filed charges against a London-based Facebook user who posted “fake news” about corrupt practices in a government satellite project.<sup>67</sup> Around mid-2018, the government filed a complaint against Thanathorn Juangroongruangkit and two other senior members of the Future Forward party for putting false information into a computer system. It claimed Mr. Thanathorn had used both personal and party Facebook pages to accuse the government of luring former MPs to back the regime by using existing lawsuits against them as a bargaining chip.<sup>68</sup>

In the same year, a group of experts developed an innovative artificial intelligence chatbot called “Police Noi” to help victims of domestic violence get legal advice and seek appropriate redress, as well as access the justice system and counseling programs more easily. This application aims to overcome gender biases in the legal process and other socioeconomic barriers.<sup>69</sup>

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# TIMOR-LESTE

## Overview

Timor-Leste's road to nationhood has been difficult but ultimately successful. The country was heavily affected by conflict before, during, and after it achieved full independence in 2002, but it has been largely peaceful since 2007 and was rated the second-most democratic country in Southeast Asia in 2020.<sup>1</sup>

The country maintained a fragile stability for the first four years of its independence, but a political crisis erupted in 2006, resulting in some loss of life, injury, displacement, and property destruction. Since then, the country has continued to progress gradually on security and safety, although it is still vulnerable to political conflict and electoral violence. The rivalry between the two largest political parties continues and has contributed to instability in the last three years. Despite the risk that instability will accentuate rifts and lead to violent conflict, however, changes of government and political alliances have not led to major unrest.

Disputes over land and other natural resources remain the most serious ongoing domestic security concern. Disputes have increased even after the enactment of the Land Law in 2017. Contested access to water is further cause of localized violence. Martial arts groups and other gangs, some of which have both political and criminal affiliations, are responsible for some violent incidents, and the Timorese still consider youth problems their second-most serious security concern. The law has effectively limited gang activity, and any related violence tends to be local. Crime has reportedly risen slightly, but most people still feel safe. Rates of gender-based violence are high, although the percentage of women who say they feel threatened by gender-based violence is declining.



## National political context

Within days of declaring independence from Portugal in 1975, the country was invaded by, and forcibly incorporated into, Indonesia, ostensibly due to fears of a communist government in the new nation. The Indonesian government conducted forced resettlement and imposed the Indonesian language and what were considered “Indonesian values” on the Timorese. Many migrants arrived from Indonesia, and Indonesians (including local military leaders) established business interests. Resistance to Indonesian authority, led by the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (FRETILIN), persisted for 24 years. FRETILIN’s armed wing carried out guerrilla warfare against Indonesian security forces during this period.

The Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation in East Timor (CAVR) estimates that at least 102,800 Timorese civilians died between 1974 and 1999. Approximately 18,600 of these were killed or forcibly disappeared, and 84,200 died of famine and disease, while Indonesian security forces committed widespread human rights violations.<sup>2</sup>

The independence movement gained domestic and international momentum in 1998 following the end of President Suharto’s rule in Indonesia. After talks mediated by the UN regarding Timor’s status, Indonesia agreed to hold a referendum on independence. In August 1999, nearly 80 percent of the population voted for independence. In the lead-up to and during the referendum, pro-Indonesia militias attacked civilians across Timor, killing hundreds and destroying property.<sup>3</sup> More than 75 percent of the population was displaced. Approximately 200,000 fled to Indonesian West Timor and other areas.<sup>4</sup> In 1999, as a multinational military force mandated by the UN arrived, the last Indonesian soldiers left the territory. While anti-independence militias were active throughout 1999 and early 2000, the transition from a UN-led administration occurred on schedule. In May 2002, East Timor officially became the independent Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste. Security risks along Timor-Leste’s border with West Timor, which is part of Indonesia, have decreased since independence, although some tensions remain. They have been particularly acute around the land border of Oecusse, Timor-Leste’s enclave in West Timor. Local trade and customary land and property ownership have not been restricted by the border, leading to regular tensions over competing claims. These local disagreements have been fairly well managed by authorities in Indonesia and Timor-Leste.

Timor-Leste has remained generally peaceful in recent years, despite rapid political change and callow institutions. National politics are shaped by rival networks driven partly by strong economic incentives in the form of state resources including foreign assistance and petroleum revenues. As in many other countries, leaders typically feel an incentive or even an obligation to use state resources to strengthen relationships within support networks that encompass various interest groups and stretch down to the local level. Instability is created by tensions between rival networks and by rifts or rivalries within networks.<sup>5</sup>

Patronage structures include numerous groups across society, most notably large numbers of military veterans. Their role and status reflect the drawn-out independence struggle that led to the formation of the current nation in 2002. In 2006, shortly after UN peacekeeping forces left the country, rivalries within the military and between political networks led to intense violence in the capital city of Dili and elsewhere as protesters, the police, and defense forces clashed. The crisis led to 38 fatalities, mass displacement, the resignation of Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri, and the return of a UN presence to help restore peace and increase police presence. The 2007 parliamentary election led to another bout of violence stemming from political rivalries, which resulted in two deaths and further destruction of property.<sup>6</sup>

Since then, political and military leaders have exercised restraint, and disputes have not spiraled into violence, although some instability persists. Elite political competition led to two parliamentary elections in the span of less than a year in 2017–2018, and another election was almost called in early 2020. The national political scene continues to be dominated by competition between the country’s

oldest political party, FRETILIN, and Xanana Gusmão and his party, the National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (CNRT). Gusmão was the most prominent leader of the independence movement and the country's first elected president after independence. During the struggle against the Indonesian occupation, he was a member of FRETILIN, but he resigned over ideological differences. During his first term as president, tensions between him and Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri led to the dissolution of parliament and new elections. In 2007, he formed the CNRT.

Between 2007 and 2015, political struggles continued between FRETILIN and the CNRT, provoked by rivalries between key leaders and their allies. Aside from Gusmão, dominant figures included José Ramos-Horta, the independence leader who received a Nobel Peace Prize in 1997 and who led the CNRT government in 2006–2007. Following these struggles, the two parties briefly reconciled in a “national unity government” that left the parliament with no real opposition.

The year 2015 saw political violence in Baucau district when supporters of a group of disaffected veterans, the Maubere Revolutionary Council, launched attacks against police. Amnesty International reported that dozens of individuals suspected of supporting the rebels were arbitrarily arrested and tortured in government security operations which halted the rebellion.<sup>7</sup>

During his second term, Prime Minister Gusmão often clashed with the president, Taur Matan Ruak. Tensions increased as President Ruak openly criticized the government for its nepotism, lack of accountability, and excessive use of resources in mega-development projects. He did not seek a second term, but formed the Popular Liberation Party and led it in the 2017 parliamentary elections.

Following parliamentary elections in mid-2017, the country experienced a political deadlock that was blamed for an economic recession in 2017 and 2018. Parliament also failed to approve a budget for most of 2018, causing the government to collapse. New parliamentary elections were held, and were won by the CNRT-PLP coalition. From 2018 to 2019 the president blocked the appointment of nine ministers, leaving the positions vacant. In January 2020, leading the ruling coalition, CNRT voted against the government budget, again causing the coalition to collapse and leading to the resignation of the prime minister. Three months later he withdrew his resignation and established an alliance with the president's party, FRETILIN. Shortly thereafter, a new majority coalition was formed, comprising the People's Liberation Party, FRETILIN, KHUNTO, and the Democratic Party. New FRETILIN ministers replaced CNRT ministers and filled the nine vacancies. In October 2020, with help from the new coalition, the 2020 budget was approved. The following year's budget was approved in December—for only the second time in four years.<sup>8</sup>



## Separatism and autonomy

Since Timor-Leste gained independence, in May 2002, there has been no overtly separatist conflict, but subnational tensions are evident below the surface. The violence of 2006 occurred partly between groups from eastern and western parts of the country, fueled by a legacy of rivalries within the military. Some residual tensions remain.<sup>9</sup> The ongoing influence of veterans' networks and the lasting impact of militias set up by the Indonesian military before independence keep some risk of violence alive.

A small country of only 1.34 million people, Timor-Leste's political system is highly centralized, and local authorities have limited power. This predominantly top-down system may have helped to keep subnational fissures or overt tensions from emerging, but it has also glossed over local differences. Rival political patronage networks operate in different parts of the country, and there is a residual risk that civil conflict, similar to the violence of 2006, could return. While separatism within Timor-Leste is an unlikely development, there are still tensions between rival political networks that incorporate business or criminal interests and an array of local ethnic or clan-based affiliations.



## Identity-based tension and conflict

Timorese have strong ties with family, kin, and community. These ties are associated with political allegiances—from traditional leaders, who often retain positions of formal or informal authority, to contemporary political parties.

Retaliatory violence between individuals and groups is commonly accepted, and personal disputes can evolve into conflicts between communities. In a similar fashion, alliances, rivalries, and conflict between communities shape how their members interact. Existing communal tensions are interlinked with several episodes of brawls, gang violence, conflict over property or natural resources, and political violence. Added to this complexity is a variety of martial art groups (MAGs), youth groups, clandestine groups, and criminal gangs. These groups evolved from local militias, organized through patronage and kinship networks during colonial rule and Indonesian occupation.<sup>10</sup>

Rural-to-urban migration is common, especially to Dili, and people tend to resettle alongside former neighbors from the same villages and join the same social groups. Dili is divided into *aldeias*, roughly corresponding to the territories of single communities, sometimes influenced by a gang, MAG, or political group. What sometimes appears to be a clash between gangs or MAGs in Dili is often a communal dispute between villages, as each community mobilizes its youth to defend its territory. Communal conflicts between families in rural districts sometimes spread to Dili, as one family uses a gang or MAG to attack another family over a property or land dispute. Gang violence often escalates, as members from other gangs or MAGs get involved, leading to cycles of retaliation. The violence in 2006 and 2007, which involved MAGs and other groups or gangs, first erupted as political conflict rooted in the animosity between communities supporting different sides during the independence struggle. The violence was also a result of land and property disputes. The government has used several measures to limit gang-related violence. Three groups who were responsible for most of the violence were permanently outlawed in 2013. Though they have subsided, gang-related fights are still common, and, according to independent monitoring by Belun, in 2019 they are responsible for up to 15 percent of violent incidents.<sup>11</sup>

Sectarian violence is unusual. The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religious propagation. Discrimination on the basis of religious beliefs is prohibited. Although 97 percent of the population is Catholic, Timor-Leste is a secular state. The Catholic Church played a significant role in the independence movement, but the political space is also open to minority religions. For example, the country's second prime minister, Alkatiri, is Muslim. There is no record of religious violence, and there is a relatively high degree of religious harmony. There have been some reports from Muslim leaders that Muslims face discrimination when applying for civil service positions.<sup>12</sup>

Timor-Leste's long-established Chinese population has repeatedly been targeted during periods of unrest, particularly as Chinese influence has continued to grow in the country. Chinese-Timorese businesses were targeted in 1999 and 2006, and routine discrimination is common.<sup>13</sup> In the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, such discrimination was particularly pervasive.



## Local political conflict and electoral violence

Clashes between supporters of the two main parties have occurred in the past—for example, the clashes of the 2007 election period.<sup>14</sup> More recent elections have led to minor violent incidents.

The presidential elections and the parliamentary elections of 2017 were viewed as significant milestones for the country's nascent democracy. For the first time since independence, the Timorese conducted national elections on their own, and youth born after the 1999 referendum on independence were eligible to vote. With political consensus between the two main parties, FRETILIN and the CNRT,

elections in 2017 were free of violence and were described by the International Republican Institute as “well-administered and conducted in a peaceful, open, and transparent manner.”<sup>15</sup>

Several days before the May 2018 parliamentary elections, clashes between rival supporters left 16 people injured and two vehicles scorched.<sup>16</sup> The elections, however, were conducted smoothly. Some doubts were expressed by rival political parties over the National Elections Commission’s impartiality, and reports of minor procedural problems also emerged.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the collapse of the leading coalition and the subsequent government reshuffle in 2018, there were no violent conflicts surrounding the matter. The transition from CNRT to FRETILIN ministers was peaceful, and the new majority went on to pass the 2020 and 2021 budgets without issue.



### Local conflict over resources and community rights

Local resource conflicts, especially over water and land, remain the most common security concern among the Timorese. Access to water and irrigation was identified as the most common cause of disputes in The Asia Foundation’s national surveys in 2015 and 2018. The latter survey found a 10 percent increase in the number of respondents reporting disputes with others in their locality over water and irrigation (Figure 30).<sup>18</sup>

Access to water has been a major problem since independence. The destruction of water infrastructure during the years of Indonesian occupation and the legacy of violent armed struggles, long-term underdevelopment, and lack of investment and efficient management have left many Timorese without clean water. Repairs to the water system have progressed only slowly. In 2015, over 91 percent of people in urban areas and 60 percent in rural areas had access to some form of improved water supply. However, even among urban households, only one-third had individual connections with piped water. The rest relied on public taps and other common sources.<sup>19</sup>

Several factors have contributed to longstanding land problems in Timor-Leste. Until 1997, less than 5 percent of land had clear ownership or use status.<sup>20</sup> The majority of land in rural areas has lacked legal status and has been customarily used and owned by local communities. The colonial Portuguese and subsequent Indonesian land tenure systems often ignored and undermined customary rights, including through state appropriation. Forced resettlement under Indonesian rule, along with mass displacement during the independence struggle and the violence after the 1999 independence referendum, resulted in numerous contested land and property claims. By 2002, the country had inherited Portuguese, Indonesian, and UN legal frameworks, which all further complicated the land and property ownership system. Many public property records were destroyed in 1999.

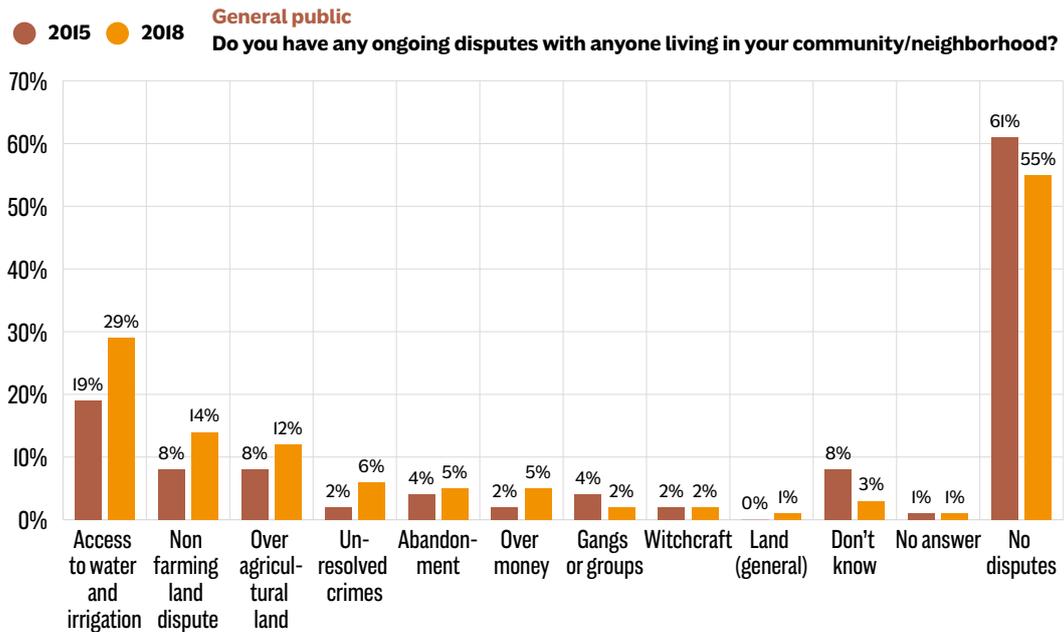
People without access to justice or mediation often resort to violence to manage property disputes. Many used the instability and lawlessness that accompanied the 2006 political crisis to evict people occupying their properties by giving gangs lists of houses to burn and inhabitants to evict.<sup>21</sup> Land surveying as a precursor to land titling has also triggered conflicts in some communities.<sup>22</sup>

After several reviews and protracted political disagreements over draft versions, a Land Law was enacted in June 2017. However, a national survey by The Asia Foundation in 2018 showed that disputes over land seemed to have become more common and more serious (see Figure 30 and Figure 31).<sup>23</sup> In 2013, the government introduced a land registration system known as Sistema Nacional da Cadastre (SNC). They also introduced a land legislation package in 2017. This legislated equal rights for women and men to own land, the recognition and protection of ancestral land rights, the protection of communities from eviction, and more.

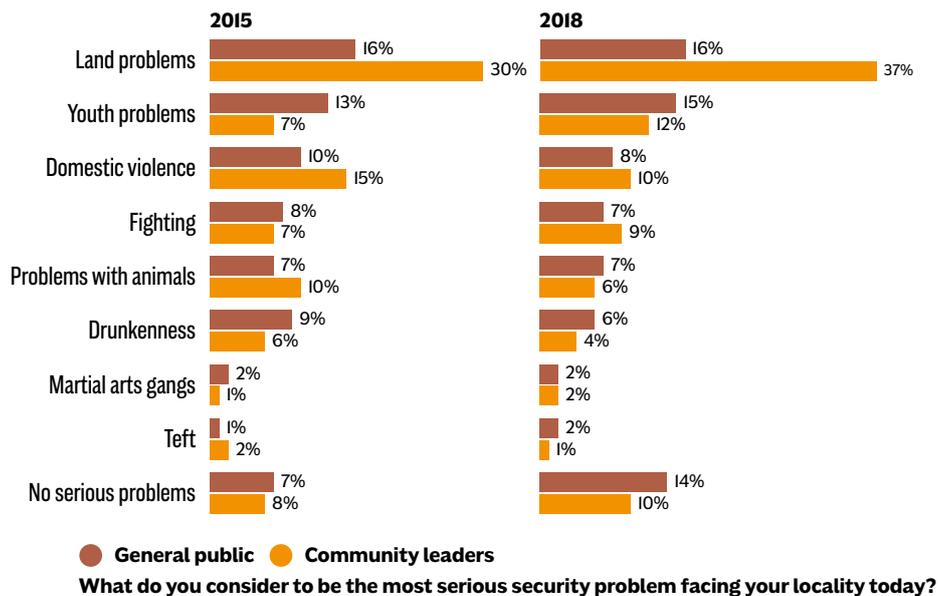
The SNC land-mapping process, completed in 2019, may help to reduce future conflicts over land. Oxfam and Timor-Leste’s civil society land rights network, Rede Ba Rai, held a press conference on

July 10, 2019, calling for greater transparency. The civil society network stated that most communities were not aware of, or did not fully understand, the land registration process, and that SNC field teams should improve their outreach to communities.<sup>24</sup>

Conflict risks will also be elevated by climate change. The devastating flooding caused by the cyclone of April 2021 served as a reminder that more regular and more extreme weather events are predicted. Along with longer-term climatic fluctuations, extreme events may exacerbate existing tensions surrounding land and water resources.<sup>25</sup>



**Figure 30:** Disputes in the neighborhood  
Source: The Asia Foundation

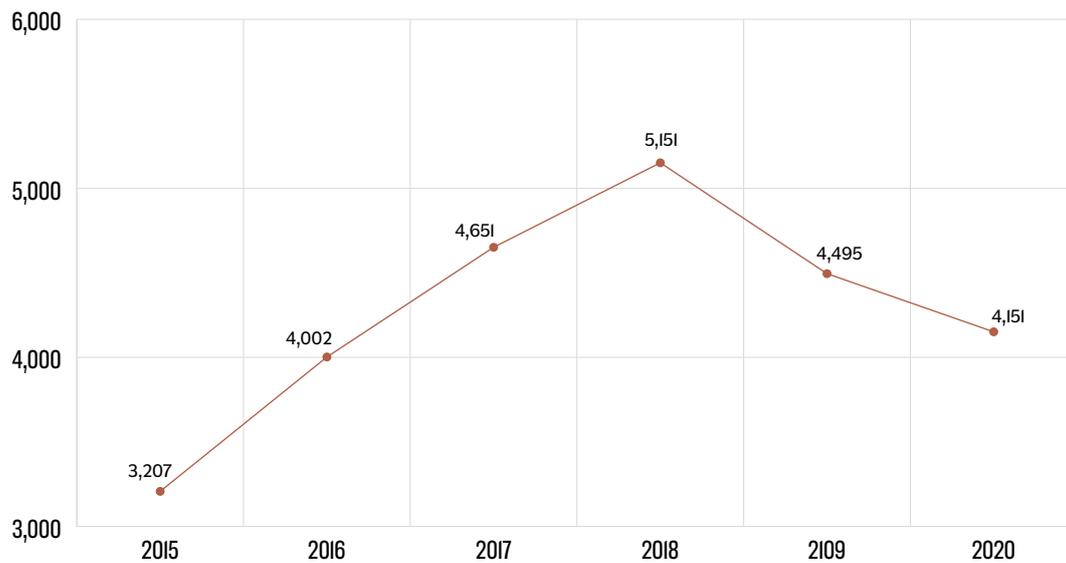


**Figure 31:** Perceptions of local security  
Source: The Asia Foundation



## Violent crime

UNODC reported a homicide rate of 3.9 per 100,000 persons in Timor-Leste for 2017, the lowest in Southeast Asia.<sup>26</sup> Police data shows an increase in crimes from 2015 through 2017, but a decrease beginning in 2018 (see below).<sup>27</sup> In 2019, the police recorded 4,495 cases, compared to 4,151 in 2020. Most cases in 2019 and 2020 involved “crimes against persons,” including assaults, sexual assaults, and robberies (2,819 in 2019 and 2,638 in 2020). In 2020, as in each of the previous three years, the largest proportion of recorded crimes, over 40 percent of the country’s total, occurred in the capital, Dili.



**Figure 32:** Reported crime cases per 100,000 people

Source: *East Timor Law & Justice Bulletin & PNTL Annual Crime Report*

Some studies have attributed urban crimes to the country’s youth bulge and a high youth unemployment rate. Timor-Leste’s economy and public expenditure have relied heavily on the oil sector, which generates over 70 percent of gross national product but little direct employment.<sup>28</sup> Gangs and MAGs offer companionship, status, protection, services, and a source of income for youth who migrate to Dili and are frustrated by limited job opportunities. As MAGs face restrictions on their activities, organized crime groups have been increasing youth recruitment.<sup>29</sup> Other studies argue that the prevalence of violent offences, as well as MAGs and gang violence, are manifestations of family and personal disputes and a culture of vengeance.<sup>30</sup>

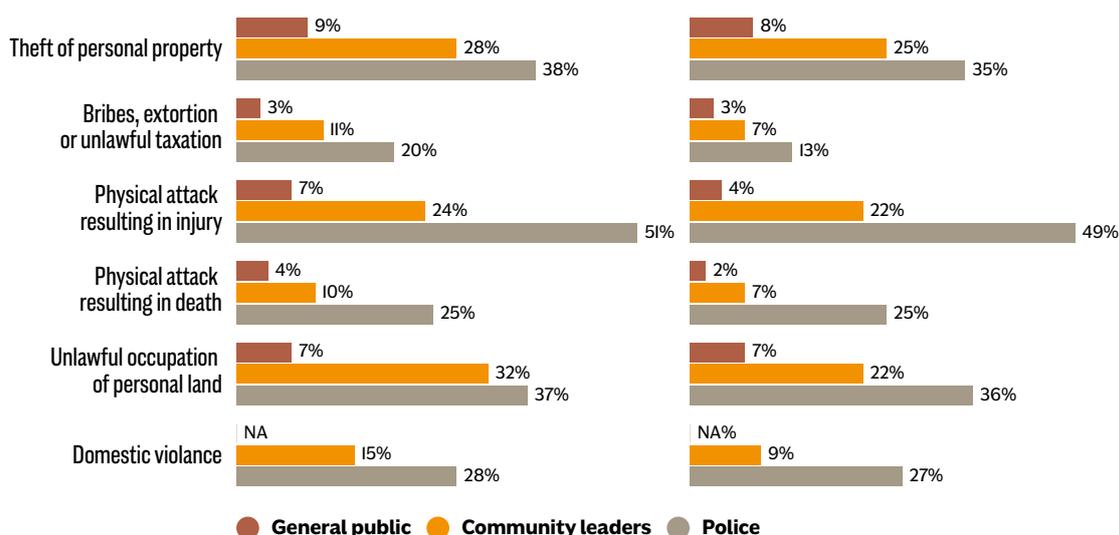
According to perception surveys undertaken by The Asia Foundation, overall security improved or remained the same between 2015 and 2018.<sup>31</sup> Respondents in Dili reported far greater concerns over security than those living in the rest of the country. Criminality associated with youth continued to be seen as a major security concern. However, other sources indicate an increase over a similar timeframe in the proportion of people reporting safety and security as the biggest problem in their area.<sup>32</sup>

## Domestic and gender-based violence

Gender-based violence, particularly domestic violence against women and girls, remains widespread. In 2020, under the criminal category of “crimes against persons,” mistreatment of a spouse was the third-most common type of crime (357 cases) after “offense against physical integrity” and property damage, according to police data. The same source also records 255 cases of “sexual aggression” in 2020, the fifth-most common type of “crimes against persons” in the country.<sup>33</sup>

Domestic violence is probably under reported in Timor-Leste as in many other countries. Back in 2009–2010, fewer than one in four women who had experienced intimate partner violence reported it to someone. They most often sought help from their own family, friends, or neighbors.<sup>34</sup> Data from research by The Asia Foundation 2016 shows that 59 percent of women aged 15–49 who had ever been in a relationship had experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner at least once. Seventy-seven percent of that group of respondents had experienced severe acts of violence, and 81 percent had experienced physical violence many times in their lives. Gender-based violence outside relationships is also widespread. Recorded rates of physical and sexual intimate partner violence are consistently higher in urban areas, particularly in Dili, than in rural areas. Data from in 2016 shows that 14 percent of women between the ages of 15 and 49 years had been raped by someone other than a husband or boyfriend (nonpartner rape). Three percent of women had been raped by more than one man at the same time (gang rape).<sup>35</sup>

Child abuse is an issue of pressing concern. The high-profile trial of defrocked priest Richard Daschbach, charged with the sexual abuse of 14 girls, brought attention to the importance of child protection in institutional settings.<sup>36</sup> Incest between men and children in their immediate and extended family is considered to be a serious problem, and civil society organizations called for laws to criminalize it as a separate crime. A local NGO monitored 49 cases of incest between 2012 and May 2018 and claimed the actual number was far higher.<sup>37</sup>



**Figure 33:** Experience or reports of crimes  
Source: *The Asia Foundation*

Patriarchal culture and traditional practices reinforce gender inequalities and heavily influence how women and girls are treated and regarded in the household and the community. Many studies and surveys indicate that there is a high degree of tolerance for violence against women within intimate relationships, and both Timorese men and women often believe that some forms of physical and sexual violence are acceptable methods of discipline.

Recent findings indicate that the situation has improved somewhat in recent years. A 2018 public perception survey found that the proportion of women living outside Dili who report violence against women as their biggest concern dropped by more than half (from 41 percent to 19 percent).<sup>38</sup> Surveys in 2015 and 2018 also found a decline, although a less dramatic one, in the proportion of respondents who identified domestic violence as the most serious security problem in their area (Figure 33).<sup>39</sup>

A weak formal justice system and poor security provision exacerbate the problem. Despite the existence of laws prohibiting domestic violence, cases rarely reach the formal justice system, and victims are often referred back to their community leaders. Courts increasingly offer suspended sentences or fines rather than incarceration for domestic violence convictions.<sup>40</sup>



### New media, conflict, and violence

Timor-Leste has seen a rapid increase in internet users, their numbers rising by over a third between 2018 and 2019. Internet penetration stood at 39 percent of the population in January 2020, and social media penetration at 31 percent.<sup>41</sup> The Asia Foundation's periodic Covid-19 surveys, 2020–2021, found that 90 percent of people who have access to a mobile phone said they also have access to the internet. The most commonly used apps in February 2021 were Facebook (79 percent), WhatsApp (39 percent), and YouTube (28 percent). However, television remained by far the most trusted source of information, while online news sources and social media were very rarely characterized as most trusted.<sup>42</sup>

The 2017 presidential election was the first time that social media started to play an important role in politics. Most candidates used Facebook to convey information, share their views on social issues, and provide space for public discussion. Political parties also created their own Facebook accounts in the 2017 parliamentary election. Social media, along with increased public access to television and the internet, are expected to contribute to a political transformation in Timor-Leste. Current electoral strategies are based on political mobilization through personal networks, and candidates' past roles in the independence movement remain a prominent criterion for voters when casting their ballot. As the country's history becomes less pivotal for new generations of voters, social media may help draw public attention to social and political issues, potentially stimulating issue-focused rather than personality-based voting trends.<sup>43</sup> However, low levels of education, a limited culture of reading, and low standards of journalism will remain constraints.<sup>44</sup> As new social media spread more widely, there will be significant risks of information being manipulated for political gain or to instigate violence. Little data is available on existing trends in social-media manipulation in Timor-Leste.

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