1   Introduction

Tamils, Acehnese, Moros, Tibetans, Abkhazians, and Basques seek more power and control over their territorial homeland. Over time, some groups have gained new institutions and financial resources while others remain embroiled in episodes of violent conflict. All of these groups are territorially concentrated and seek self-determination. As a result, these nationalist conflicts strike at the core of a state's identity, its boundaries and its unity. They pose deep challenges to a state's territorial integrity.

The deep divide between nationalists and the state often appears unbridgeable. The gap separating the Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lankan state and Tamils, for example, appears just as wide even after the Tamil Tigers' defeat.[1] Papuans in Indonesia feel marginalized and excluded while migrants threaten to outnumber them in their claimed homeland.[2] Civil war in Sudan ended with the creation of a new state of South Sudan, but it caused thousands of deaths and vast destruction while laying the basis for new territorial claims.[3]

States jealously guard their territorial boundaries and unity. Whether freed from colonial rule, or shaped out of the ashes of crumbling empires, modern states lay claim to rule over their internationally recognized territory, project power through security forces and institutions, and create an overarching identity to legitimize their integration of various groups under their authority.[4] International law recognizes state sovereignty over its territory and sanctions measures to protect it.[5]

---

[1] Ahmed Hashim, *When Counterinsurgency Wins: Sri Lanka's Defeat of the Tamil Tigers* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

[2] Jacques Bertrand, "Autonomy and Stability: The Perils of Implementation and 'Divide-and-Rule' Tactics in Papua, Indonesia," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 20, no. 2 (2014).

[3] Richard Cockett, *Sudan: The Failure and Division of an African State* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016).

[4] Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors: An Analysis of Systems Change*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Daniel Philpott, *Revolutions in Sovereignty: How Ideas Shaped Modern International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[5] Francis Harry Hinsley, *Sovereignty*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); James Crawford, *The Creation of States in International Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

1

As a result, these dual claims to territory and group identity often clash and yield conflict. More than other forms of ethnic conflict, those involving nationalist groups are deeper and more endemic. Once launched on a path of seeking self-determination, they aim for independence or claim rights to govern their territory. Such conflicts often lead to civil war.[6] They are even more profound when the state is founded on the basis of a competing nationalist frame that lays claim to one, single nation.[7]

Democratic regimes offer in theory a more flexible context that is conducive to resolving such conflicts peacefully.[8] Their institutions mediate how political actors interact with one another under situations of heightened tension. Through formal political channels, such as the legislative assembly and sometimes the executive, representatives of different groups can voice concerns and grievances. They may seek redress through the courts, which are expected to play an unbiased role.[9] Elections test the political system's capacity to provide ethnic groups with significant representation and power. Nationalist groups can negotiate institutional arrangements, such as territorial autonomy or power-sharing, which represent them and ascribe powers to manage their affairs, within the boundaries of existing states.

Yet, in practice, even well-established democratic states are often saddled with intense nationalist conflicts, including violent ones. In Northern Ireland, the Irish Republican Army and Sinn Fein claimed self-determination.[10] Basques and Catalans claimed nationhood and independence from Spain.[11] Among newer democracies, Czechoslovakia broke up after the resurgence of claims to nationhood from Czechs and Slovaks, respectively.[12]

---

[6] James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 75–90; Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambanis (eds.), *Understanding Civil War: Evidence and Analysis, Volume 2: Europe, Central Asia, and Other Regions* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2005).

[7] See for instance, on Indonesia, George McTurnan Kahin, *Nationalism and Revolution in Indonesia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1955).

[8] Andrew Reynolds, *The Architecture of Democracy: Constitutional Design, Conflict Management, and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Sujit Choudhry, *Constitutional Design for Divided Societies: Integration or Accommodation?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Tom Ginsburg, "Constitutional Afterlife: The Continuing Impact of Thailand's Postpolitical Constitution," *International Journal of Constitutional Law* 7, no. 1 (2009).

[9] Choudhry, *Constitutional Design for Divided Societies.*

[10] John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, *The Northern Ireland Conflict: Consociational Engagements* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[11] Sebastian Balfour and Alejandro Quiroga, *The Reinvention of Spain: Nation and Identity since Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); André Lecours, *Basque Nationalism and the Spanish State* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2007); Montserrat Guibernau, *Catalan Nationalism: Francoism, Transition, and Democracy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

[12] Eric Stein, *Czecho/Slovakia: Ethnic Conflict, Constitutional Fissure, Negotiated Breakup* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997).

Democratic contexts, therefore, produce an array of outcomes. Violent nationalist conflicts have occasionally erupted at the time of a transition to democracy.[13] In other instances, democracy has allowed conflicting parties to reach ceasefire agreements, negotiate settlements, and new institutional arrangements.[14] Sometimes, nationalist groups have even participated in deliberations for a new constitution, as in the case of Spain.[15] More often than not, the pattern is mixed. Periods of violent conflict might be followed by negotiated settlements. Conversely, violence might decline in intensity but be followed by occasional rioting, demonstrations, and public displays of discontent.

Does democracy reduce or exacerbate nationalist conflict? What explains the variance in conflict outcomes? I argue that democracy matters and it generally does reduce violent nationalist conflict. Yet, the outcome is neither linear nor simple. New structural constraints and incentives tend overall to limit violent conflict, yet the pattern as suggested in the literature can lead to heightened violence in the short term. As a result, while violence tends to be reduced and less frequent over time, it does not disappear under democratic rule, nor is the conflict easily resolved. It opens up more options for nationalist groups to choose to pursue violence, seek negotiated settlements, or accept offers of accommodation. The democratic context multiplies the available options and, more importantly, increases the state's accountability. But the democratic context does not necessarily resolve conflict. Resolution of conflict entails not its absence, but its channelling through formal institutional processes of a democratic regime. This book provides an explanation for the varied pattern of nationalist conflict under democratic rule.

Southeast Asia constitutes the empirical terrain for this study. In Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, five nationalist groups have sought recognition and territorial self-determination: Acehnese and Papuans in Indonesia; Moros and peoples of the Cordillera in the Philippines; and Malay Muslims in Thailand. All these groups are territorially concentrated and have made claims to self-determination.

Nationalist conflicts across Southeast Asia first emerged in authoritarian regimes. The nature of grievances, modes of mobilization, and episodes of violence transformed and shifted over time. Under recent authoritarian regimes, groups that saw themselves as "nations" with secessionist ambitions

---

[13] Jack Snyder, *From Voting to Violence* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2000).

[14] Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[15] Michael Keating, "Rival Nationalisms in a Plurinational State: Spain, Catalonia, and the Basque Country," in *Constitutional Design for Divided Societies: Integration or Accommodation?*, ed. Sujit Choudhry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 316–41; Enric Martinez-Herrera and Thomas Jeffrey Miley, "The Constitution and the Politics of National Identity in Spain," *Nations and Nationalism* 16, no. 1 (2010).

drew on histories of resistance, recast themselves in nationalist terms, and sought to consolidate new forms of mobilization against the state.

Of course, there was nothing natural or inevitable about these groups. While the Acehnese have had a longer history of political and social consolidation, it was far from the case for Papuans, Moros, Cordillerans, or Malay Muslims of Thailand. Papuans have been scattered over a highly mountainous terrain with difficult mobility across the land. Papuan subgroups, speaking their own language, mostly evolved with few contacts among each other. The same is true of the Cordillera, mainly a highland mountainous area where different ethnic groups have been divided by the difficult terrain, with specific local cultures and languages. Moros shared Islam as a religion, but their local ethnolinguistic identities as Tausug, Maranao, and Maguindanao have often been stronger, and they are concentrated in different parts of Mindanao and the Sulu archipelago. Malay Muslims were divided among different sultanates prior to colonial conquest and share close affinities with groups across the border in Malaysia. Nevertheless, nationalists built movements and tapped into overarching common grievances to build more unified identities that have remained important sources of their mobilization.

Once states began to democratize, paths diverged significantly: one group, the Acehnese, enjoys wide-ranging autonomy that has been fairly well implemented while another, the Malay Muslims of Thailand, have neither obtained significant accommodation nor seen a reduction in state repression. Others fall somewhere in between. The following sections introduce my framework for explaining the impact of democratization and how it manifested in the region.

Patterns of Nationalist Conflict under Democratic Rule

Democracy reduces violent nationalist conflict but has a poor record of resolving it. Authoritarian regimes do not resolve conflicts; they generally tend to repress them.[16] Democratic regimes offer the only credible alternative framework by which conflict can be channelled through formal institutions but, in the case of nationalist conflicts, they rarely do. Nationalist conflicts, relative to other forms of ethnic or identity-based conflicts, strike at the core of the state's territorial claim and require a separate analysis to understand how they evolve under changing institutional frameworks.

This book challenges the argument that the establishment of a new democratic regime fuels nationalist violence. While such outcomes occur, they are usually rare or relatively brief. Instead, I argue that democratic regimes create

---

[16] Christian Davenport, "Multi-Dimensional Threat Perception and State Repression: An Inquiry into Why States Apply Negative Sanctions," *American Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 3 (1995): 690–91, 701; "State Repression and the Tyrannical Peace," *Journal of Peace Research* 44, no. 4 (2007).

conditions that reduce nationalist **violence** but rarely succeed in channelling **conflict** through democratic institutions. Nationalist conflicts are sufficiently deep-seated that negotiated outcomes are difficult to achieve. Mobilization outside of institutional channels occurs regularly. Occasional violent episodes, protests, or other extra-institutional means of making greater claims from the state are part of the landscape of nationalist mobilization and are endemic.

More than any other ethnic or minority conflict, nationalist conflict is the most difficult to resolve because of the wide gap in the preferred outcomes between the state and group. The state is fundamentally concerned with preserving its boundaries and unity. As a result, it views any claims made by nationalist groups as potentially threatening its integrity. As a starting point, its preferred outcome is the dissolution or disappearance of nationalist claims, and the integration and loyalty of the groups making these claims.

Nationalist groups, on the other hand, have strong identities tied to their claimed homeland and a political agenda that includes self-determination and self-governance, irrespective of the grievances that give rise to them. Their preferred outcome includes a range of possibilities, such as full independence in a small minority of cases, some form of recognition of their status, power-sharing, or autonomous institutions. But many other forms of concessions, such as providing more educational or cultural resources, or protecting minority rights, fall short, whereas they will be occasionally sufficient in a number of cases involving ethnic or minority group grievances that are not nationalist in their orientation.

As a result, the gap between nationalist and state objectives is wide. Few institutional solutions can adequately meet the former's claims while reassuring state leaders that their authority and the integrity of territorial borders will be maintained. The fear remains that giving more concessions fuels greater demands, leading ultimately to secession. The structure of the conflict sets, therefore, an equilibrium point that is difficult to achieve.

Why then should democracy reduce violent nationalist conflict? Mostly because it broadens the channels for mobilization, diversifies and dilutes claims to national group representation, and increases the political costs of violence over time. It changes the parameters of repression, increases prospects for negotiated solutions, allows greater representation of interests and claims to resources, and broadens options for mobilization. While the net impact might not eliminate conflict, these processes nevertheless dampen the intensity of conflict, mostly by reducing the conditions fuelling violence. When taking an overall assessment of democracy on such conflicts, therefore, the argument that it fuels violence is tenuous, but the conflict can remain deep, unresolved, and expressed through occasional outbursts that are sometimes violent.

Over the long run, then, there is a tendency for less violent mobilization under democratic regimes but significant variance requires explanation. First, as Snyder and others have suggested, there is an observed tendency for an increase in violent mobilization in some cases of democratic **transition**. Second, the outcomes over time vary significantly, with some cases reaching negotiated agreements that significantly reduce or eliminate sources of conflict while others retain deep grievances and see sporadic violence, protest, or other extra-institutional forms of mobilization.

In order to analyse more deeply this variance, the book considers two different stages of democratization: (i) an early phase of transition from an authoritarian to a democratic regime and (ii) a period of democratic stability. I postulate that there are different structural parameters framing the interaction between the state and nationalist groups in these two stages.

The main differentiating factor between the two stages is that institutions are fluid in the initial phase while they are more set, and therefore stabilize expectations, in the second. First, a transition from an authoritarian to a democratic regime alters the parameters of the conflict by opening up institutional channels to express grievances, and negotiate possible changes to address them. Yet, it also raises uncertainty. The latter heightens the incentive for nationalist groups to mobilize. At the same time, the state is confronted with a strategic choice to signal willingness to compromise, or reaffirm its preferred rejection of nationalist claims. There is a high probability of violence to rise when the state chooses to repress initially, thereby signalling that the new democratic regime is not willing to offer a new basis for negotiation. An initial attempt to offer some accommodation can initially prevent spiralling violence. Such accommodation is typically far less than what groups demand and is usually designed to offer small concessions to move the group away from nationalist demands. Violence tends to increase when the state chooses to continue or increase repression, particularly when the nationalist group is united and well organized.

Second, once democratic institutions stabilize, violence is reduced but conflict tends to remain endemic. I show that as violent mobilization becomes costlier to nationalist groups and the state under democratic rule, both sides have incentives to negotiate, seek new institutional solutions to address nationalist grievances, and attempt to resolve the conflict. Yet, given the deep gap in both sides' preferred outcomes, mutually acceptable negotiated settlements or even the state's establishment of new institutions, powers, and resources to accommodate nationalists often fail and produce, instead, lower violence but ultimately sustained conflict.

A number of factors influence variance across cases. As I explain subsequently, five are particularly important. First, much of the heightened violence is related to nationalist groups' mobilizational capacity. Those with little ability

to mount insurgencies produce mostly low-level violence or none at all if state repression is strong. Yet, conflict can remain deep and stalled, with periodic low-level violence resurging. Second, state concessions, particularly in periods of transition, can reduce incentives to mobilize violently, at least in the early stages. Significantly large signals of willingness to concede can even prevent the onset of a civil war altogether. Third, electoral coalitions are key for understanding the degree to which states are willing to make concessions to nationalist groups, particularly if their support is required to maintain a ruling coalition but, more frequently, when there is a shift from a majority reluctant to concede to "secessionists" to one sufficiently tired of continued violence. Conversely, populist leaders might attempt to capitalize on strong armed responses and escalate violent conflicts, but such measures are likely to be short-lived and have high risk of undermining democratic credentials and backfiring politically. Fourth, in presidential systems with highly independent parliaments it is more difficult to resolve conflict and achieve institutional outcomes that address nationalist grievances. As they tend to reflect the majority's reluctance to concede to "secessionists," parliaments will often dilute or thwart peace agreements or legislation that is negotiated with nationalist groups. Finally, the credibility of commitments is important in reaching conflict resolution rather than stalled conflict with low-level violence. Democratic institutions increase credibility mainly because of their greater constraint on the executive's ability to govern arbitrarily and ignore its laws, as well as the greater scrutiny and accountability of state actions. Nevertheless, in the case of commitments to nationalists, they provide only a basic expectation. Constitutionalized recognition of autonomy for nationalists helps to firm up the commitment and make it more credible but requires legislation. The state sometimes crafts it in ambiguous language or with terms that allow it to undermine autonomy and even erode its commitments through regulation. Detailed legislation and negotiated agreements with nationalists help to increase credibility. The combination of these factors, as well as their relative importance, varies according to context but some influence more violence in initial stages and a variety of outcomes, from wide-ranging autonomy that satisfies nationalist grievances to low-level violence and stalled conflict.

This explanation departs from other studies by emphasizing the longer-term patterns of nationalist conflict under democratic rule. As this book shows, the pattern follows a modified version of the inverted U-shaped curve that has been described in the literature. I propose instead that a bell curve more aptly represents the observed tendencies, as it captures a smoothening of the impact of democratization on violence at both ends. Rather than a sudden rise of violence after democratic transition, I suggest that most conflicts have a fairly steady level of violence initially while nationalist groups assess

the degree to which new democratic regimes are willing to negotiate or compromise. Initial state concessions also tend to dampen violent mobilization or delay its onset. When democracy stabilizes, there is a tendency for violence to decline but it often remains present, at low levels. In most cases, while democratic stability reduces the incentives for violent mobilization, it nevertheless does not easily resolve conflicts. Grievances remain and nationalist groups continue to use extra-institutional means to voice discontent and make demands, with low-level violence recurring periodically. Nationalist conflicts are much more difficult to resolve as states perceive them to be threats to their foundations. They often remain endemic, stalled, and often sporadically violent. The smoothening of the curve represents this frequent stabilization into low-level violence.

Based on an inductive comparison of five cases and tracing change in two different time periods, I examine why initially similar cases under authoritarian rule produced a wide range of outcomes, both in the first phase of democratic transition and later after democracy stabilized. Relatively low levels of violence as a general observation disguises significant variance in terms of outcomes, from obtaining negotiated special autonomy over a claimed territory to complete absence of accommodation and high levels of state repression. Furthermore, even the most beneficial outcomes to nationalist groups, in the form of special autonomy and detailed legislation, are often subjected to state attempts to dilute and undermine them.

A caveat is in order. While the book traces what I believe to be crucial factors that explain why democratization had varied effects on each conflict, it does not claim to account for all relevant factors in the evolution of secessionist conflicts in the region. Indeed, I weigh the relative importance of factors that explain, domestically, why certain characteristics of democratic change led to more or less violence, and to differentiated outcomes of institutional accommodation. Moreover, I assess how these factors evident in Southeast Asia measure against a broader literature on democratization and ethnic conflict, while providing some general propositions based on this inductive study. Others will analyse better the role of international, regional, or other external factors that might explain some of the patterns observed. I contend, however, that international and regional factors have been far less influential than in other parts of the world, at least with respect to their impact on democratization patterns and their role in the evolution of these conflicts. Finally, the book does not claim to delve in as deep detail as would any particular specialist of each group, but examines carefully the historical and empirical material to engage in a close analysis and dialogue with conceptual factors discussed in relation to the broader theoretical literature.

Southeast Asia: From Violent Insurgency to Autonomy

Southeast Asia has been the locus of numerous forms of nationalist mobilization and violence in the past few decades. Several movements have persisted in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, in spite of the improvement in democratic governance since the mid-1980s. Yet, the pattern of violent and non-violent mobilization is puzzling, as there are no clear trends across the board toward more or less violence. The most consistent pattern appears to be an ebb and flow between periods of high mobilization and violence, followed by significant troughs, sometimes accompanied by ceasefires or a peace agreement. Only one among these groups, the Acehnese, successfully reached a lasting peace agreement that institutionalized vast autonomy powers.[17] In the four other cases, in spite of a greater democratic environment, conflict has continued, although less violently on the whole.

Over time, as democratization progressed, violence tended to diminish. In many of the cases, there were one or several spikes, mostly during the earlier phase of the transition. When probing at a deeper level, however, there is enough variance that requires explanation. In the initial stages of democratization, there was a wide range among the five cases, with one degenerating into civil war (Aceh), while there was virtually no change in the case of Malay Muslims in Thailand. At a later stage, after democracy stabilized, there was a decline in violence in all cases. But conflict was far from resolved. The range of outcomes was quite broad. There was less violence overall but poor outcomes in terms of conflict resolution, with one case reaching a credible special autonomy agreement (Aceh) and another continuing to be highly repressed (Malay Muslims).

There are several reasons why these five groups can be usefully compared. They share a number of similarities. First, they can be classified as "nationalist" groups, as opposed to ethnic groups more broadly. Second, they are all territorially concentrated and represent relatively small percentages of the overall population. Third, they all had significant periods of armed insurgency during the authoritarian period preceding the democratic opening, with similar kinds of state responses. In addition, as they are all situated in Southeast Asia, they were subjected to similar regional factors. In this case, regional influences are low relative to other regions.

Armed organizations in all cases cast their groups in nationalist terms. They were not only seeking recognition of their ethnic identities and rights associated with that recognition, but they all made claims to a designated homeland and demanded powers and resources to govern their respective groups in that homeland with minimal interference from the central state. They varied in

[17] Edward Aspinall, *Islam and Nation: Separatist Rebellion in Aceh, Indonesia* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

the extent to which some of the groups asked for outright independence and defined their nationalist identities in direct opposition to the dominant majority in control of the state. The Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, GAM) made clear demands for secession from Indonesia on the basis of the long historic control of the Acehnese over their territory and past sovereignty over a local kingdom. Similarly, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) sought secession from the Christian-dominated Philippines, which they rejected on the claimed basis of a long history of territorial control and self-governance under Muslim sultanates that resisted external intrusion from Spanish colonial rule. Several armed groups, including the Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO), mobilized Malay Muslims in the south of Thailand on the basis of their shared Malay and Islamic identities against the Thai state's long claim to unique "Thai" national identity, while also laying claim to secession on the basis of the territory of the past kingdom of Patani. The Cordillera People's Liberation Army (CPLA) articulated a claim of a shared Cordilleran identity, recognized by Spanish colonizers as "Igorot," and having a long history of resistance to external influence and conquest, and political control over the Cordillera highlands. Finally, Papuans organized under the Free Papua Movement (*Organisasi Papua Merdeka*, OPM) to mobilize against integration to the Indonesian state and to emphasize their distinct racial and ethnic identity from "Indonesians," on the basis of their Melanesian origins. These distinctions laid the basis for a nationalist claim to independence of West Papua.[18]

All five groups are similar in some basic structural features. Acehnese, Papuans, Malay Muslims in Thailand, Moros, and Cordillerans all represent less than four per cent of their country's population. They are also territorially concentrated. The Acehnese occupy most of the Indonesian province of Aceh. Papuans are spread over the western part of the vast island they share with Papua New Guinea, alongside migrants from other regions. They are composed of a large number of different tribal groups. Malay Muslims are

---

[18] There is a vast literature on the history of all these movements. Some useful studies include Aspinall, *Islam and Nation: Separatist Rebellion in Aceh*; Tim Kell, *The Roots of Acehnese Rebellion, 1989–1992* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, 1995); Robin Osborne, *Indonesia's Secret War: The Guerilla Struggle in Irian Jaya* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1985); Richard Chauvel, *Constructing Papuan Nationalism: History, Ethnicity, and Adaptation* (Washington, DC: East-West Center, 2005); Wan Kadir Che Man, *Muslim Separatism: The Moros of the Southern Philippines and the Malays of Southern Thailand* (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1990); Peter G. Gowing, *Mandate in Moroland: The American Government of Muslim Filipinos 1899–1920* (Quezon: New Day Publishers, 1983); William Henry Scott, *The Discovery of the Igorots: Spanish Contacts with the Pagans of Northern Luzon* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1974); Gerard A. Finin, *The Making of the Igorot: Contours of Cordillera Consciousness* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2005); Surin Pitsuwan, *Islam and Malay Nationalism: A Case Study of the Malay-Muslims of Southern Thailand* (Bangkok: Thai Khadi Research Institute, Thammasat University, 1985).