1 Introduction: beyond and before the 9/11 framework

Re-examining extremism

In the popular mind, extremism and terrorism are invariably linked to ethnic and religious factors. Yet the dominant history of South Asia is notable for tolerance and co-existence, despite highly plural societies. What then accounts for the rise of extremist ethno-religious groups in societies that were historically not predisposed thus? What determines the winners and losers in the identity struggles that we see in South Asia, and what tips the balance between more moderate and extremist outcomes? Despite the unprecedented international attention South Asia has received in the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, we would be hard-pressed to conclude that our understanding of extremism and our capacity to combat it, have improved significantly. If anything, the situation has become more dire – from Afghanistan to Pakistan to Sri Lanka to Bangladesh, extremist violence is breaking out anew or remains unabated. Much of the post-9/11 analysis is from a US policy perspective with little theoretical or historical content, and for a region that has an overabundance of history and political complexity, such an approach is far too limited.

We need a new way to grasp the complex of political and geopolitical factors that have determined outcomes in South Asia over the contemporary period, pre- and post-9/11. It would seem vitally important to re-examine a phenomenon that shows little signs of receding, let alone being defeated. This book offers a fresh perspective to illuminate and explain the contours of extremism in South Asia, bringing together insights from international relations and domestic politics. While the book does not purport to offer a full-scale treatment of all forms of extremism in South Asia, it does attempt a fairly ambitious explanation that captures important tendencies in extremism across the region from Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Indeed, my analytical framework sees a cross-country and inter-linked process of extremism at work. This introductory chapter lays out the book's main line of argument, and shows why we need to go beyond

1

a number of popular alternative explanations for extremism found in the literature.

Explanatory limitations

Broadly speaking, the conventional view posits religious ideology as the main driver of extremist violence in South Asia, especially "Muslim South Asia." In the larger South Asian context, we may add another factor, ethnic identity, as a chief motivator. Although both these so-called primordial explanations had been receding in the scholarly community, 9/11 has brought the religious explanation in particular back to the forefront. Referring to the ethno-religious hatred explanation, one analyst put it this way: "like the monster in slasher movies, just when you think that view is dead and buried, it springs up once more."[1] Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* remains the touchstone for many proponents of these models.[2] Yet, a closer look points to a puzzle: why do groups and individual leaders with shared religious roots or ethnic backgrounds and even similar initial objectives choose different strategies to achieve their aims? Why do some turn to extremism and even terrorist violence to promote their cause while others choose a more moderate path? Why are some groups more amenable to co-optation or participation in the larger political process than others? Why do we observe huge divergences across time in terms of the level of extremism expressed in any given region? These anomalies or puzzles clearly beg further explanation beyond ethnicity or religion.

An alternative explanation

This book argues that we can understand the trajectory of extremism in South Asia by considering a three-way identity struggle that repeats itself across the region between ethno-religious, secular, and what I term

---

[1] R. G. Suny, "Why We Hate You: The Passions of National Identity and Ethnic Violence," *Working Paper Series* (Berkeley Program in Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies) February 1, 2004, p. 22. He points out how Samuel Huntington takes the notion of a civilization and reifies it into a large cultural constellation. Examples of the post-9/11 primordial works include *The Age of Sacred Terror* (New York: Random House, 2002) by Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon in which they argue forcefully for an apocalyptic religious conception of terrorism and violent extremism and Barry Cooper's *New Political Religions, or an Analysis of Modern Terrorism* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2004). Jessica Stern takes a somewhat more equivocal stance in *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: Ecco/HarperCollins Publishers, 2003).

[2] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1997).

"geopolitical identities."[3] This pattern of competition and convergence goes a long way in determining the evolution of either moderate or more extreme political outcomes, and a key objective of the book is to discover what tips the balance one way or the other. The book's underlying contention is that geopolitics has had far greater impact on the rise and persistence of extremism than generally believed, and the impacts of religion and ethnicity have been less so. There is a fairly good understanding of the *politics* of ethnic and religious movements. Less explored is the *geopolitics* of religion and ethnicity.

Competition between states and their power plays as set forth by a Waltzian realist framework have been enormously important.[4] However, in South Asia, geopolitics has to be seen as not simply occurring in a disconnected fashion at the international level, but rather as influencing and creating deeper social and political structures and orientations within states. This view is compatible with Peter Gourevitch's well-known approach, which points to the strong impact of the international system on domestic structures and preferences.[5] But he also cautions that the international arena does not determine outcomes outright, short of actual military occupation. Thus there is some leeway at the domestic level in responding to the international environment. What is important is the *interactive* nature of the international and domestic realms, a notion upon which my argument is based.[6]

South Asia is fertile ground for geopolitical influence in the domestic sphere with contested sovereignties; ethnic, religious and linguistic

---

[3] Secular and geopolitical identities need greater elaboration and are described later in the chapter. To anticipate, secularism is viewed in a more encompassing sense than a simple religious versus nonreligious dichotomy.

[4] For the definitive contemporary work on realism, see Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979). One problem with Waltz's approach is that it operates at a fairly gross level in determining outcomes, and it remains firmly at the international level in terms of the independent and dependent variables.

[5] A more refined and useful approach that extends Waltz's theory for analyzing the influence of international factors on domestic structures is Peter Gourevitch's "second image reversed" ("The Second Image Reversed: The International Sources of Domestic Politics," *International Organization* 32.4 (Autumn 1978), p. 882, 900). The "outside-in" effects of external forces and actors on domestic politics and preferences is critical in South Asia, particularly his insight into how "domestic structure itself derives from the exigencies of the international system." James Alt, Peter Evans and Peter Katzenstein are a few of the well-known exponents of Gourevitch's model. See also Ira Katznelson and Martin Shefte (eds.), *Shaped by War and Trade: International Influences on American Political Development* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[6] As he put it, "The international system, be it in an economic or politico-military form, is underdetermining. The environment may exert strong pulls but, short of actual occupation, some leeway in the response to that environment remains." (Gourevitch, "The Second Image Reversed," p. 900)

minorities spilling across borders; and insecure political classes. The geopolitical interests and needs of regional and extra-regional states have increasingly had a deep impact on the shape of internal identities – and that impact has not been confined to the politico-military realm as traditional international analysis would have it. All too often, the results have been a polarizing of ethnic and religious identities with disastrous consequences. Yet, those identities had previously coexisted within a fairly open and secular historical tradition (described in Chapter Two). Across South Asia, perceived geopolitical and strategic needs have shaped and modified identities, as captured in the term "geopolitical identity." I suggest that conditions of weak secularism and a highly charged geopolitical environment tend to produce the most extremist outcomes. This is not to suggest that robust secularism will prevent war, but it is extremism, not inter-state warfare, that is under investigation.

Gaps in alternative explanations

Political violence or extremist violence takes place in different forms: insurgencies, civil war, communalism, terrorism and government repression. It is important to keep in mind that it is difficult to collapse all these forms of violence in any analytically meaningful manner. Conversely, it is nearly impossible to understand terrorism if it can encompass everything from government repression to inter-communal violence.[7] The literature on political violence is mostly characterized by domestic level explanations, with only a limited number also considering external variables.[8] The most important alternative explanations for radicalism are: ethno-religious identity; relative economic deprivation; elite manipulation; and state repression and lack of political institutional access. Their drawbacks and limitations are highlighted below to underscore the need for the alternative framework that this book offers. Further, the book shows how the proposed framework can subsume or supplement these explanations.

Donald Horowitz's studies on *ethno-religious conflict* remain classic works in the field.[9] For Horowitz, ethnicity is a key marker for groups in conflict,

[7] For a discussion of this dilemma, see, for example, Nicholas Sambanis, "Poverty and the Organization of Political Violence," *Brookings Trade Forum* (2004), pp. 168–170.

[8] One early work considering the role of external relations on ethno-political conflict is by Stephen Ryan, *Ethnic Conflict and International Relations* (Aldershot, England: Dartmouth Publishing Co., 1995), especially pp. 52–76.

[9] See for example, Donald Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley, CA: Univeristy of California Press, 2000); and *Deadly Ethnic Riots* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

but challenges to this have come from a variety of sources.[10] If ethnic identity is given primary importance, then we would have to also explain how the hugely diverse populations of South Asia have co-existed without resorting to violence for long periods of time. Co-existence, not conflict, has been the reality of clearly differentiated groups in the subcontinent.[11] Similarly, if religious ideology is privileged in explaining political violence, how do we account for the large divergences *within* religious groups on political preferences? This factor is nearly always omitted in works making a strong religion-based argument.

For example, the book aptly titled *New Political Religions, or an Analysis of Modern Terrorism* argues that "new political religions" are launching spiritual warfare that does not recognize conventional cost-benefit analysis in its operation. The author uses a highly selective and narrow perception of Islamic tradition to argue that it never developed a pragmatic and realistic way to distinguish between religious and nonreligious aspects.[12] It is a reductionist argument that cannot account for the variations found in Islamic thinking or practice, and is, at bottom, an argument based on extremely shaky essentialist logic. In Kashmir, for example, Muslims are not united on either the means or the ends in their struggle. The ruling People's Democratic Party and its main opposition party, National Conference, are not insignificant and largely Muslim parties, yet they operate in entirely different ways than the militants. Even more pointedly, Muslims in the rest of India have shown little or no support for Kashmiri separatism. Clearly, more is at work than a simple attachment to ethnicity or religion.

Some proponents of the *relative deprivation* school, such as Ted Gurr, see the ethno-religious factor as an intervening variable, rather than a causal one. Others who make the relative deprivation argument have tried to establish a more direct causal link between inequality and violence, but, despite the huge literature on the subject, there is no consensus.[13] Gurr's more sophisticated notion is an expansion of his original view regarding individual psychological grievances about unfulfilled expectations, to one

---

[10] For an argument that takes issue with the very notion of ethno-religious conflict, see Bruce Gilley, "Against the Concept of Ethnic Conflict," *Third World Quarterly*, 25.6 (2004), pp. 1155–1166.

[11] Raju Thomas provides a good overview of the ethno-religious diversity of South Asia in "The 'Nationalities' Question in South Asia," in Amita Shastri and A. J. Wilson (eds.), *The Post-Colonial States of South Asia* (London: Curzon and Palgrave Press, 2001) pp. 196–211.

[12] Cooper, *New Political Religions*.

[13] For excellent summary discussions, see, for example, Sambanis, "Poverty," pp. 165–211 and Gudrun Ostby, "Horizontal Inequalities and Civil Conflict," paper prepared for the 46th Annual Convention of the International Studies Association, Honolulu, HI, March 1–5, 2005.

that sees how inequalities that coincide with ethnic cleavages may increase both dissatisfaction and group solidarity, resulting in greater chances to mobilize for conflict.[14] Still, in South Asia, even a cursory glance at some of the groups in conflict points to a gap: Tamils in Sri Lanka and Kashmiris do not fit the profile of groups that were relatively deprived economically. Terrorists of the 9/11 variety and others actually demonstrate a positive relationship between political violence and economic standing, calling this model into serious question.[15]

Explanations based on *elite manipulations* have taken us much further in explaining why conflict and extremism occurs in particular contexts and not in others, and how ethnic and religious factors come to the forefront in some cases and not in others.[16] However, ethnic and religious ''elites'' are far from uniform, so how is it that the interpretations of one set of elites on identity issues gains ascendancy over others? Inter-elite competition is frequent, and it is not always possible to predict the outcomes at the outset. For example, in the Indian case, there has been disagreement between the more Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party and Congress Party's Hindu and non-Hindu leaders alike on mobilizing political support by appealing to religious identity. In Pakistan, the leaderships of the Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islami (JUI) have not been equally active on the Kashmir and Afghanistan conflicts, and have shown differences in the importance they attach to them and the manner in which they characterize the religious content of these conflicts.

An additional explanation for extremism is found at the state level: groups turn to violence in response to *state repression*, having no other effective recourse. In some instances, this seems to be a plausible explanation, as may be argued in the case of Sri Lanka. However, the causation is as likely to work the other way around, and it often depends on which point in the timeline the analysis begins. Of course, given the paramount position of the state and its potential coercive capacity, it does not necessarily take political repression as such to activate violent reactions; much less could do the same. Another state-level explanation

---

[14] Ted R. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), Ted R. Gurr and Barbara Harff, *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994) and Ted R. Gurr, *Minorities at Risk* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 1993).

[15] Sambanis (''Poverty,'' pp. 168–170) is one of the few analysts who tries to explain this anomaly systematically, but it remains rather ad hoc.

[16] A foremost exponent of instrumentalism is Paul Brass, *Ethnicity and Nationalism* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1991), p. 15. See also Peter van der Veer, ''Riots and Rituals: The Construction of Violence and Public Space in Hindu Nationalism,'' in Paul Brass (ed.) *Riots and Pogroms* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

suggests that it does not require repression per se – denial or perception of denial of political access is often sufficient.

One study that partially supports this proposition is by Mohammed Hafez, whose work on Islamist groups suggests that institutional exclusion blocks avenues for political participation, and when it is combined with state repression, rebellions and insurgencies ensue.[17] His focus is on Egypt and Algeria, with only brief vignettes of many other cases including Afghanistan, Kashmir and Pakistan. But again we are left with the question as to why comparable groups react in different ways when faced with similar state actions, from high-handedness to outright repression. Moreover, we find extremist violence occurring even in open, democratic political systems, as the cases of India and Sri Lanka show. Indeed, despite being one of the strongest democracies, India is also the venue for a large number of sustained insurgencies and extremist violence.

Filling the gaps: external–internal encounters and mediating identities

As the above discussion shows, the most widely held explanations for extremism cannot account for the variations in outcomes that we observe in practice. We suggest that regional and global geopolitics have come to play an enormous role in shaping and influencing domestic structures and identities, and solely domestic level explanations are insufficient. The key to this external–internal interaction in South Asia is the role of the state, traditionally the only actor in such a mediating position, located at the intersection of internal politics and external geopolitics.[18] This pivotal position gives executive officials a special legitimacy in the formulation of national security policy that they lack in other more ''domestic'' areas of public policy. With this legitimacy, they can redefine previously domestic issues or define ambiguous international questions in a way that impinges on national sovereignty, security or threat perception, all generally conceded to be in the domain of the state.[19] Unlike liberal interpreters of the state who see it

---

[17] Mohammed Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003).

[18] This privileged position of the state has been challenged in recent times by anti-statist groups, especially with the widespread use of the internet and other communication technologies that operate beyond the strict control of the state.

[19] This point, emphasized by G. John Ikenberry, David A. Lake and Michael Mastanduno, regarding foreign economic policy, is even more applicable in the national security arena. See ''Introduction: Approaches to Explaining American Foreign Economic Policy,'' *International Organization* 42.1 (Winter 1988), p. 13.

only as a referee among competing societal interest groups, or captured entirely by class interests as Marxists would have it, this book adheres to the presumption of state autonomy as articulated by Theda Skocpol and others.[20]

Giving the state such significance and autonomy may seem contra-dictory in light of the near consensus regarding the weakness of states in South Asia.[21] Although the South Asian state's capacities may be weak in comparison to its counterparts in advanced industrial states, it still enjoys relative power among national actors (with the notable exception of the period of the internal wars in Afghanistan in the 1990s). As the dominant institution in what are universally diverse societies, the state is particularly well placed to influence, shape and perpetuate various identity formations. The state's capacity to define national identity in South Asia is also enhanced thanks to two other enduring realities: the region has been persistently vulnerable to wider geopolitical pressures; and the region has been plagued by unstable secularism as a result of historical factors. Both these conditions have given the state a significant mediating role as an autonomous and Janus-faced actor. This raises the question of why certain forms of identity are promoted (explicitly or implicitly) over others by the state. It is at this point that the external–internal relationship becomes critical; and it goes some way towards filling the gaps in current understandings of political violence and extremism.

If we assume that the autonomy of the state is fairly significant, it becomes possible to identify state preferences for ''national identities.'' Identities that offer the greatest scope for statist conceptions would seem to be a natural preference. In South Asia, for example, we would expect that states with majority Muslim populations would opt

[20] Theda Skocpol's work has been decisive in understanding the critical notions of state autonomy and state capacity. State autonomy refers to the ability of the state to pursue goals independent of societal pressures or interests. State capacity relates to the ability of the state to carry out its objectives, which includes factors such as level of military control over territorial sovereignty, internal coherence and administrative and economic resources. It is especially useful in developing a historical–institutional and comparative perspective on the role of the state. Her early work remains highly relevant. See Theda Skocpol, ''Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research,'' in Peter B. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol (eds.) *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge University Press, 1985). See also Michael Mann, ''The Autonomous Power of the State,'' in *States in History* (ed.) John A. Hall (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

[21] Vernon Hewitt offers one of the best constructed explanations of state weakness in South Asia. See *The New International Relations of South Asia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press and Palgrave Press, 1999), especially pp. 1–20. But despite talk of state failure or imminent collapse in parts of South Asia, the state as actor is still critical.

for more ''officially'' sanctioned Islamic identities rather than the traditional popular and folk Sufi versions. Some analysts have referred to these distinctive Islamic identities as ''parcellization of Islam,'' a development that began with colonial authorities, but was extended under post-colonial elites.[22] Rather than a religious preference, it would appear to be a political one: Sufi concepts are diffuse, syncretic, inner-directed and as such are difficult, if not impossible, for the state to arrogate. They cannot be easily adapted for state purposes, nor easily destroyed for that matter. For example, while orthodox Islam was systematically purged during the anti-religious drives in Soviet Central Asia during the 1930s, Sufi mystical folk Islam managed to survive; likewise, Sufism continues to flourish in Afghanistan despite the onslaught of more radical Islamic strains in Afghanistan during the 1980s.[23] Conversely, it could be argued that the very fragmented nature of Hinduism makes it difficult for ''official'' versions to be developed or to take hold politically, despite attempts to do so. This discussion begins to give us a sense of how the state may operate in the context of identity politics, in particular, the creation or suppression of exclusionary political space. This has implications for nearly all the alternative explanations already discussed.

For instance, essentialist arguments that cannot explain why different ethno-religious groups engage in conflict when they have co-existed for long periods, may be overtaken by an understanding of the role of the state in constructing, or at minimum justifying, exclusionary social visions. In almost every South Asian country the state has done this at some point in the post-independence era. The effects have been felt most in Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Likewise, in the context of elite manipulations, which version of identity wins may be traced in large part to state sanction or opposition. In Pakistan, the trumping of mainstream elite conceptions of the Pakistan People's Party and the Muslim League, which have tended towards loose secular identities, by religiously motivated political ideology, cannot be understood without seeing the statist needs of the military. Even the relative economic deprivation argument may be supplemented by a

---

[22] Describing the historical developments in Bangladesh, Imtiaz Ahmed argues that the British authorities took the lead in trying to isolate Sufism from Islam, making the latter ''thoroughly apathetic if not opposed to 'reason'.'' See ''The Role of Education in Conflict: Bangladesh,'' in Pamela Aall and Deepa Ollapally (eds.) *Perspectives on the Role of Education and Media in Conflict Management in South Asia* (Washington, DC: US Institute of Peace Press, forthcoming 2008), p. 4.

[23] Brian Glyn Williams, ''Jihad and Ethnicity in Post-Communist Eurasia: On the Trail of Transnational Islamic Holy Warriors in Kashmir, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Chechnya and Kosovo,'' *The Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, 2.3–4 (March/June 2003), p. 4.

state-oriented analysis: preferential or prejudicial economic policies can stimulate perceptions of future deprivation, as in the case of Sri Lankan Tamils, leading to a sharpening of grievances. In already polarized or potentially polarizing conditions, even benign economic neglect by the state can have a strong catalytic impact, as in Assam in northeastern India. Finally, the simple state repression argument needs to be refined. States have a variety of tools at their disposal that have been used, well short of repression, whether in proactive or reactive terms. The more complex institutional blockage argument made by Hafez is also not entirely convincing because he ignores the ''political culture'' surrounding institutions. The presence or absence of secular political culture often determines or conditions the level of institutional openness to various forms of grievances in the first place.

Nevertheless, this pivotal position of the state does not mean that it can dictate even security policy (an area in which it has no other serious competitor) on a whim. The external environment clearly sets some limits. For example, it is not an accident that the most violent conflicts have occurred on the borders or geographical peripheries in India. The Indian government cannot set policy in Kashmir, Assam or, earlier, Punjab without taking into account Pakistan, Bangladesh or China. Factoring in the geopolitical context allows us to make better sense of the state's chosen strategy in dealing with political violence in these cases. Going one step further beyond the domestic political sphere thus brings us to the central argument of this book.

The state and geopolitical identities

In South Asia, identities have underlying geopolitical components – the 1947 partition of India has left a legacy of clashing identities as well as territorial competition, best captured by the Kashmir conflict. Bangladesh is struggling to resolve its national identity between a Bengali and Bangladeshi definition, ultimately connected to regional relationships with India. Likewise, extremism in Sri Lanka reflects a chauvinistic Sinhalese nationalism wrapped up in a ''majority–minority'' complex understood only with reference to India.

The ongoing competition to redefine ''national identity'' in Afghanistan illustrates clashing preferences and interests vis-à-vis Pakistan and the US. Whether ethnic, religious or a more secular pan-Afghan identity dominates in the end will have implications for domestic and international relations. For the government, headed by Hamid Karzai, the latter is the most attractive for a host of reasons, not least because of exterior pressures.