Welcome to the third trend report for ACLED-Asia, covering political violence events in Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Nepal, Bangladesh, Thailand, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia (see Figure 1). Data from January 1, 2015 to August 31, 2015 are available for public download at https://www.strausscenter.org/strauss-articles/acled- 3.html, as are the previous trend reports (no. 1 and no. 2). Trend reports will be published quarterly for the first period of the ACLED-Asia extension, after which, similar to the ACLED-Africa project, they will be produced monthly. We will continue to backdate our available data from 2010 for all countries and will release country datasets as they become available.

Over the summer, ACLED-Asia saw a significant decrease in politically violent events throughout the subcontinent and Southeast Asia (see Figure 2). The decline in violent events is likely due, in part, to the start of the holy month of Ramadan, which ran from June 17-July 18. In addition to the occurrence of Ramadan, the general decline in the previous quarter continued throughout the summer.

ACLED incorporates reporting on non-violent protesting into these counts by country and month; over the last eight months protests have continued to dominate recorded events. Consistent with past trend reports, protests in India topped Asia's charts, with a summer average of approximately 250 protests per month followed by Pakistan with 75 protests. Vietnam and Cambodia both saw a general increase in the number of protests reported in the media. Despite the fact that Vietnam and Cambodia's protest totals are comparably quite low to the rest of the region, the rise in public reports on protests is significant.

This trend report focuses on areas of heightened activity across the subcontinent. This issue will discuss: a general review of the conflict environment in Thailand with a focus on recent events in Bangkok; an overview of large scale attacks against civilians in 2015; protests on issues surrounding the quality of life in Cambodia and Vietnam; and a review of violent groups who target civilians, as opposed to military targets. Special focus topics include a of
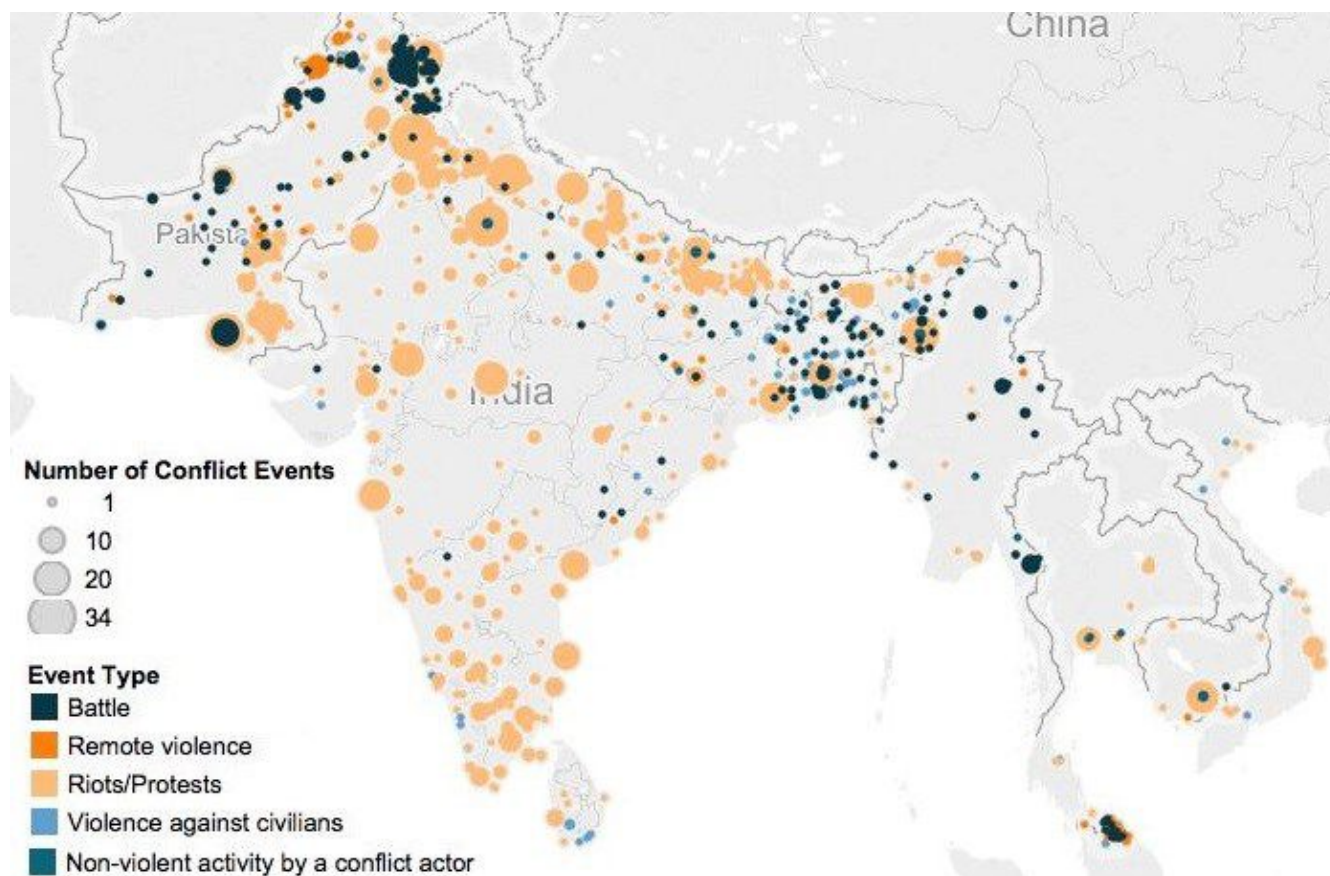

Number of Conflict Events
- • 1
- ○ 10
- ◯ 20
- ◯ 34

Event Type
- ■ Battle
- ■ Remote violence
- ■ Riots/Protests
- ■ Violence against civilians
- ■ Non-violent activity by a conflict actor

Figure 1: Number of Events by Location and Event Type June 2015– August 2015   1

Pakistan's ongoing military operation, Zarb-e-Azb, and its impact on Pakistani security, as well as an overview of the various causes for competition and conflict over land in India.
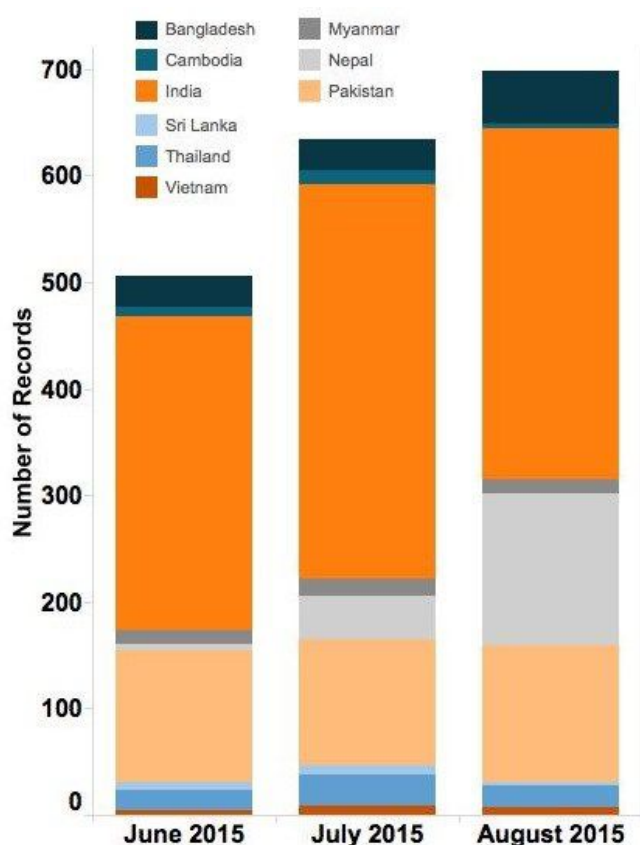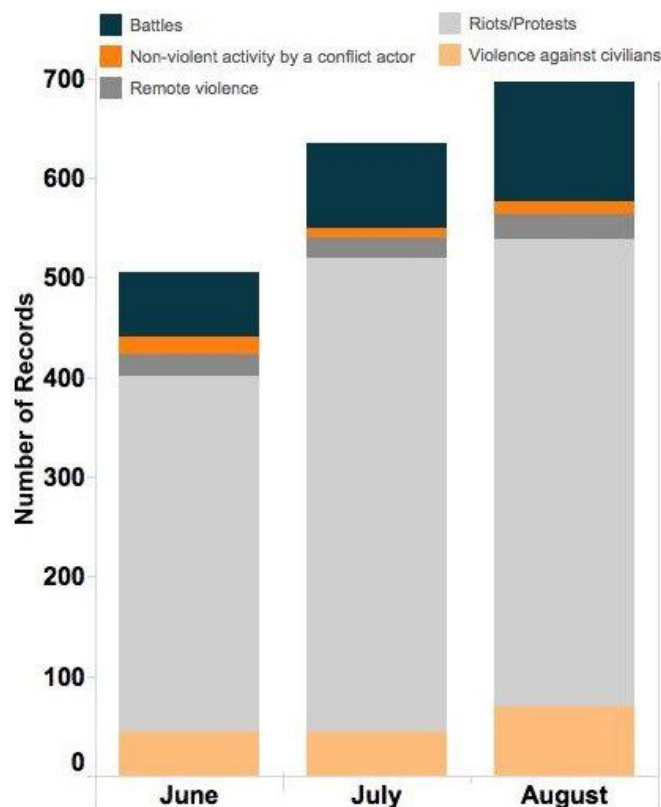

Figure 2: Political Violence by Country

Figure 3: Political Violence by Event Type

Thailand

The Southern Muslim Insurgency in Thailand has grown less lethal since August 2014. (Crisis Group, 2015) In the first 8 months of 2015 there have only been 15 civilian deaths related to the conflict, whereas 2014 saw at least 50 civilian deaths. (International Business Times 2014; ACLED data for 2015) However, the recent bombing in Bangkok on August 17, 2015 suggests that active Malay Muslim militants may be expanding their operations beyond the three southern provinces of Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani—collectively referred to as Patani - where they have operated for the past twelve years.

The recent bombing in Bangkok—which ripped through the Erawan Shrine, a major tourist destination—claimed 20 lives, injured more than 100 and was named one of the worst acts of political violence in Thailand's recent history (Brookings, 2015). However, at the time of writing, it was still unknown who was responsible. While bomb attacks are relatively rare, the location and significance of this location made it an attractive candidate for terrorism.

At present, the Thai government and international experts believe three main groups could be the perpetrators, but are careful to not rule out other possibilities. The first suspects are the Malay Muslim insurgents, as some experts believe this violent conflict would eventually spill over into the capital. Others believe that targeting Bangkok, outside the southern conflict region, would be antithetical to these groups' motives for local

Thailand

autonomy. In line with the recent rise in international and religiously-motivated terrorist groups, including Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, some believe the incident could have been the work of international jihadi groups. The Thai government, however, is insistent that the bomb was not placed by an international group. Finally, the third suspects are thought to be the political elements opposed to the military junta, most predominantly the "red shirt" faction, as the bomb could have been meant to highlight the illegitimacy of the regime(Brookings, 2015). However, this seems unlikely, since after the Thai police announced a one million baht reward for information leading to the suspects, the red shirts said they would double that reward (Wall Street Journal, 2015).

In addition to the Bangkok bombing that killed 20 and wounded at least 100 more, violent incidents over the past five months indicate growing restlessness among Malay Muslim rebels. May marked a resurgence in violence as insurgents set off a wave of bombs that injured 29, including a blast on the resort island of Samui, which was the first out-of-area operation since December 2013 (CTC, 2015). June and July also saw other deadly attacks against Thai soldiers and Buddhist monks at the end of the holy Muslim month of Ramadan and the discovery of banners in southern cities that called for independence for the southern region of Patani (Deutsche Welle, 2015).

At the core of the escalated violence is a decades-old separatist movement and national liberation struggle among the Thai Malay Muslim community. For years, this community has been asserting their distinct cultural identity as separate from Thailand's predominantly Buddhist population. The most active groups are the BRN (Barisan Revolusi Nasional), its alleged armed wing the RKK (Runda Kumpulan Kecil), the GMIP (Gerakan Mujahidin Islam Patani), the BBMP (Barisan Bersatu Mujahidin Patani), and the PULO (Patani United Liberation Organization) (East by Southeast, 2014). While these groups share a common Islamist agenda, the southern Thailand insurgency is still considered specific to Thailand and not part of the global jihad. Analysts agree that the conflict has persisted because the Thai government has shown little interest in addressing grievances. In addition to the ruling military junta's drive to collect fingerprints and DNA from southern citizens as well as the economic and social stagnation in the south, the Malay Muslim communities have felt continually alienated (Deutsche Welle, 2015).

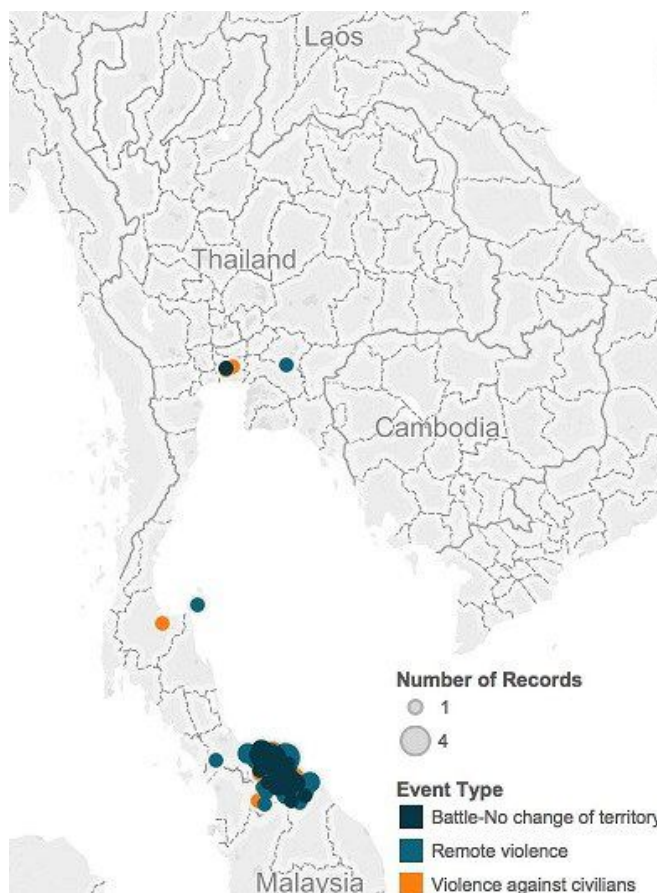Peace talks began in February 2013 between representa-

Figure 4: Number of Conflict Events in Thailand

tives of the BRN and Malaysian officials though were stalled by the junta that ousted Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra on May 22, 2014. The military government has yet to initiate further dialogue (Crisis Group, 2015). If indeed Southern Muslim Separatists carried out the attacks in Bangkok and are venturing outside of their traditional conflict zones, this may indicate a radical new phase in this longstanding conflict. If insurgents intentionally spread their fight to the capital, the government may be forced to initiate a more robust military presence and/or engagement with the separatists. Although the violence witnessed in Thailand does not compare to the conflicts that dominate the global stage, the country's consistent unrest does not appear to be close to resolution and the rising death toll—estimated at 6,500, mostly civilians—remains a cause for worry (Deutsche Welle, 2015).

Large Scale Violence Against Civilians in 2015

After the terrorist attack last month in Bangkok, ACLED reviewed the recent large scale (ten +) attacks on civilians in South and South East Asia. From January to August in 2015, six large terrorist attacks have occurred against civilians in the South and Southeast Asian states that ACLED covers. Five of the six attacks occurred in Pakistan, while the final attack was in Myanmar.

Pakistan

The five large scale terrorist attacks in Pakistan since January do not indicate any geographic similarities or patterns: the locations range from Lahore to Turbat to Karachi. Large scale attacks have stopped since mid-May, remaining relatively quiet over the summer, possibly due to the success of the ongoing operation Zarb-e-Azb that is targeting various military groups including Jundullah and the Taliban in North Waziristan. The launch of the operation in June 2014 targeted militant hideouts and known leaders (The News, June 2014). Militant groups attacked civilian populations in retaliation for the government offensive in December 2014, including a border attack by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Wagah which killed 45 people, and the TTP's bombing of a military affiliated pri-

Figure 5: Reported Civilian Fatalities from Targeted Attacks in 2015

mary school in Peshawar, which killed 141 people. (The Independent, December 2014) A TTP representative, Muhammad Umar Khorasani announced, "We selected the army school for the attack because the government is targeting our families and females. We want them to feel the pain." (The Independent, December 2014) The lack of direct, large scale retaliation in 2015, despite the continuation of the operation, suggests TTP leaders remain in hiding or are recuperating after heavy losses. Out of the five attacks that did occur since January, Jundallah claimed responsibility for three, each of which attacked the Shia community. Jundallah carried out two attacks by sending suicide bombers to Shia mosques and executed another attack by boarding a bus and killing Shia commuters. (Quartz, May 2015, Press TV, January 2015) Targeting the "kafir" or the unbelievers remains Jundallah's mission, though their current silence calls into question Jundallah's capabilities after Zarb-e-Azb. In addition, Jamaat-ul-Ahrar killed 16 people by attacking two churches in Lahore in March. 80% of Pakistan's large scale terrorist attacks (10+ fatalities) targeted minority religions in violent suicide attacks. The Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) claimed responsibility for the final attack, whose struggle against "Pakistani occupation" remains the primary motivating factor for civilian targeting in Balcohistan. (New York Times, April 2015) The BLA and several other Baloch groups target government-affiliated companies and workers, in addition to Pakistan's security forces.

Myanmar

On February 15, 2015, rebels reported that the Burmese military forces killed unarmed civilians in Kokang, Myanmar. Forces gunned down civilians in the city of Kokang and continued to shoot after civilians tried to flee to safety. (Asia Times, 2015) At least one hundred civilians were killed over two days. The army denied such accusations, stating that after fighting died down locals who had fled were welcomed by the army with "noodles, soft drinks and snacks." (Irwadday, February 2015) Such large scale violence against civilians is rarely reported in Myanmar.

Smokescreen Protests

Protests constitute 87% of recorded events in Cambodia and Vietnam. This may be reflect the issues currently engaging these societies, but local media reporting is limited by strict state censorship. The state limits not only the publication of protest information in local and internation-

al press but also often restricts public gatherings that could present potential threats to the government. From January through August, the press in Vietnam and Cambodia have released a slow trickle of reports which often detail insignificant events like protests concerning exces-

Smokescreen Protests

sive noise. Likely a tactic used by the regime to distract both the citizens and the international press from more pressing issues, the result is a disproportionate amount of protests on mundane issues while human rights violations often go unacknowledged.

CAMBODIA

The Cambodian government frequently implements harsh crackdowns on protests against the ruling Cambodian People's Party (CPP), which came into power through disputed parliamentary elections in 2013 (HRW, 2015). Civil society groups targeting social welfare issues, rather than justice and human rights, experience a lesser degree of state intervention (Freedom House, 2015). Therefore, about 50% of protests in Cambodia demand wage increases and better treatment of workers. However, the government has taken actions to combat these protests as well, occasionally resorting to violence to break them up (HRW, 2015). In January, security forces killed four protesters campaigning for better working conditions in the capital (FreedomHouse,2015).

Cambodia experienced 42 work-related protests since the beginning of January, with a spike of 15 relevant events in April alone. 86 protests have been reported in Cambodia in 2015. The other protests were mainly political or related to land disputes, and Cambodia's security forces often forcibly dispersed the gatherings. In April, approximately 500 workers from three garment factories protested in Phnom Penh to demand that government officials intervene after their employers refused to meet their demands for food, transportation subsidies, and better working conditions. Protests like these are representative of the majority of protests in Cambodia. It is striking that reported protests are so heavily oriented toward raising the standard of living in a country where the government uses excessive lethal force and exercises arbitrary detention and torture (HRW, 2015). Either the government of Cambodia is publishing protests to assuage international observers or the government is trying to distract the populace from more pressing issues.

VIETNAM

The Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) has maintained one-party rule in Vietnam since 1975. Growing public discontent about the lack of basic human rights challenges the CPV's grip on power, especially as social media increasingly facilitates the expression of these ideas. In addition to tightly controlling the media, the government requires official approval for public gatherings, allowing it to stifle any protests they deem unacceptable and to pun-
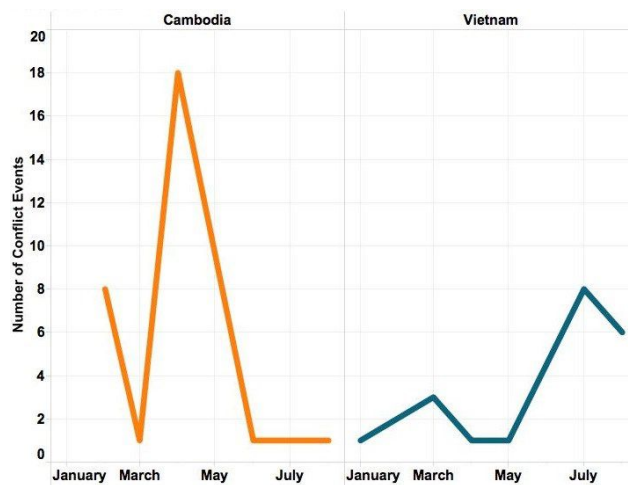

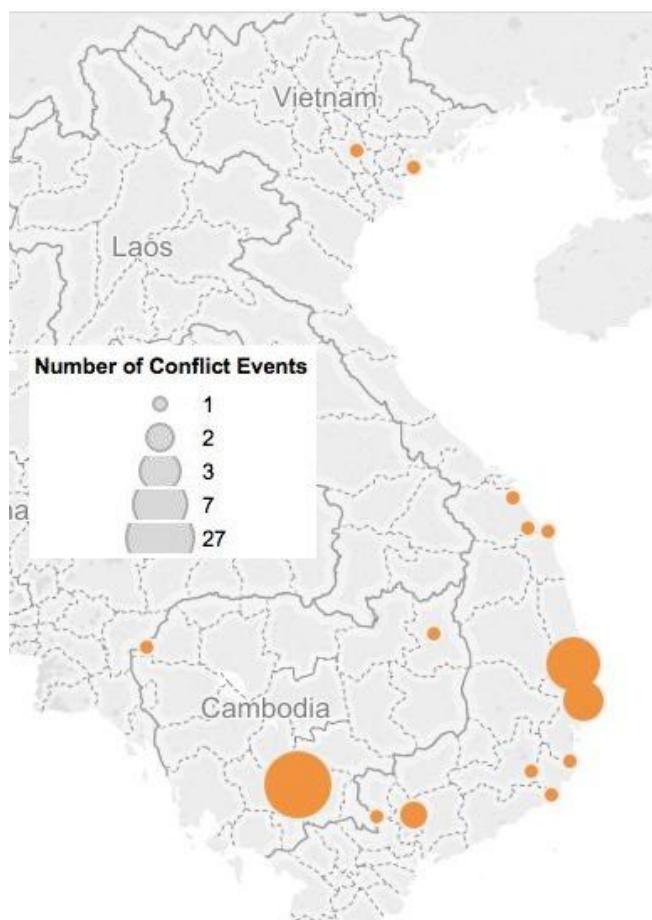**Figure 6: Number of Protests January 2015– August 2015**

Figure 7: Number of Protests by Location

Smokescreen Protests

ish those who violate this order (HRW, 2015). In 2015, the Vietnamese media reported 42 instances of political violence in Vietnam. Of these, 81% were non-violent protests. Many of these protests focus on issues like dust, pollution, fair compensation for labor, and eco-system preservation. For example, in April, thousands of protesters blocked a highway in southeastern Vietnam to protest a nearby power plant they said was covering their homes with dust. (Radio Free Asia, 2015). In July, residents in the central province of Thanh Hoa set up tents and lived in them for one week to block the construction of a landfill site they said would pollute their homes' surroundings (Thanh Nien News, 2015). Most of the reported protests target private companies or local governments, but rarely the national government. This is likely the result of the CPV's tight grip on the media outlets. Allowing protests that target seemingly minor issues relative to the frequent violations of basic freedoms occurring in the country distracts from the real issues at hand and casts the CPV in a more favorable light. The gov-

ernment of Vietnam may sanction the release of minor protests to quell criticism from international allies and organizations like the UN as well as mediate Vietnam's image in the international press. By reporting on local frustration over dust, for instance, Vietnam retains its image as a safe, developed country. Reports leaking out of Vietnam from international journalists and NGOs suggest dust is not the most pressing issue: sources reporting independently of the CPV reference human rights abuses including systemic use of corporal punishment, unfair detentions, and police use of lethal force

(U.S. Country Report, 2014).
In sum, protests centered on improving citizens' quality of life may be occurring throughout Southeast Asia, though it is more likely that the politically relevant events that are occurring go under-reported or unacknowledged throughout the region. Understanding the nations' motives to selectively release snippets of innocuous protests is critical in framing the political environment in Southeast Asia.

Targeting Civilians

South and Southeast Asian countries have witnessed 561 violent events targeting civilians in 2015 so far. Over half of these events, 293, cannot be verifiably linked to any specific group. Yet the remaining 268 events can be traced to specific rebel groups and political militias. In Bangladesh, the political rivalry between the Bangladesh National Party and Awami League created an environment in which both parties, along with unidentified armed groups, targeted civilians in 212 recorded incidents. India and Pakistan had similar levels of violence against civilians, with 142 and 101 events respectively. Yet a lot of this violence against civilians is a bit more difficult to explain than countries like Bangladesh and Thailand because unidentified

armed groups committed a majority of these events in Pakistan and India. While Thailand did not see as many events targeting civilians as Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, or Myanmar, it did see a continued trend of southern Muslim insurgents targeting civilians in the south.
Bangladesh

Violent events targeting civilians in Bangladesh is a problem that was examined in the previous trend report. Much of the violence is due to the ongoing political rivalry between the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and the Awami League (AL). However, levels of violence have decreased. At its peak in February, ACLED tracked 76 violent
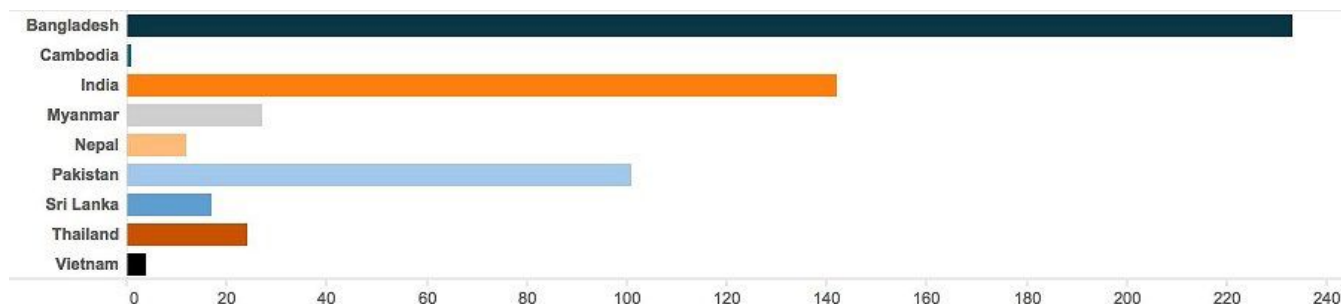

Figure 8: Number of Violent Events Targeting Civilians by Country

Targeting Civilians

events targeting civilians. Only 34 events occurred in June, July, and August combined. Both the BNP and AL target civilians in order to contest the party in power (currently the AL), a common tactic that they have used for years. This targeting is widespread throughout the country and not limited to the capital or any geographic region due to the nature of BNP and AL's national political machines. (Early Warning Project 2015)

Thailand

The Southern Muslim Insurgency stems from the annexation of the three southern provinces, Pattani, Narathiwat, and Yala, in 1909 by Siam, now modern-day Thailand. Yet the conflict has moved beyond wanting independence for the three southern provinces. Military and police forces of Thailand are often targeted by Southern Muslim Separatists over independence claims while civilians are targeted due to ethnic conflict between the Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims. (Combating Terrorism Center 2015) In 2015, all events targeting civilians occurred in the south, with one exception. Human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have condemned Southern Muslim Separatists for targeting civilians, noting it is a violation of international law. Yet 2015 was not the only year to witness the targeting of civilians in Southern Thailand. Since the early 2000s, the conflict has seen over 6,000 casualties. According to reports around 90% of these casualties have been civilians of the ethnic Thai Buddhist and ethnic Malay Muslim pop-

ulations. (Human Rights Watch 2015). In 2014 at least 50 civilians died in the conflict, while 16 have died so far in 2015. (International Business Times 2014)

Experts do not expect the Thai government or military to increase their pressure on the Southern Muslim Separatists. At present the military has already deployed over 150,000 troops to the region, while the insurgent forces are estimated to be between 3000 and 9000. (CNN 2013) While violence continues both against civilians and government forces, the levels of violence are kept at a relatively low rate and are contained to the southern three provinces, Because only one Westerner has been killed in the conflict so far the central government has not been pressured by other governments to eliminate the insurgency for good. (Combating Terrorism Center 2015). Over half of violent events targeting civilians in South and Southeast Asia in 2015 were committed by unidentified armed groups. In many cases, such as Pakistan and India, this large amount of unidentified armed groups makes it difficult to discern the intentions of these groups when they target civilians. However, in Bangladesh and Thailand, it is often clear what specific violent actor is targeting civilians. In Bangladesh, political rivalry between the two national political parties has caused much of the violence against civilians. In Thailand, a long-standing Southern Muslim Insurgency has targeted civilians as part of an ethnic conflict between the Malay Muslims and Thai Buddhists.

Special Focus Topic: Operation Zarb-e-Azb

The Pakistani Armed Forces launched operation Zarb-e-Azb on June 15th 2014. Hailed as the first "comprehensive operation" (The News June 15 2014) in Pakistan, the state deemed it a required response after the joint Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) June 8th 2014 attack on the Jinnah International Airport in Karachi. A newly elected government gave permission to the armed forces to weed out local and foreign militants in the Federally Ad-

ministered Tribal Areas. Historically, far reaching military operations against militant organizations in Pakistan have been rare, and often with a limited focus. The Musharraf era operations in 2009 targeted one militant faction at a time. In Operation Rah-e-Nijhat, the Pakistani military pursued TTP militants in South Waziristan. Operations in the past, however, were criticized by analysts and the media as empty measures, failing to address the root causes of extremism and strategically allowing other mili-

Figure 9: Operation Zarb-e-Azb Accomplishments

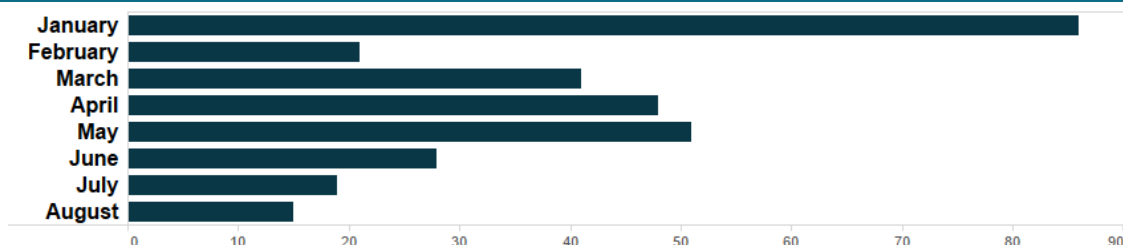## Special Focus Topic: Operation Zarb-e-Azb

Figure 10: Number of Military Attack in Pakistan in 2015

tant groups, such as the Haqqani Network, to flourish (Haider 2014).

Over a year later, Zarb-e-Azb has been hailed a military success by the Pakistani armed forces, who estimate that they have eliminated at least 2,919 terrorists (ACLED Data), destroyed 873 hideouts and safe-houses and recovered 253 tonnes of explosives ([The Express Tribune June 13 2015](#)). Perhaps more critical is how the success of the operation changed local and international public perceptions toward the state's role in combatting terrorism in Pakistan and abroad. When the operation began, local sentiment focused on the influx of Internally Displaced Peoples (IDPs) from the tribal belt and on the assumption that the operation was an attempt by the army to once again hijack the democratic process in Pakistan --whose first democratic transition of power occurred in May 2013. In mid-2014, international allies were concerned with Pakistan's ability to fulfil the operation's mission statement, with commentators dubious of the objective of ridding the tribal belt of all militant factions (Haider, 2014).

One year on, while public opinion on IDPs and their treatment is still a contested topic, with IDPs protesting at least once every month since the start of the operation, public sentiment towards the army is encouraging. The army has displayed a commitment to expunge local and foreign groups, as well as those it has considered allies in its past, such as the Haqqani Network. It has not, to date, tried to dislocate the power structure in Islamabad. Internationally, Pakistan has been lauded by several countries, including the United States ([Express Tribune 6 November 2014](#)) for its commitment over the last year to abandon its previous policy of "strategic depth". The policy allowed for intelligence agencies to back militant outfits in Afghanistan and India with the pretext that the knowledge they provided gave Pakistan an advantage in regional politics (Kronstadt 2008, p13).

Amongst the militant groups the Pakistani military is

fighting in FATA, TTP, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Jundallah are the only three Pakistani-based militant outfits, the others, like IMU and EMIT, are foreign. In addition to foreign fighters and domestic terror cells, the army has had to factor in US drone strikes. Pakistan argues these operations undermine local efforts to eliminate extremism and radicalisation in the tribal belt. As Zarb-e-Azb gained momentum, IMU and EMIT presence in the tribal belt has diminished, with the Army claiming that by August 2014, just a month into the operation, the vast majority of the 500 militants killed were from these groups (Khan, 2014, 21). Additionally, the divisions created in the TTP as the operation unfolded-- including infighting and the launch of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) to whom the IMU chief declared allegiance -- meant that the safe haven created for foreign militants was now less stable. Although Uzbeki and Tajik militants are active intermittently in pockets of Afghanistan, they have largely retreated from Pakistan since Zarb-e-Azb began, as over a 100 were killed the first two weeks of the operation ([DAWN, 14 June 2014](#)).

The Haqqani Network's relationship with Pakistan has taken a sharp turn since the operation began in 2014. The Network's presence in the region dates back to the early 1970s at the time of the Marxist revolution in Afghanistan, when the Network's leader operated rebellion efforts from Miranshah, North Waziristan (Gordon, 2015). The Haqqani Network's rise during Taliban rule in Afghanistan made them a key component of Pakistan's strategic depth policy, a tie that would prove difficult to sever in the post 9-11 security environment. Lieutenant General Hamid Gul, who served as the Director General of the ISI between 1987-1989, was a key figure in creating militant resistance groups in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation, and then used the same strategy in Kashmir in Pakistan. His involvement with separate militant groups in the region earned him the title of the "Godfather" of Pakistan's geo-strategic policies. He is often cited as proof of the connec-

Special Focus Topic: Operation Zarb-e-Azb

tion between the military and militant networks in Pakistan, often supporting negotiations with violent groups (Rondeaux, 2009). The intricate networks built between the Taliban, Al Qaida, and The Haqqani Network in Afghanistan was a key component of Pakistan's security narrative, as well as the target of the US mission in Afghanistan.

9/11 further complicated the intricate network, as Pakistan, hesitant to abandon old ties and stratagems but pushed into declaring allegiance with the US on the War on Terror, adopted a narrative that separated the "good" from the "bad" Taliban (Ali, 2014). Pledging to rid the nation of 'bad' Taliban, Pakistan offered safe havens to militants being attacked in Afghanistan by the US, with the understanding that these militants would not carry out attacks on Pakistani soil. This often lead to contention with Afghanistan and the United States, as groups such as the Haqqani Network were not attacking Pakistani soil, they often teamed up with Afghani Taliban to carry out joint attacks in Afghanistan. By providing these groups safe haven, Pakistan was implicit in prolonging the War on Terror in Afghanistan (Khan, 2014).

Pakistan's narrative of good and bad Taliban was put to the test in the years to come as the TTP made further gains in the country and the United States began its drone warfare program in the region. The military proved that it had abandoned the policy of strategic depth in favour of a policy of no negotiations, hard military action, and a strengthening of domestic and international relations through official democratic channels, as opposed to secretive meetings with proscribed outfits. The gains made by this particular break in national policy by Pakistan has resulted in a narrative shift for the state, as well as greater support and diplomacy on the international platform, with the United States appreciating Pakistan's role in defragmenting the Haqqani Network and Al Qaida in the region (The Daily Times 4 March 2015). In addition to a successful disassociation with terrorists and local narrative shift, Operation Zarb e Azb also gained military successes. Haqqani Network hideouts have been destroyed and several important commanders have been captured or killed. Foreign Al Qaida commanders have been captured and killed in Karachi, indicating that their hideouts in the tribal belt are no longer safe areas (Times of India January 9 2015).

When Zarb-e-Azb began, the Pakistani military publically requested that the US military stop drone attacks on Pakistani soil, a request the US obliged to for the first six months of the operation. Since then, there have been sporadic periods of consistent drone attacks in border areas with Afghanistan. Pakistan repeatedly condemns such attacks and often does not give access to journalists to verify who was targeted and killed. However, ISPR reports consistently mention that among those killed by drone strikes are often foreign militants from the Afghan side of the border. While the number of drone strikes has decreased since an all time high in 2010 (The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, 2015), the Pakistani military maintains that their efforts are hindered by US drone strikes.

With the rise in attacks in Afghanistan however, Pakistan has struggled to fully sever ties with with militant groups. This month, Afghani President Ashraf Ghani, in the wake of a militant attack in Kabul that killed over 50 people, blamed Pakistan (Dawn 10 Aug 2015). While Pakistan is working on shifting elements of its narrative, there are other deeply entrenched beliefs that prove immutable. The military's response to Afghanistan's accusations was to blame India, and focused on Indian motives to destabilise Pakistan and jeopardise its relations with Afghanistan and the United States. This cycle of blame has prevailed since Pakistan's independence.

Overall, activity by external forces has decreased in Pakistan's tribal belt since the start of Operation Zarb-e-Azb, and the army has worked not only to eradicate terrorism in the region, but also on shifting the narrative. Abandoning the policy of strategic depth meant that safe haven provisions for foreign militants was off the table. Perhaps as a result, a nation wide commitment to eliminate all radicalised elements in society has translated throughout the country. Thus far, there have been no attacks by the Haqqani Network in Pakistan in 2015. US Security advisor Susan Rice, on her recent visit to Pakistan contended that more could be done by Pakistan to dismantle the Haqqani Network (VOA News 31st August 2015). Pakistan, adamant to show commitment, has started what it calls the final push, with a major ground and air offensive, killing at least 89 local and foreign militants in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas in the last two weeks of August. Pakistan's neighbors are careful to assess Operation Zarb-e-Azb's effectiveness for them, and attacks on Pakistani soil by other factions have continued, the operation is far from over and Zarb-e-Azb is been a key element in Pakistan's first attempt at a radical policy shift since 9/11.

Special Focus Topic: Land Conflicts in India

Reigniting the long-standing issue of land acquisition, the proposed amendments to the new 2013 Land Acquisition Act by the Modi-led BJP government in December 2014, have led to nationwide farmer's protests in India (The Economic Times 2013, BBC 2015). Thousands of farmers took to the streets between January and May 2015, in particular in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, and increasingly in New Delhi. The protesters were led by members of opposition parties, such as the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). In August 2015, in light of protests and ahead of the Bihar state elections, the Prime Minister Modi retracted the proposed amendments (Live Mint 2015, WSJ 2015). Yet, land acquisition is the basis for only one of many land-related conflicts in India. Other national conflicts include land rivalry between 'indigenous' and 'migrant' communities, inter-communal disputes over religious sites, as well as private land-grabbing, which at times plays out under the veil of communal violence. This special focus provides an overview of these land related conflicts in India and how they manifest themselves in various forms of political violence, including ethnic violence, violence between religious groups, as well as caste and economic-based violence.

Ethnic based land conflict between 'indigenous' and 'migrant' populations, for example, plays out in Assam – a state in Northeast India. Bengali-speaking Muslims and other 'non-indigenous' populations have been violently attacked by members of 'indigenous' populations, in recent years especially by members of the Bodo community (NDTV 2012, Times of India 2012). Centered on competition for local resources and political power, it has been claimed that the increasing number of Muslims is due to illegal immigration from Bangladesh (BBC 2012). The rivalry between members of the indigenous population and the allegedly illegal Muslim immigrants plays out in frequent occurrences of political violence. It has also led to large-scale violence between Bodos and Bengali-speaking Muslims in 2012 and 2014. The violence between Bodos and Muslims from July to September 2012 in Kokrajhar cost more than 75 lives and hundreds of thousands of Muslims fled their homes (The Economist 2012). In 2014, Bodo groups launched two attacks: first, against Muslims in May and second, against non-Bodo (Adivasi) tribals in December. During the first attack, at least 45 people were killed, during the second attack at least 34 persons (Reuters 2014, The Guardian 2014). In all three incidents, allegedly factions of the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) – a separatist group that became active in
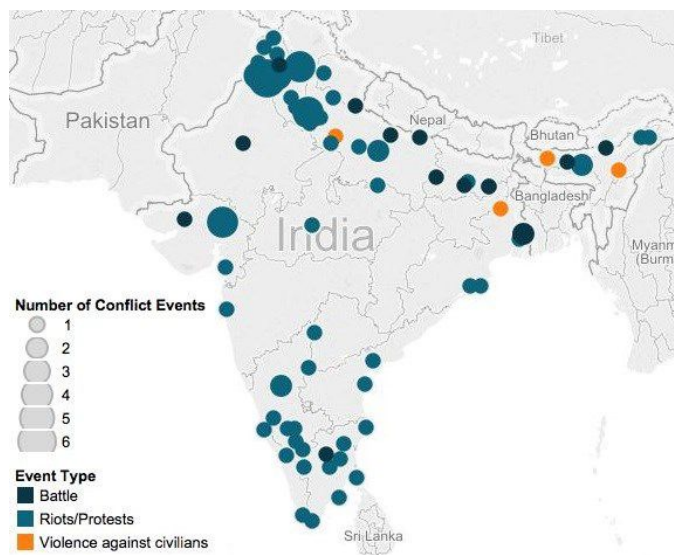

Figure 11: Number of Land Disputes by Location and Event Type in 2015

1986 – were involved (SATP 2015). Due to the targeting of Muslims, attempts have been made to portray the Bodo conflict as communal, as the conflict is partially based on religious identity. Such claims, however, are difficult to measure due to the religious diversity of the Bodo community and the variation of targets. Partially as a result of the Bodo violence, Assam now has amongst the highest number of internally displaced persons in India (IMDC 2015).

Following the violence in July and December 2014 against Bengali-speaking Muslims and non-Bodo tribals in Assam, the situation has remained much calmer in 2015. No large-scale violence has been reported thus far. Of the total recorded cases, about 80% constituted riots or protests. The remaining recorded cases were comprised of battles and violence against civilians.

Violence between religious groups across India has at times also evolved around land disputes. Disputes over religious sites or over private land have provided 'sparks' for incidents of violence, for example between Hindus and Muslims. In Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, in May 1987, Hindus and Muslims clashed after the murder of a Hindu during a 'banal land dispute' (Graff and Galonnier 2013). Yet, more frequent triggers are disputes over religious sites. In the case of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, for example, Hindutva groups claimed – and still claim – that the site of the ancient mosque was in fact the birthplace of Lord Ram, an important deity in Hinduism. This claim

Special Focus Topic: Land Conflicts in India

led to the mobilisation of thousands of Hindus with the aim to destroy the mosque and to erect a Hindu temple instead. This was organised by Hindu-nationalist organisations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a partner of the currently ruling BJP. The first aim succeeded in December 1992. The nationwide mobilisation for, as well as the actual destruction of the mosque were accompanied and followed by large-scale violence between Hindus and Muslims across the country. In Mumbai alone, at least 900 persons were killed during violence in December 1992 and January 1993 (Rediff 2014). While the case of Ayodhya is probably the best-known example, disputes over religious sites can also trigger more localised incidents of communal violence. Such was the case in the recent violence in May this year in Ballabhgarh, Haryana, where 400 Muslim villagers were attacked over the dispute of a local mosque (The Hindu 2015). While these disputes over land can trigger communal violence, it is important to keep in mind that they represent only one of a number of potential triggers.

Land related caste violence plays out in various forms. Though legally abolished, caste discrimination still persists in India, particularly in rural areas (National Geographic 2003). Members of the Dalit community, formerly referred to as untouchables, are often denied access to certain facilities or areas in villages, such as temples or wells. Breaking those unwritten rules can lead to retaliatory attacks from members of upper castes. In a crude instance of such violence in 2014, a Hindu priest beat to death an 8-year old Dalit, because he had entered a temple (The Telegraph 2014). Traditionally not allowed to own land, Dalits are also regularly subject to forceful evictions from lands they allegedly unrightfully inhabit in villages, but also within cities. These evictions are often accompanied by protests and violent clashes. For example in Kolkata, in West Bengal in 2003, 7,000 Dalits were forcibly evicted from their slum residences at Belilious Park to make way

for development projects (HRW 2007). Caste related violence can also be triggered by private disputes over land, similar to the cases discussed in the context of religious groups. Just recently in Rajasthan, as a result of an old land dispute, members of the upper caste Jat community attacked Dalits for allegedly squatting on their lands, killing at least three (BBC 2015).

Taking an economic angle, some scholars have also argued that individual cases of communal violence have served as a form of private 'land grabbing'. For example, Das (2000) argued that the Kolkata Hindu-Muslim riots in 1992, which erupted following the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, resembled a form of 'land grabbing in disguise'. Pointing to rising estate values of slum areas in Kolkata, he suggests that the attacks in these areas were primarily driven by the aim of land developers to forcefully 'evict' residents from their land. A similar argument has been made in the context of the 2002 Hindu-Muslim violence in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Field et Al (2008) found that violence was much more likely in mill areas, where competition for increasingly valuable lands had risen. They suggest that the communal tensions in 2002 were used to evict religious minorities, i.e. Muslims, from their lands.

Land based conflicts are, in reality, often not as neatly separable along markers of identity, such as ethnicity, religion, caste, or class. At times, different markers of identity may overlap. Moreover, markers of identity may change over time. Further, how land, resources and identity may create conditions for violence are often presented in terms of the traditional 'Hindu-Muslim' conflict cleavage. Yet, there are myriad ways that intra-group and other challenges can emerge over land, land access, and livelihoods. ACLED will explore these in greater details in the coming months.

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