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Ethnicity, Parties, and Electoral Violence in Developing Democracies

by Aditi Malik

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This essay describes how differences in the degree of party stability generate varying incentives for elites to instrumentalize election-time violence. Although I focus on two 'ethnic' forms of electoral conflict — Hindu-Muslim riots in India (Varshney, 2002; Wilkinson, 2004) and 'ethnic clashes' in Kenya (Klopp, 2001) — the core insights from the essay can be applied to cases of partisan violence as well. In short, my aim here is to underline that one of the key factors that makes certain places prone to electoral violence — ethnic or non-ethnic — is the instability of political parties. Whether or not such violence manifests itself in an ethnic form depends on the salience of ethnic (as opposed to non-ethnic) differences (Posner, 2005) and on the degree to which these differences are institutionalized by the state (Lieberman and Singh, 2012a,b).

I. Recent Advances in the Study of Ethnicity

Since the publication of Donald Horowitz's *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (1985), the study of ethnicity has be-

come a dedicated area of inquiry in comparative politics. Based on a constructivist approach, much of this research has focused on detailing the "effects of 'ethnicity' " (Chandra, 2009).[1] At the same time, and especially over the last decade, scholars of ethnic politics have made considerable progress in (i) defining what an ethnic identity is and (ii) identifying the properties — namely, constrained change and visibility — that are intrinsic to it (Chandra, 2006, 2009). In doing so, this research has shown that "the properties commonly associated with ethnic identities" — such as common ancestry, common language, and common culture — are not defining features of such identities (Chandra, 2006, 399). Rather ethnic identities are "an arbitrary subset of categories in which descent-based attributes are necessary for membership" (Chandra and Wilkinson, 2008, 520). There is also a consensus among researchers as to the kinds of identities — namely, religion, sect, language, dialect, tribe, clan, race, physical differences, nationality, region, and caste — that qualify as ethnic categories. However, membership in these categories must be based on descent and not on voluntary acquisition over the course of a person's lifetime (Chandra, 2006; Chandra and Wilkinson, 2008).

> In places where elites do not expect their parties to endure from one election to the next, the future costs of electoral violence — such as voter sanctioning — are likely to be discounted.

Both prior to and since the articulation of these vital conceptual clarifications, ethnicity as an independent variable has been tied to a number of economic and political outcomes. These outcomes include violence (Posen, 1993; Fearon and Laitin, 1996; Petersen, 2002; Lieberman and Singh, 2012b), democratic stability (Rabushka and Shepsle, 1972; Horowitz, 1985; Chandra, 2005), and voting behavior and political patronage (Bates, 1974; Fearon, 1999; Caselli and Coleman, 2013; Chandra, 2004; Bratton and Kimenyi, 2008; Habyarimana et al., 2009; Ferree, Gibson and Long, 2014). In developing democracies, ethnicity has also featured in studies of party formation and reproduction (Chandra, 2011; LeBas, 2011; Elischer, 2013) as well as coalition politics (Posner, 2005; Arriola, 2013). Finally, research on election-time violence has generated valuable insights into the various ways in which ethnic identities

can be mobilized to drive such conflict (Gagnon, 1994; Brass, 1997, 2003; Chua, 2003; Snyder, 2000; Varshney, 2002; Wilkinson, 2004; Berenschot, 2011). Recent work has highlighted that in places where long-standing ethnic rivalries exist and are available for appropriation, elections can provide crucial focal points during which elites can activate ethnic cleavages and instrumentalize violence (Shah, 2012; Travaglianti, 2014; Malik, 2015). Survey-based research, furthermore, has demonstrated that ethnic identification tends to become stronger during periods of political competition (Eifert, Miguel and Posner, 2010). In short, research on ethnic politics and electoral violence has considerably advanced our understanding about the reasons due to which elections in multiethnic democracies can descend into violent conflict.

II. Ethnicity and Electoral Violence in Developing Democracies

Despite these vital insights, a number of questions — about the link between electoral competition on the one hand and ethnic strife and violence on the other — remain unanswered. For instance, in places marked by a history of election-related conflict — expressed along ethnic lines — how can we explain changes in the patterns of such violence over time? More concretely, why does election-time ethnic conflict persist, or even escalate, in some places while it declines in others? And what accounts for how, when, and why different ethnic identities come to be electorally salient?

In the first wave of studies on election violence, research on Hindu-Muslim riots in India (Brass, 1997, 2003; Varshney, 2002; Wilkinson, 2004) and ethnic and nationalist conflict in Eastern Europe (Gagnon, 1994; Snyder, 2000) generated several important insights about the ways in which ethnic divisions can be appropriated to instrumentalize election violence. Much of this work, particularly in the Indian context, leveraged spatial variation to account for election-related conflict. With regard to changes in ethnic salience, influential accounts held that voters' efforts to become members of 'minimum winning coalitions' serve to explain these shifts (Lieberman and Singh, 2012b; Chandra, 2004; Posner, 2005).

Election-related conflict has been found to take on ethnic manifestations in places where ethnic divisions

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[1]The constructivist approach stands in opposition to an earlier primordial understanding of ethnicity and ethnic behavior.

not only exist on the ground but where these divisions are also electorally salient. For example, in India, the Hindu-Muslim cleavage is salient in many different parts of the country. As Varshney (2002, 2004) has documented, northern and western states have seen the highest levels of conflict between the two communities. Furthermore, and as Lieberman and Singh (2012a) have shown, the Indian state continues to institutionalize this cleavage through several different mechanisms. Similarly, in Kenya, where divisions between many different tribal communities — owing largely to historical reasons — are salient, ethnicity has been enumerated in the census since 1948. These two countries have typically witnessed *inter-ethnic* forms of election-time conflict. However, electoral violence has also manifested itself *within ethnic groups*, as in Sri Lanka (Shah, 2012) and Burundi (Travaglianti, 2014). In these places, rather than being used as a way to depress turnout — as seen in cases of inter-ethnic electoral conflict — election-time violence has largely been used to coerce the support of coethnic voters (Travaglianti, 2014).

III. Political Parties and Electoral Violence in Developing Democracies

Manipulable ethnic cleavages and the institutionalization of these divisions are key *enabling* conditions for electoral violence. However, there are several more proximate *triggering* conditions, such as unexpected results, electoral fraud, close elections (Wilkinson, 2004), and biased police, that drive election-related conflict (Höglund, 2009, 423). Political elites, for their part, often play a crucial role in converting these precipitants into active violence. Whether they do so directly by deploying narratives of autochthony (Klopp, 2001; Côté and Mitchell, 2016) or intimidating challengers (Kriger, 2005) or indirectly by relying on 'violence specialists' (Cleven, 2013; Brass, 2003), existing studies have consistently shown that election-related conflict stems from elite instrumentalization.

In much of the literature on this topic, scholars have either implicitly held or explicitly demonstrated that elites amass electoral benefits by orchestrating election-time violence (Klopp, 2001; Jaffrelot, 2003; Dhattiwala

and Biggs, 2012; Ticku, 2015). Indeed, it is only recently that researchers have begun to specify the costs of such conflict, which range from voter sanctioning — that is, supporting rival parties and candidates (Gutierrez-Romero and LeBas, 2015; Rosenzweig, 2017) — to international criminal trials (Hafner-Burton, Hyde and Jablonski, 2014). This more recent research suggests that if politicians believe that instrumentalizing violence could backfire on them, then they will steer clear of organizing such conflict.

One way that we might think about elite calculations regarding the utility of electoral violence is by paying attention to levels of party stability. At their core, we can define stable parties as those parties that endure from election to election. For its part, by noting that electoral violence often occurs in places with 'weak' parties, existing work on election-related conflict has already shed some light on the role of party structures. In the Kenyan case, for instance, scholars have highlighted that non-programmaticity (Mueller, 2008) and a lack of internal rules and procedures (Wanyama, 2010) mark most of the country's political parties. In election periods, when ethnic rivalries have often been available for appropriation, parties and elites have drawn on these antagonisms to drive violence (Klopp, 2001). However, from a broader perspective and barring a few exceptions (Siddiqui, 2017), we know relatively little about the relationship between parties and party systems on the one hand and electoral violence on the other.

My research holds that the level of party stability impacts elites' calculations about the utility of electoral violence by elongating or shortening their time horizons. In places where elites do not expect their parties to endure from one election to the next, the future costs of electoral violence — such as voter sanctioning — are likely to be discounted.[2] Under these conditions, violence will manifest itself ethnically if ethnic identities and divisions are electorally salient and manipulable. However, in places where political parties are generally stable and well established, and where elites expect their parties to survive over the long-term, they will weigh the costs and benefits of violence much more carefully. In short, we should expect that as a country's parties and

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[2] By saying that punishment from voters is a potential future cost, I simply mean that if elites organize violence at time *t*, voters get a chance to react and sanction them at time *t+1*. There is an important theoretical reason to expect this to be the case: voters have to learn who was behind the violence at time *t*. During episodes of electoral violence, voters may lack good information about who organized the conflict. But after violence has occurred, this information often becomes accessible through investigatory commissions, the press, and community leaders.

[3] This does not mean that politicians will always correctly deduce the costs and benefits of violence, and recent research has shown that

its party system stabilize, the frequency of electoral violence will decline.[3]

IV. Kenya and India

I apply these insights to account for variations in the incidence of electoral violence in Kenya and India. My work draws on recent advancements in the study of party volatility. Specifically, I use what Eleanor Powell and Joshua Tucker (2014) have termed Type A volatility, which measures the extent of party entry and exit, to proxy elite expectations of their parties' lifespans.[4] Kenya and India are appropriate cases for a cross-national comparative analysis of this topic for two reasons. First, both nations have extensive histories of deadly violence (ethnic clashes in Kenya and Hindu-Muslim riots in India) around elections. In fact, although recent scholarship on the subject of election-related conflict has highlighted that such violence is on the rise across much of the developing world, within their respective regions, Kenya's and India's experiences with election-time violence long predate these trends (Straus, 2012; Staniland, 2014). Second, the *trajectories* of electoral conflict in the two countries have diverged considerably. While the incidence of such violence has declined in India since the mid-1990s, Kenya continues to be at risk of experiencing electoral conflict.[5]

Variations in the level of party stability across the two countries and within each country over time serve to explain these patterns. In Kenya, the fact that new parties frequently emerge and existing parties routinely disintegrate between elections is well recognized (Ajulu, 2002; Elischer, 2010; Wanyama, 2010).[6] Venerable research on the country's political parties has also emphasized that these entities typically form and prolifer-

ate along ethnic lines (Branch and Cheeseman, 2010; LeBas, 2011). As a result of instability at the party level, electoral coalitions in Kenya, too, are notoriously volatile. For instance, in the last election for which I have complete data — 2013 — the birth of new parties and the death of existing parties contributed to a change in seat share in the National Assembly (the lower house of Kenya's parliament) to the tune of 48%.[7]

For its part, Kenya's 2010 constitution put in place a number of reforms, some of which — including the new requirement that 50%+1 votes and at least 25% percent of the votes in at least 24 counties must be won to secure the presidency — sought to reduce high rates of party entry and exit. In addition, and so as to prevent last-minute defections, as per the 2012 Political Parties Act, pre-election coalitions now have to register themselves with the Registrar of Political Parties three months before an election is conducted. At the same time, however, other reforms — particularly devolution, have actually heightened competition for positions at the county level. All in all, the evidence from 2013 was mixed. While the presidential election was generally deemed peaceful, violence associated with county-level elections broke out in several parts of the country (Burbidge, 2015; Malik, 2017). Although it is too early to draw conclusions about whether the new constitution will keep party birth and death under check in the long-term, at least in 2013, political elites in many different parts of the country — uncertain of their future and the future of their parties — drew on 'negative ethnicity' to mobilize voters and drive violence.[8]

On the other hand, party instability in India — at both the national and sub-national levels — rose precipitously in the mid- to late-1970s, after which party

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elites can make important errors in this regard (McGlinchey, 2011; Varshney, 2013; Rosenzweig, 2017). Accounting for the conditions under which such miscalculations occur, however, is beyond the scope of this work.

[4]At the time of writing this article, the incumbent Uhuru Kenyatta had been declared victorious in the controversial re-run of Kenya's 2017 presidential election. However, complete results — of the presidential, parliamentary, and county levels — were not publicly available. Thus, my data for Kenya spans the 1992 to 2013 elections.

[5]This is not to say that India has entirely stopped experiencing electorally-motivated Hindu-Muslim riots. In 2013, for instance, violent clashes in Uttar Pradesh's Muzaffarnagar and Shamli districts claimed the lives of over sixty individuals. This violence appeared to be linked to the upcoming 2014 general elections. Nonetheless, the incidence of such conflict in India has dropped over the last two decades. In Kenya, on the other hand, the risk of election-time violence persists. In the run-up to the 2017 elections, for example, the country's National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) identified 33 of Kenya's 47 counties as being at risk of experiencing electoral conflict. Furthermore, it is estimated that at least sixty-five individuals had been killed in election-related police shootings by October 31, 2017 (Ng'ethe, 2017).

[6]Interview with an ODM party official, Nairobi, September 18, 2013; interview with a policy expert, Nairobi, October 17, 2013; interview with a civil servant, Nairobi, November 25, 2013.

[7]Interestingly, total electoral volatility (as measured by the Pedersen Index) was 65%. This means that more than half of the overall volatility was attributable to party entry and exit as opposed to vote-switching among existing parties.

[8]Interview with a CCM politician, Nakuru, October 23, 2013.

entry and exit levels declined. Furthermore, and with regard to the rate of party birth and death over the last two decades, India's party system has fluctuated between being quite stable and being moderately stable (Mainwaring and Scully, 1995; Kuenzi and Lambright, 2001). As a result of these important changes, Indian elites — in ethnic, multi-ethnic, and non-ethnic parties — have come to orient themselves towards the future. To put it in the clearest terms, because most politicians in India today expect that their parties will survive from one election to the next — and because Indian elites fear a potential backlash from voters — they have powerful reasons to steer clear of orchestrating electoral conflict.[9]

V. Concluding Comments

Foundational research on the study of ethnic politics sheds considerable light on the causes of ethnic violence. More recent work has shown that ethnicity often also matters in the context, and for the mobilization, of election-time violence. Why does election-related conflict persist in some places but not others? Comparative insights from Kenya and India suggest that differences in the level of party stability impact the incentives of elites to engage in electoral conflict.

Manipulable ethnic cleavages, institutionalized by the state, are available to politicians in both countries. Furthermore, many elites in both Kenya and India compete for political office via ethnic parties. But while politicians in India generally expect their parties to endure from one election to the next, elites in Kenya are far more uncertain about the long-term survival of their political parties. This difference in projected party lifespan, as proxied by party entry and exit, affects the calculations of politicians about the electoral utility of conflict. Compared to their counterparts with long time horizons (as in India), elites with short time horizons (as in Kenya) can more readily choose violence as a strategy.

The electoral salience of certain ethnic groups and the continued institutionalization of these divisions in Kenya and India has meant that electoral violence in these countries has manifested itself along ethnic lines. But the idea that election-time violence is more likely to occur, and recur, in places with high rates of party birth and death can also be extended to other forms of electoral conflict such as partisan violence. In order to make sense of the threat and likely form of election-

related violence more generally, then, scholars will need to pay closer attention to the relationships between elite incentives, prevailing social cleavages (both ethnic and non-ethnic), and formal institutions (including political parties). To this end, existing insights on how ethnicity has been mobilized to mount electoral violence in many different contexts can help us better explore the drivers of non-ethnic forms of election-related conflict as well.

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[9]Interview with a religious leader, Hyderabad, July 28, 2013; interview with an academic, Hyderabad, August 1, 2013.

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Europe's Urban-Rural Divide on Immigration

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Europe is geographically divided on the question of how to deal with immigration. The big cities are home to 'Cosmopolitan Europe', where immigrants are considered valuable contributors to society and multiculturalism is a virtue. In comparison, the countryside is home to 'Nationalist Europe', where immigrants are considered unwelcome outsiders and multiculturalism is an insidious ideology that threatens to destabilize society.

This geographic divide on immigration has become politically prominent in recent years because it has been at the center of several recent elections. During the 2016 'Brexit' referendum in the United Kingdom, opinions were divided between Greater London and a few other metropolitan areas that voted to Remain and the rest of the country that voted to Leave. In large part, these divergent preferences reflected different views on how Britain should respond to the challenges of managing immigration in an era of globalization (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley, 2017). One year later during the UK general election there was a similar geographic divide over support for Labour and the Conservatives (Jennings and Stoker, 2017).

The new political geography on issues like immigration threatens to upend the axes of partisan conflict that were established during the 20th century.[1] Party cleavages in the 20th century formed around socioeconomic issues and the broad distinction between workers (left wing) and capitalists (right wing) (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967). However, Cosmopolitan and Nationalist perspectives each draw support from across the left-right divide. This makes it difficult for established center-left and center-right parties to take coherent stances on immigration, or to make significant policy progress once elected. In addition, it opens space for insurgent and populist parties to gain influence. In the 2017 French Presidential election, neither the center-left nor the center-right candidates made it to the second round. Emmanuel Macron received the majority of his support from large urban areas and campaigned on an explicitly cosmopolitan and pro-immigration policy agenda, while Marine Le Pen received the majority of her sup-

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[1] Urban-rural political conflict is not a new concept. In many respects, the urban-rural divide was at the center of European politics in the 19th century, but it lay dormant for much of the 20th century.