

CONFLICT TRENDS (NO. 4)

REAL-TIME ANALYSIS OF ASIAN POLITICAL VIOLENCE, FEBRUARY 2016

Welcome to the first 2016 Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project’s Conflict Trend Report for Asia. This is the fourth report in our series. The analysis is based on ACLED real-time and historical data on political violence and protests from ten countries in South and Southeast Asia. Monthly data updates are published through our research partners at [Complex Emergencies and Political Stability in Asia \(CEPSA\)](#) and are also available on the [ACLED website](#).

In February 2016 ACLED released the first annual dataset of South and Southeast Asia political violence and protest data. This set covers events in 2015 across ten South and South-East Asian states. 10,195 political violence and protest events are recorded in 2015. ACLED’s team is also working to record historical data from 2010 in Pakistan, India, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Bhutan. In January 2017, we aim to release data from January 2010- December 2016 for all

above named countries. We are also pleased to announce the completion Thailand and Vietnam data from January 2010-December 2015, the release of which will be published in the coming month.

Conflict Trend Report No. 4 includes a general overview of the violence recorded in South and Southeast Asia throughout 2015. The report highlights **distinctions between the types and frequency of political violence and protests** throughout 2015, a general review of **rioting in South Asia**, a focus on **Pakistan’s most violent spaces**, a piece on the **rise of conservatism in India**, and a review of **Myanmar’s tenuous peace** with rebel groups. A special report analyzing Thailand’s conflict environment over the last six years focuses on **targeted killings of Buddhists and teachers, Thailand’s southern Muslim insurgency**, and the **underreporting** of continuous violence in Thailand’s southernmost districts.

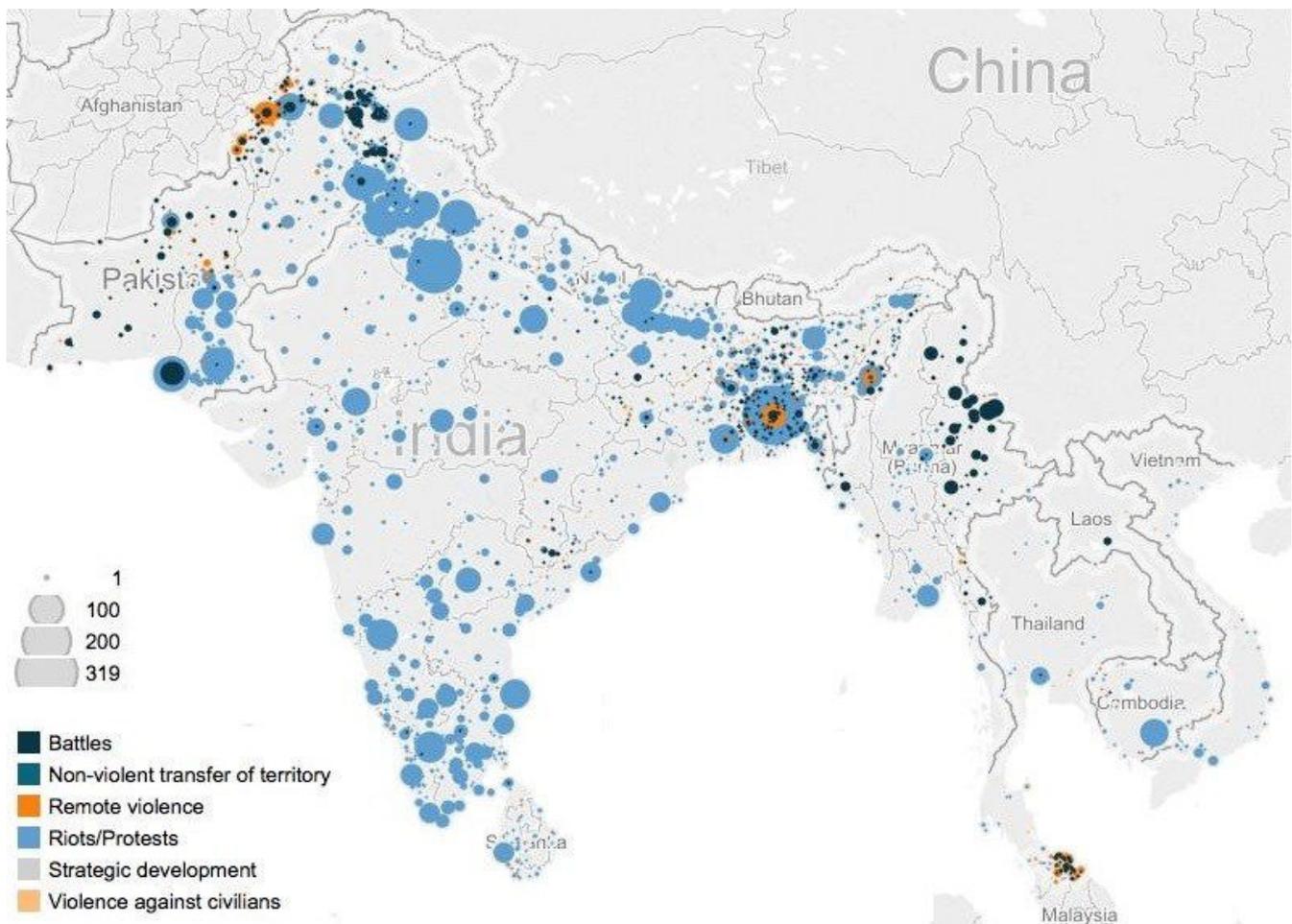


Figure 1: Political Violence and Protests in South and Southeast Asia, 2015

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A Review: Violence in South and Southeast Asia 2015

Across the ten countries ACLED covered in 2015, the rates of political violence were significantly higher in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh than elsewhere in South and Southeast Asia. Violence in India comprised more than half of ACLED Asia’s 2015 dataset, followed by Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Pakistan’s preponderance of political violence reflects the government’s continuing military offensive, Zarb-e-Azb, whose objective includes eliminating military strongholds in the north (examined in the [previous trend report](#)). As indicated by Figure 2, violence in Pakistan resulted in the greatest number of fatalities. Approximately 4 deaths occurred for every battle in Pakistan. Reported fatalities overwhelmingly occurred in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), Pakistan’s most violent state. FATA and Balochistan both have mountainous terrain that is strategically used by violent actors. Government involve-

ment against non-state actors was highest in FATA and Balochistan: state forces are involved in 75% of all battles and remote violence in 2015. Violent engagements between political militias and rebel groups (absent of any government intervention) were also highest in FATA and Balochistan, underscoring that these areas pose the greatest challenge to the Pakistani government despite the state’s increased efforts to quell violence.

Comparably, India produced only 1.3 fatalities per violent interaction. India’s largest threats to internal stability include: rebel groups in Jammu and Kashmir, CPI (Maoist)-led violence in the South and East, and ethnic militias and rebel groups in India’s Eastern states. Though violence in India remains isolated within high-conflict clusters, state forces are active in conflict regions. Violence in India remained concentrated in several isolated and often peripheral pockets of the state: Jammu and Kashmir in

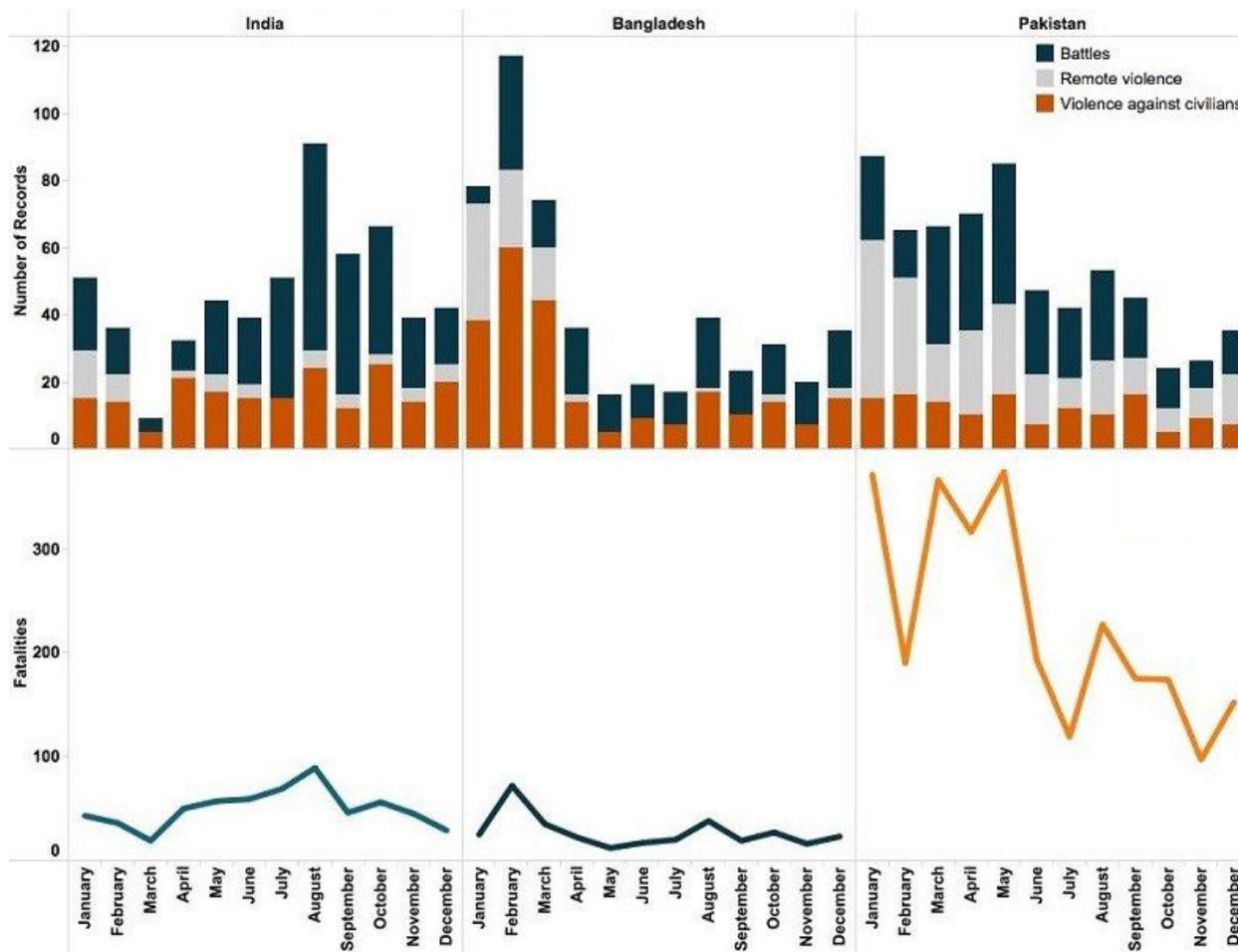


Figure 2: Rates of Violence to Fatalities in Most Politically Violent Countries, 2015

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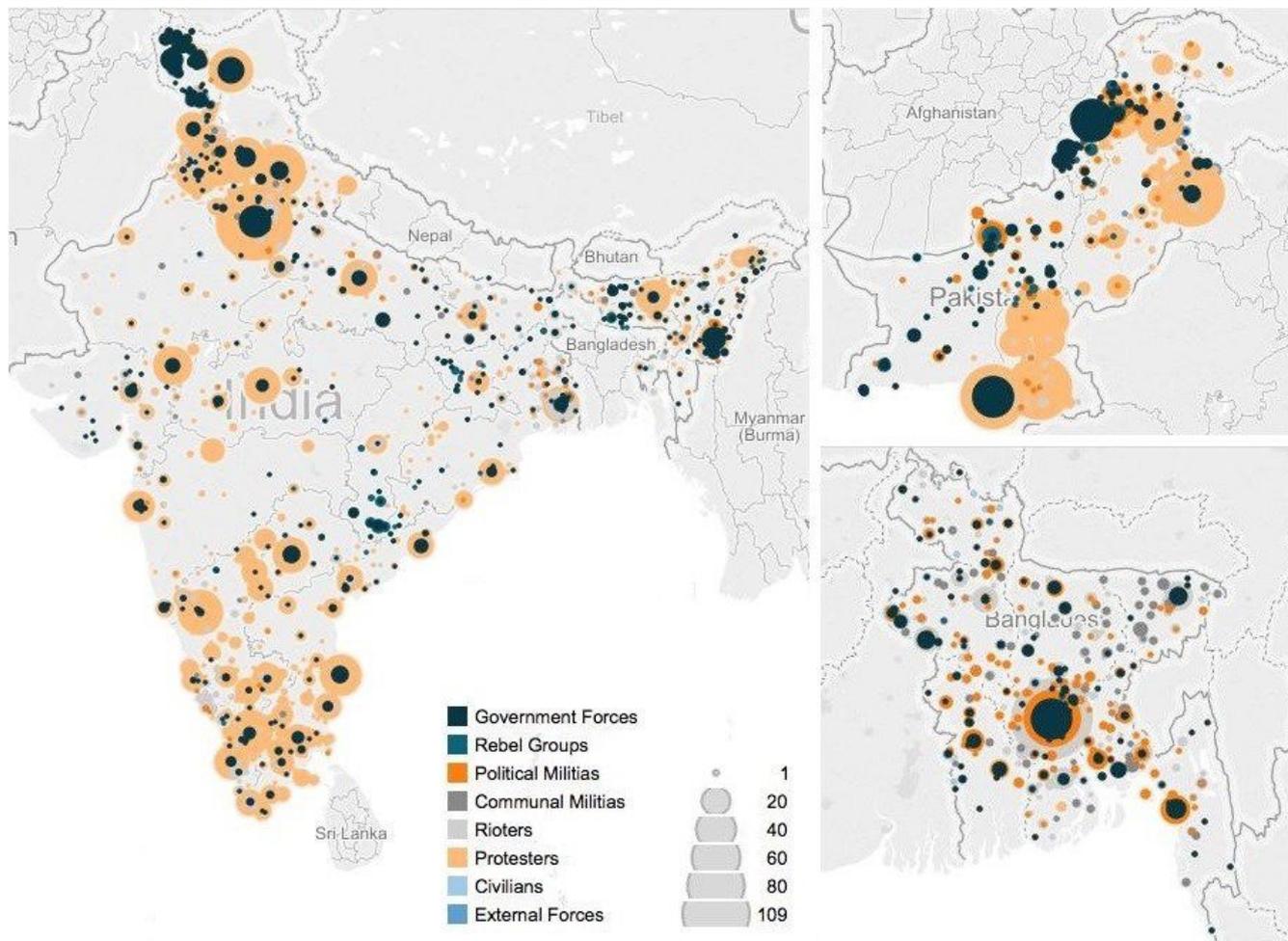


Figure 3: Political Violence by Actor Group in Most Politically Violent Countries, 2015

the West, Chattisgarh in the South, and several states in the Northeast: Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Jharkhand, Nagaland and West Bengal. While violence in Jammu and Kashmir dominated India’s violent interactions (160+) in 2015, state forces were active in 97% of all violent interactions in the disputed territory. Indian forces presence and response to violence committed by various rebel groups and militias violence in Jammu and Kashmir has been consistent. Chattisgarh revealed similar patterns, with Indian forces involved in 90% of interactions. In the South, however, the CPI (Maoist): Communist Party of India was an actor in nearly every violent event, quite the opposite from Jammu and Kashmir’s abundance of actors. In India’s Eastern states, the government was involved in only 65% of violence. Unlike India’s other pockets of conflict, government forces battled with local ethnic rebel groups and militias, fighting for state or national independence. Local groups like the National Democratic Front of Bodoland, the Garo National Liberation Army,

and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang engaged frequently with the Indian state, though rarely fought each other. Violence between communal militias was also common in the Eastern states, though rarely resulted in involvement from state forces. Across the border, Bangladesh’s large scale violence in the first few months of 2015 emanated from a Bangladesh National Party (BNP) imposed hartal, or strike, which targeted civilians and opposing political militias across the country (See ACLED’s Conflict Trends No.1). Fatalities peaked at 79 in February, though dropped off significantly following the conclusion of the hartal. Similarly, violence of all types in Bangladesh decreased drastically post-hartal. Throughout 2015, political violence resulted in less than a death per battle (.75), significantly fewer than its Indian and Pakistani neighbors. Groups that participated in the most violence included the BNP and Awami League militias, the two groups responsible for feuding during the hartal. While other rebel groups such as Jamaat-e-Islami

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and the Islamic State have committed acts of violence in 2015, the frequency and scale of their attacks is limited in scope. Large scale violence led by political parties is the biggest threat to peace in Bangladesh.

*Riots and Protests in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh*

Protests constitute the majority of ACLED events (59%), occurring consistently throughout the year and region. Riots occur at a lower rate in the region, constituting 17% of ACLED events. Nepal (1.34), Bangladesh (.37), India (.05) and Pakistan (.03) showed the highest records of riots per 100,000 population ([World Bank, 2016](#)) against significantly lower averages in Cambodia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Vietnam. As acts of spontaneous, civilian-involved instability, riots highlight societal and political tension points for average citizens in each country. They exact a significant human and economic toll: fatalities from riots in India (76), in Pakistan (40) and Bangladesh (48) underscore their destructive influences (see figure 4).

India recorded the most protests in the region (3,908); this comprised 76% of all events in India. India’s northern states, including Punjab, Jammu and Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh, and Delhi accounted for a majority of India’s protests. Tamil Nadu and Karnataka in the south also experienced widespread protests throughout the year. Consistent with the election cycle, Bihar’s state election in November slightly increased the frequency of protests and riots, as did the Delhi election in February. The increase in protests/riots was not significant enough to warrant an overall national increase, as election-related political activity remained overwhelmingly local. The largest and deadliest riots were motivated by issues of political rivalries and communal/religious identities. There had been speculation that the country could see more riots between religious groups since the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the Indian national elections in 2014 ([Foreign Policy, 2015](#)). Despite these concerns, the number of fatalities resulting from communally-motivated riots in 2015 remained small at 6. Several of this past

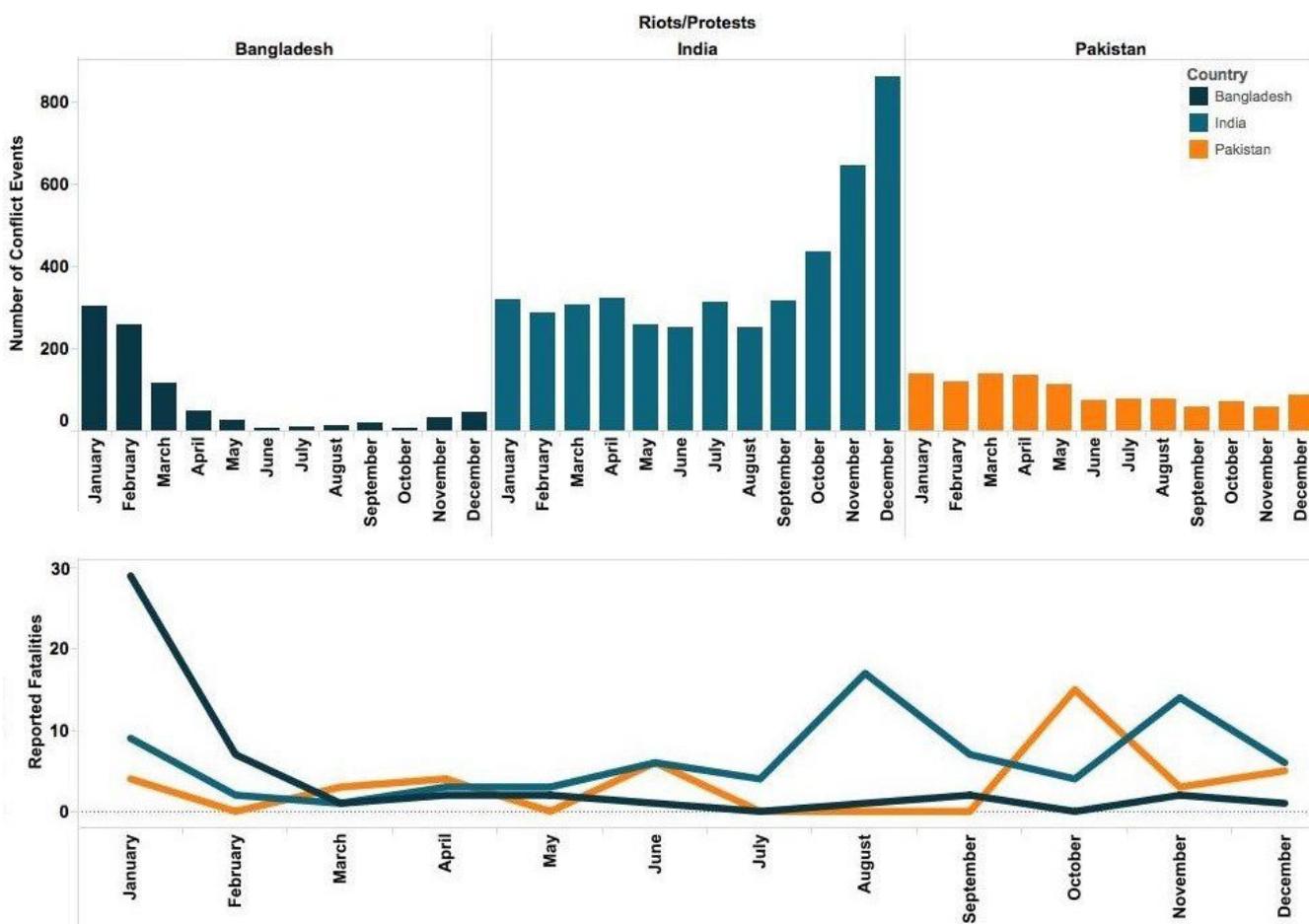


Figure 4: Protests and Riots by Month & Fatalities from Riots by Month, 2015

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year’s largest and most deadly riots were related to caste and reservations (a form of affirmative action). Specifically, the Patidar caste reservation agitation, led by Hardik Patel, accounted for 14 of the 42 riot events recorded in Gujarat and resulted in 9 deaths. Members of the Patidar community staged protests and rioted to demand Other Backward Class (OBC) status which would create quotas for their community in education and government jobs. 2016 saw a continuation of caste-related violence, as the Jat caste rioted throughout Haryana in February, killing 16 and causing water shortages in Delhi ([Times of India](#)).

In contrast, Bangladesh’s outbreak of riots and protests during the hartal (an effort to force reelection) significantly affected the national political landscape. The Bangladesh National Party (BNP) prompted the hartal as a protest against the ruling Awami League. January’s events marked the one-year anniversary of contested elections in Bangladesh, spurring riots to peak in January and February at 237 events (40%) and 170 events (29%) respectively. Instead of riots and protests remaining local issues, the hartal spread to every state throughout the country. ([ACLED May 2015 Trend Report](#)). Post-hartal, riots remained at relatively low levels throughout the year.

Finally, Pakistani protests fluctuated throughout the year, with protesters demonstrating consistently about issues such as state failure to provide public goods, increases in the prices of basic commodities (sugar, wheat), ineffective government policies surrounding education and minority rights as well as and local political issues. Geographically, Sindh’s protests more than doubled that of the province with next greatest number of protests, Punjab. Punjab, too, recorded high levels of protests throughout the year followed by Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Although riots occurred throughout the year, most riots in Pakistan happened in March and April. Political rivalries and religious tensions were also a significant feature of Pakistan’s riot landscape in 2015. 45% of riots in Pakistan this year

involved organized political groups, most frequently the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP), and their political rivals, the Pakistani Muslim League (PML). 22% of riots recorded in Pakistan in 2015 were tied to elections. Local elections in late October 2015 proved to be a flashpoint for the deadliest riots, particularly in Khairpur, where 11 people died in a riot-turned-gun battle between supporters of the PML-F and the PPP--the deadliest riot of the year. Clashes between the PML and the PPP proliferated in Sindh province, where the PPP--not Prime Minister Sharif’s PML party--controls the regional administration. This riot between rival supporters resulted in 11 deaths, prompting PPP officials to suspend the polls indefinitely. Election violence continued into November and December, with 12 more riots involving the PML-N, PML-F, and the PPP, 4 of which proved deadly, in Sindh and Punjab. Religious tensions in Pakistan fueled a small but significant number of riots in 2015. In March, a double suicide attack on two churches in Youhanabad (a Christian suburb of Lahore) resulted in 15 fatalities, sparking underlying religious tensions in that city and across the country. The rioting continued in Lahore for two days, and spilled over into nearby Kasur.

Trends across Southeast Asia

Though India, Pakistan and Bangladesh were the most politically violent states in ACLED-Asia, pockets of persistent violence can be found in Northeast Myanmar and Southern Thailand. Myanmar’s violent actors have been battling the state for decades, but violence decreased from the first to the last quarter of 2015. Myanmar’s patterns of violence are similar to Thailand’s constant spate of separatist violence in the far south. Thailand’s violent actors, however, have strategically remained nameless and random in attacking their targets, making government retaliation difficult. Violence in Thailand occurred almost exclusively in southern border regions, targeting military and police as well as civilians associated with the Thai government. Nepal’s violence ebbed throughout the year; it sparked and remained relatively high from August to December, as protesters demanded a new, more democratic constitution. The scale of protests coincided with Nepali demands for a revised constitution. Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos did not report significant numbers of political violence: ACLED-Asia recorded only a few dozen violent events, though several protests occurred throughout the year. Protests in these states were not correlated to election cycles but rather seemed to focus on issues impacting citizens’ quality of life such as pollution.

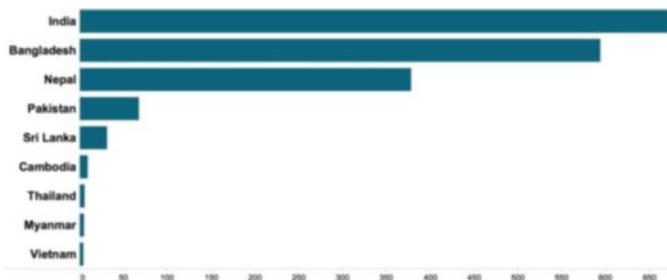


Figure 5: Riots by Country, 2015

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Violent Trends in Pakistan 2015

Pakistan remains one of the most active conflict environments in South Asia. Throughout 2015, Pakistan’s violence is concentrated into several high intensity geographic spaces; the most fatal, intense battles occurred primarily in the states of Balochistan and FATA (see Figure 7). Pakistani protests were heavily concentrated in Sindh, Punjab, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

FATA is Pakistan’s most violent space; 82 battles, airstrikes, and drone attacks occurred in January 2015 alone, marking the beginning of the year as Pakistan’s most violent month as well as the most fatal, with 440 reported deaths. The most active agents in FATA included the Pakistani Armed Forces, Unidentified Armed Groups (UAGs), and Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP). The Pakistani Armed Forces were involved in 75% of all violent activity that occurred in 2015, with a majority in FATA. TTP presence in FATA, however, has long defined the conflict space, with the U.S. and Pakistani militaries recently targeting rebel groups and militias operating the region to clamp down on terrorist threats. Other notable groups in FATA include Lashkar-e-Islam and the Hafiz Gul Bahadur Group. Combined with TTP and the Pakistani military, these groups accounted for 1,660 fatalities in 2015 or approximately 50% of fatalities related to political violence in 2015. Highly organized and effective, these four fatal organizations contribute significantly to FATA’s unstable political climate.

In Balochistan, the Pakistani military was present for more than half of the violent interactions. State forces engaged largely with UAGs or Baloch separatists, a nebulous for-

mation of actors opposed to external involvement in Baloch affairs, fighting for an independent Balochistan. Attacks including Baloch separatists tended to involve large-scale operations, while UAGs tended to appear in smaller, individual, and less organized attacks. The consistent frequency of violence by unidentified actors in Balochistan, however, suggests a systemic lack of security in the region. The Baloch separatist movement has simmered in Pakistan for decades, but has drawn international attention this year, since the April 2015 agreement between Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Chinese President Xi Jinping for a \$46 billion infrastructure aid package. The package’s centerpiece is a China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which cuts through Balochistan province. When Sharif visited the United States in October 2015, Baloch activists publicly protested the Prime Minister’s public speech.

The busiest months for protests in Pakistan were January and March (see Figure 8). January’s high protest numbers reflected the coordination of a wide coalition of civil society groups protesting the cartoons of the prophet Muhammad published in *Charlie Hebdo*. Jamaat-e-Islami, Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam, and Sunni Tehreek, and, significantly, Tehrik-e-Jafaria, a Shia activist group, organized country-wide protests that continued through the entire month of January.

Geographically, the Sindh and Punjab accounted for 71% of all Pakistan’s protests in 2015, with 46% of protests occurring in Sindh and 25% in Punjab. By December, Sindh saw a 48% decline in number of protests from its most active month, April. Members of the All-Pakistan WAPDA

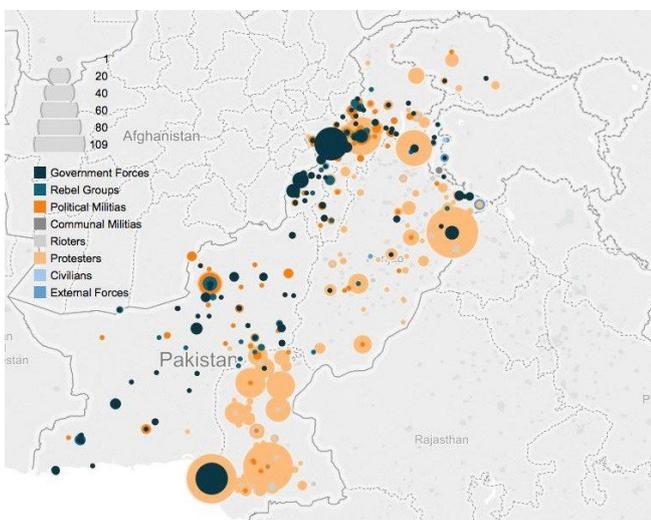


Figure 5: Political Violence by Actor Group

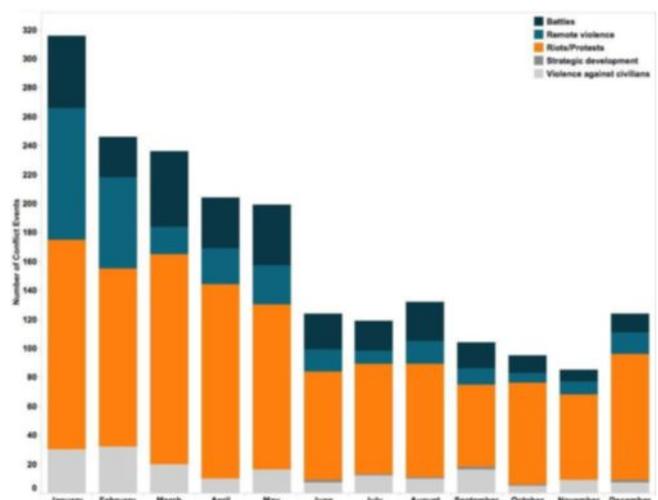


Figure 6: Political Violence and Protests in Pakistan

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Hydro Electrical Union protested with the greatest frequency and consistency of all groups allied with protesters, organizing more than 70 protests in 2015. In March and October, union members rallied in cities across Punjab and Sindh against a move by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s government to privatize the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA). As of December 2015, WAPDA remains a state-run institution, but given the Pa-

kistani Muslim League’s previous push for widespread privatization in Pakistan in the first decade of the 21st century, it seems likely they will continue their efforts. Jeay Sindh Qaumi Movement (JSQM) and the All Pakistan Clerics’ Association (APCA) followed WAPDA as the most frequent protesters in Pakistan, though a majority of the protests took place in Sindh and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Examining Claims of Rising Intolerance in India

Over the last three months, demonstrations and violent clashes against Muslims and Hindu extremists have sparked public outcries against the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government for deepening fissures between the two communities. Although communal tensions between Muslims and Hindus in India is far from unexamined (see [ACLED’s Conflict Trends Report No. 3](#) for an analysis of rising Hindu fundamentalism), remonstrations by prominent public figures against the Modi-led government has underscored a growing sentiment that BJP and BJP-allies have fostered an atmosphere of intolerance towards Muslims ([The Guardian, 2015](#)). ACLED’s dataset confirms a rise in reports of violence and political activity spurred by growing dissatisfaction in the government, particularly around religiously fueled issues.

ties have challenged the beef consumption bans through lawsuits ([Indian Express, 2015](#)) and by holding beef-eating festivals throughout India ([DNA, 2015](#)).

These beef-related attacks are associated with Sangh Parivar, an outfit of individual right-wing Hindu organizations. They share an adherence to Hindutva, a Hindu-nationalist ideology that seeks to establish the hegemony of Hindus. As Figure 9 indicates, these groups primarily include--in addition to the BJP--Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Shiv Sena, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (the student wing of RSS), and Bajrang Dal. Compared to the beginning of 2015, these groups’ participation in demonstrations and clashes increased by 30%. Of the total events in which a Sangh Parivar organization was involved, 40% occurred in the last three

Several notable incidents illustrate the severity of the recent spate of violent clashes. In September, a mob in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh killed a Muslim man following unfounded rumors announced at a Hindu temple that his family was consuming beef ([Time, 2015](#)). The attack begot further violence, sparking ten additional riots and protests in surrounding communities. Similarly, in October a major protest by right-wing Hindu nationalists against a pro-beef rally resulted in the death of a young teenager in Kashmir ([India Today, 2015](#)). In Karnataka, members affiliated with the Popular Front of India, a banned Islamic group allegedly connected to terrorist attacks, murdered a Hindu who investigated illegal slaughterhouses ([New Indian Express, 2015](#)). In December, groups intercepted trucks suspected of transporting cattle and attacked the drivers near Delhi ([The Hindu, 2015](#)).

Consuming or slaughtering beef has been the common denominator in many of these clashes. Serving cow, a sacred animal for Hindus, is considered blasphemous. ACLED data illustrates that 80% of beef related protests have occurred since the September incident in Dadri. Part of the increase can be attributed to recent efforts by BJP leaders to curb the dietary habits of certain groups ([Hindustan Times, 2015](#)). Meanwhile, BJP opposition par-

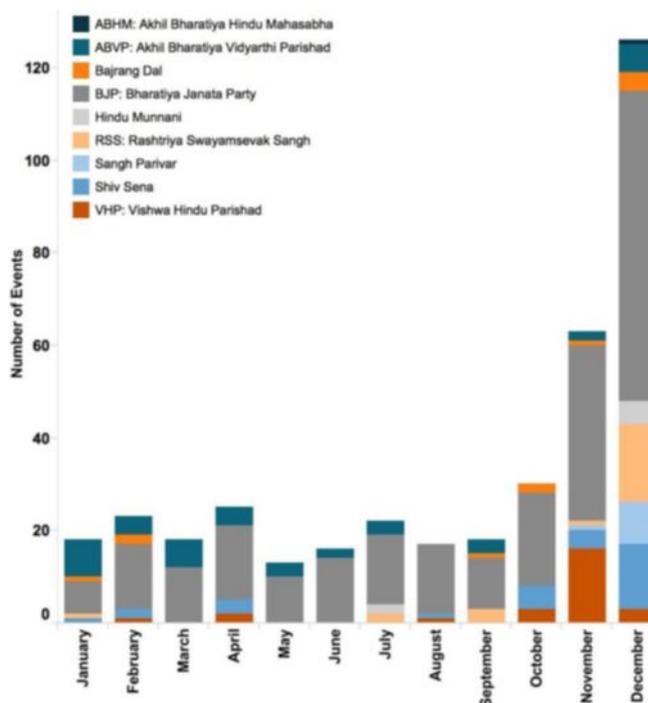


Figure 7: Protests in India by Political Parties, 2015

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months of 2015.

Critics assail BJP officials for condoning or exacerbating the violence. During the previous electoral campaign, then-candidate Modi garnered support by stoking fears of a “Pink Revolution”—i.e. an increase in cow slaughter ([The Hindu, 2014](#)). This might explain his notable silence in condemning the Dadri murder ([Indian Express, 2015](#)). But other BJP officials have also provoked tensions with vitriolic remarks. In December, the Chief Minister of Uttarakhand, a BJP official, threatened: “We warn them against a Dadri-like incident in Telangana. We can both give our lives and take life for the sake of protecting the cow.” ([DNA, 2015](#)) The hostility has affected legislative decorum as well. In November, a BJP leader threatened the Chief Minister of Karnataka, stating: “Let him eat beef...If he does so, he will be beheaded. We won’t think twice about that.” ([Deccan Herald, 2015](#)) And in October, BJP Legislative Assembly Members beat a fellow Muslim Legislator in Kashmir for serving beef at a private dinner

party ([BBC, 2015](#)).

Yet despite these offenses, BJP officials disavow promoting intolerance ([Indian Express, 2015](#)). Moreover, they categorically deny that intolerance is even increasing, pointing to the history of religious violence that existed prior to the party’s ascent. However, as the ACLED dataset indicates, and as anecdotal news reports suggest, Hindu extremists are increasingly attacking Indian Muslims over perceived transgressions.

Stemming the recent tide of religious clashes will prove difficult for a political party that commonly promotes a sectarian ideology for political expediency. As Stanford historian Audrey Truschke stated, since the end of colonialism “the modern Hindu right has found tremendous political value in continuing to proclaim and create endemic Hindu-Muslim conflict” ([Stanford, 2015](#)). Although the recent spate of violence is a multifaceted issue, divisive commentary and restrictive dietary laws are certainly not likely to abate the recent trend.

Peace in Myanmar?

Myanmar recorded 254 battles in 2015, compared to Pakistan’s 274. Geographically, Myanmar’s battles are concentrated largely in two of its northern states: Shan and Kachin (see Figure 8). This area of Myanmar recorded nearly as many battles as all of Pakistan.

Since Myanmar’s coup d’etat in 1962, which transitioned the country to strict authoritarian military rule, the government has continued to stifle independence movements from the mountainous areas of Shan and Kachin. For decades, local ethnic groups in these two states have taken up arms against the central government in an attempt to achieve independence. Though government and rebel leaders have signed several ceasefire agreements over the years, constant violence between the government and ethnic rebel groups has persisted and no comprehensive, lasting peace has held.

In October 2015, the government and eight rebel groups (The All Burma Students’ Democratic Front (ABSDF), Arakan Liberation Party, Chin National Front, Democratic Karen Benevolent Army, Karen National Liberation Army-Peace Council, Karen National Union, Pa-O National Liberation Organization and Shan State Army-South) signed a ceasefire agreement. The government agreed to remove the organizations from its list of terrorist groups and extend development assistance to the regions they governed. Several of the largest, most powerful groups, however, refused to sign the final document, citing ongoing

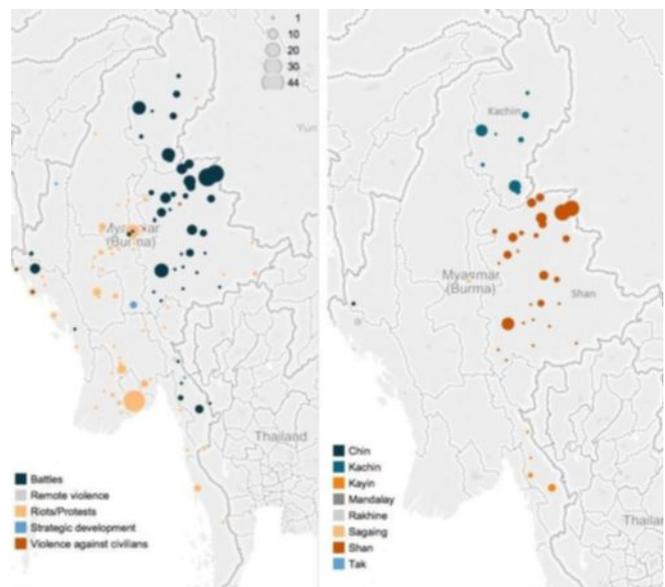


Figure 10: Political Violence and Battles in Myanmar

military attacks that were displacing civilian populations. Groups that refused to sign included the United Wa State Army, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and Shan State Army-North (SSA-N). Other groups, such as the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) and the Ta’ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), were not included in the talks due to the government’s refusal to recognize their legitimacy ([Radio Free Asia, 2015](#)). Leaders

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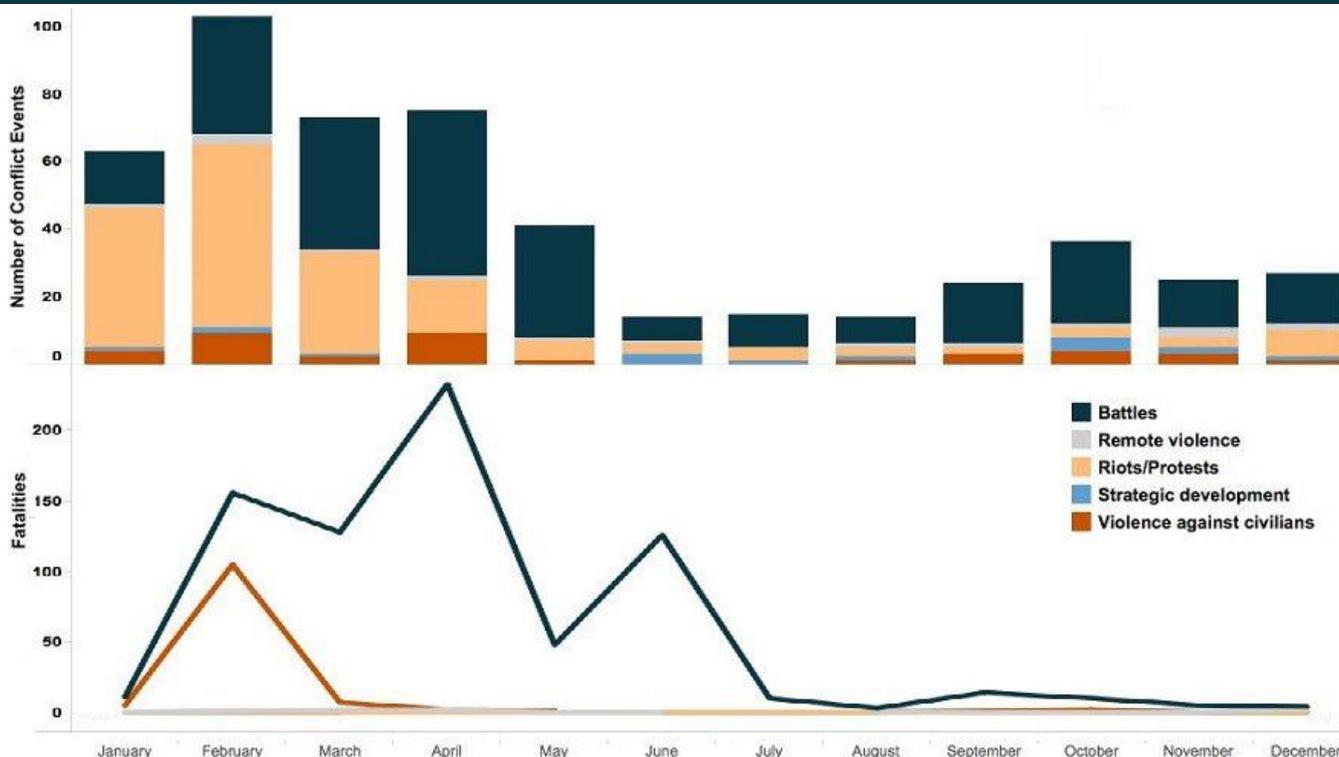


Figure 11: Conflict Types and Fatalities in Myanmar by Month, 2015

from the TNLA expressed doubts the ceasefire would hold, citing past failures, ongoing military operations endangering civilians, and the exclusion of important rebel groups ([Radio Free Asia, 2015](#)). Since October 2015, Myanmar’s military leadership has targeted rebel groups in the North and East of the country, displacing thousands of civilians.

Overall, violence occurring in Myanmar’s pockets of conflict declined in 2015 compared to previous years. The most active rebel groups that have refused to sign a ceasefire agreement with the government include the MNDAA, KIA, TNLA, and the Arakan Army (AA). Together, these groups accounted for 80% of all battles in Myanmar. MNDAA remained the only group that substantially increased their military offensive against Myanmar in 2015, engaging in at least 15 clashes in 2014 while ACLED recorded 69 clashes in 2015, a 360% increase ([Myanmar Peace Monitor, 2015](#)). Though no numbers were available for previous years, ACLED recorded 12 battles involving the Arakan Army in 2015. The TNLA clashed at least 80 times in 2012, 42 times in 2013, and 113 in 2014 ([Myanmar Peace Monitor, 2015](#)). ACLED recorded TNLA engaging in 70 battles, 64 of which involved Myanmar’s armed forces, decreasing significantly from the previous year. The remaining 6 battles included clashes with rival

political militias and a communal militia. Finally, the KIA’s violent encounters decreased markedly from more than 2,400 in 2012, to less than 1500 encounters in 2013, to only 73 reported clashes in 2014. ACLED recorded 66 battles involving the KIA in 2015. Despite KIA, TNLA and AA’s refusals to sign the most recent ceasefire agreement, the number of violent interactions against the government committed by these groups during 2015 decreased significantly.

Myanmar’s latest attempt at reaching a peace agreement was largely regarded as a political maneuver designed to sway election results in November 2015. Leader of Myanmar’s National League for Democracy Party, Aung San Suu Kyi was held under house arrest by the current regime for 15 years. However, Suu Kyi recently expressed support for the ceasefire, surprising many and spurring additional rebel groups to consider the proposition ([Reuters, 2016](#)). Suu Kyi’s historic opposition to the regime paired with her recent support for the ceasefire has spurred serious consideration from major opposition groups and greater hope for a lasting, more inclusive peace between the government and Myanmar’s major rebel groups. After decades of broken peace accords and persistent conflict between Naypyidaw’s leadership and ethnic rebel groups, a lasting peace accord would significantly reshape domestic

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security, governance capabilities, and potentially resource distribution to the ethnic majority regions in Myanmar. It is unlikely, however, that a lasting peace will come about

with the continued exclusion of several prominent rebel groups that have vowed to continue their military campaigns against the government.

Special Focus Topic: Thailand’s Persistent Political Tumult 2010-2015

In 2004, Thailand’s Pattani region experienced a noticeable spike in violence, perpetrated by Muslim separatist groups seeking autonomy. Over the past 11 years, this southern border region—encompassing the provinces of Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani— has been engulfed in a lingering unrest. Conflict analysts at Deep South Watch have defined the situation as one of “protracted violence” as it has occurred every day in every month of every year since 2004 (Deep South Watch, 2011). ACLED’s data confirms the sporadic violence is chronic; in the past five years, ACLED has recorded 1,296 incidents related to Southern unrest, which include battles between military/police forces and Muslim separatist groups, bombings in cities, villages, and rural roadsides, shootings targeting civilians, and other attacks. From 2010 to 2015, the Patani region averaged 21.6 insurgency-related incidents per month, with some months experiencing much higher numbers while others, much lower. Although no discernable pattern exists in the frequency of attacks per month, it is undoubtedly pervasive. The variation in the frequency of violence has only further defines the nature of the conflict as one of volatility and uncertainty.

*The Emergence of Thailand’s Insurgency*

Thailand’s insurgency has its roots in an unsuccessful assimilation process of the late 19th and early 20th centuries when the ruling elite in Bangkok attempted to centralize the nation. Assimilation was least successful in the south where Malay Muslims remained attached to distinct identities and where the centralized conditions of Thailand’s political structure—in which governors are appointed and local elected officials hold little power—further discontents within resident ethnic and religious minority groups (The Asia Foundation, 2013) who aren’t represented by central government-appointed officials. The main separatist movements in the south include organizations and cells made up of Malay Muslims, who attack in strong opposition to the Bangkok government and those who enforce the law: the Thai military, police and paramilitary patrols. These movements include the Pattani United Liberation Organization (PULO) and the National Revolutionary Front (BRN), but also other smaller cells. According to The Asia Foundation, contestation over governance remains one of the primary drivers of conflict in this region of the world (2013), and the demands of

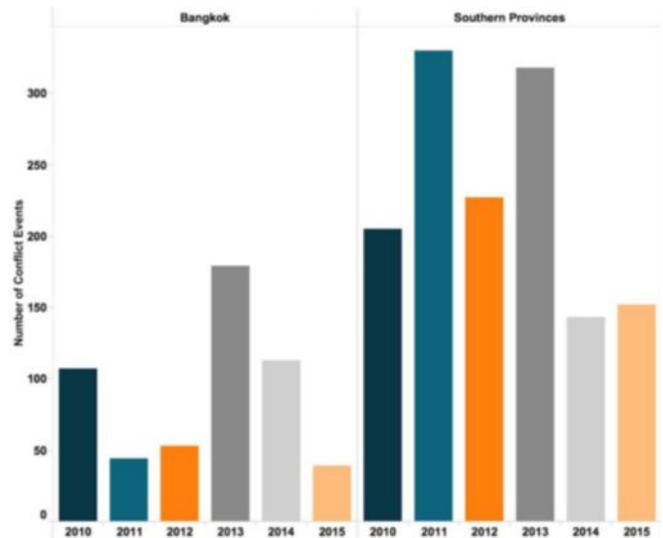


Figure 10: Conflict Events in Thailand by Region and Year

conflict actors have ranged from complete independence from Thailand, to greater local autonomy, to the removal of security forces.

*Comparing Violence in Bangkok and the South*

When compared alongside concurrent political and violent incidents in Thailand’s capital, Bangkok, ACLED’s data illuminates a pattern that could link the southern Muslim insurgency to the country’s political instability. Since 2006, Thailand has experienced frequent political turmoil, marked by a spate of mass protests, government takeovers and violent attacks in Bangkok between demonstrators, security forces and oftentimes bystanders. During these times when Bangkok erupted in political conflict (most notably in early 2010 and late 2012), violence in the south tended to diminish.

Coup d’etats are nothing new for Thailand. Since Thailand became a constitutional monarchy in 1932, the nation has had 24 military coups, in addition to 18 constitutions and 28 Prime Ministers (International Business Times, 2014). The origin of Thailand’s recent unrest is traced back to 2006 when a bloodless coup forced Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra from power. In late 2008, the succession of Abhisit Vejjajiva prompted a spate of rallies in support of Shinawatra. Between March and May 2010, tens

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of thousands of United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (UDD) supporters, dressed in emblematic red shirts, demanded the resignation of Vejjajiva. 91 people died in the violent clashes that ensued.

During the outbreak of political violence in Bangkok in 2010, there was a perceptible drop in violence in the south related to the Muslim insurgency. In March 2010, the numbers of insurgency-related attacks begin to drop to 24 that month. In April, there were 16 incidents, while May, only three—a significant decrease from the average of 25. Once the circumstances in Bangkok began to calm that June, the violence in the south returned to averaging about 25 incidents per month with no dramatic outliers (besides one uptick in October 2011) until 2012.

In May 2012, Bangkok began to stir again as thousands of “red shirts” rallied to commemorate the 2010 protests. Their opposition, the People’s Alliance for Democracy (PAD), known for donning yellow shirts in support of the monarchy and the military, also began to protest—calling attention to a growing rift between the people, the government, and then Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra. There was widespread discontent with the strict lese-majeste law that protects Bangkok’s ruling elite among the red shirts. The yellow shirts were staunchly against a planned national reconciliation bill, as they believed the bill would allow Thaksin Shinawatra back into the country from a four-year self-imposed exile. In June, yellow-shirted PAD members blockaded parliament and

began to intensify their protests in opposition to government policies and their red shirt rivals (BBC, 2014). While resistance against the Prime Minister and her policies intensified throughout the fall months in Bangkok, Thailand’s south again grew relatively calmer—from May to December 2012, Muslim insurgent violence averaged less than 20 incidents per month, down from 25.

The frequency of Muslim insurgent activity would dip once again during 2014, coinciding with heightened protests against the Yingluck administration. March recorded only 11 incidents, followed by 9, 15 and 14 in April, May and June respectively. From September 2014 into 2015, the average of Muslim insurgent attacks remained less than 11 per month, following a May 2014 coup when the Thai Army seized power from Shinawatra.

When viewed holistically over the past six years and compared alongside instability in Bangkok, the trend in the rise and fall of Southern Muslim insurgency reflects that the conflict is political, not solely religious, and is tied up within the context of Thailand’s larger political landscape. For years, however, the Thai government has struggled to explain the political element to the insurgency, and often blames the situation only on personal/ religious conflicts or criminal activity (Tony Blair Faith Foundation, 2014). This is because, unlike groups operating in other areas of the world, the Muslim separatist groups in Thailand are not vocal about their motives or practices; they rarely, if ever, claim responsibility for their attacks. They have no stated political allegiances. One possible explanation for this trend could be the fluctuation in media coverage during political turmoil in Bangkok. During these periods of crisis, the media could be shifting its attention to the capitol and reporting less vigilantly on events occurring in the south—skewing the numbers of attacks actually taking place.

Although the recent numbers indicate a potential decrease in the frequency of insurgent attacks in the south, the 11-year history of the situation serves as a warning that this may only be a trough in the wave that could easily crest again during political shifts in Bangkok. The political significance of Thailand’s southern unrest and its correlation to changes in broader state policy are worthy of analysis (Deep South Watch, 2011). The enduring restlessness of Thailand’s politics as well as the inability of those in power to produce and/or show a committed interest in a cohesive plan of action in fighting the southern insurgency could also contribute to the fluctuations in the region’s violence. According to Human Rights Watch, the Thai government has done little to establish a credible and effective mechanism to investigate the problems that

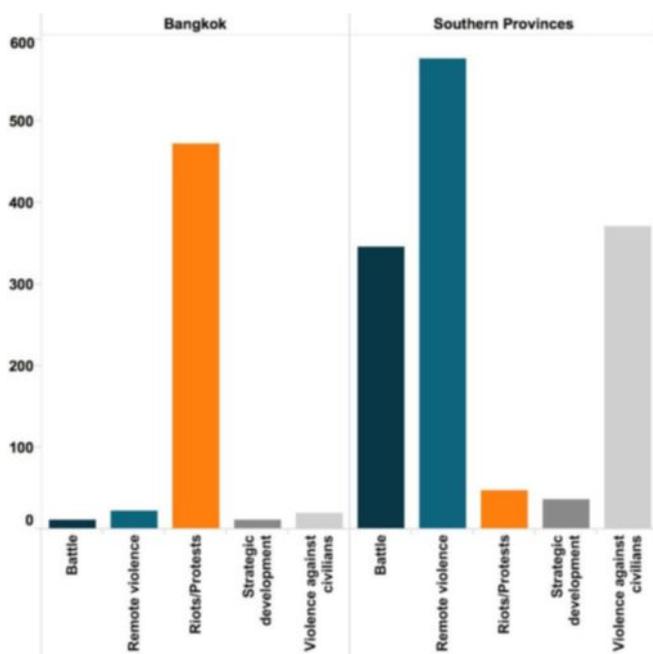


Figure 13: Conflict Types in Thailand by Region

CONFLICT TRENDS (NO. 4)

REAL-TIME ANALYSIS OF ASIAN POLITICAL VIOLENCE, FEBRUARY 2016

have generated discord among the southern population (2015), such as corruption and abuse against Malay Muslims. The problem of insurgency has remained of little concern to Bangkok because it has not significantly impacted the government’s power and it has not been widely published in foreign media. The conflict remains largely free from international censure. Over the years, peace talks between the Thai government and separatist groups have failed repeatedly due to lingering divides between insurgent factions as well as Bangkok’s lack of commitment. But in August 2015, the military-run Thai government along with the Malaysian government entered into its third round of closed-door peace talks with separatist groups in Kuala Lumpur. These 2015 talks were made possible by more systematic efforts by Thailand’s leaders and the formation of Mara Patani—an umbrella organization for several of Thailand’s separatist groups: Barisan Revolusi Nasional (BRN), Gerakan Mujahideen Islam Patani (GIMP), Barisan Islam Pembebasan Patani, and three factions of Patani Liberation Organisation (PLO) (Channel NewsAsia, 2015). Mara Patani’s goal remains sovereignty and the right of self-determination, despite Thailand’s previous refusal to grant this regional autonomy. Although nothing concrete emerged from the closed-door talks, public talks will continue in 2016, after Mara Patani has had time to look over a three-point proposal issued by the Thai government in November (Bangkok Post, 2015).

Changes in the Characteristics of Southern Violence:

*Decrease in Civilian Deaths*

Most casualties resulting from the insurgency have been civilians (Human Rights Watch, 2015). While civilian deaths attributed to attacks by Southern Muslim Separatists are still frequent in Thailand, ACLED data concludes that incidents of violence against civilians has decreased notably since 2013. From 2010-2013, events classified as violence against civilians ranged from around 70 to 100 annually, while only 28 events were reported in 2014 and 25 in 2015. In the past two years, civilian deaths have been occurring more frequently as collateral damage from attacks aimed at military, police and local leaders, and less because the civilians were the outright targets themselves.

This decrease in attacks targeting civilians could indicate a change in the insurgent groups’ tactics to minimize loss of life while still drawing attention to themselves and exhibiting their military prowess. This is firmly in line with the increased use of roadside bombs in rural areas rather than urban spaces where casualty rates would be much

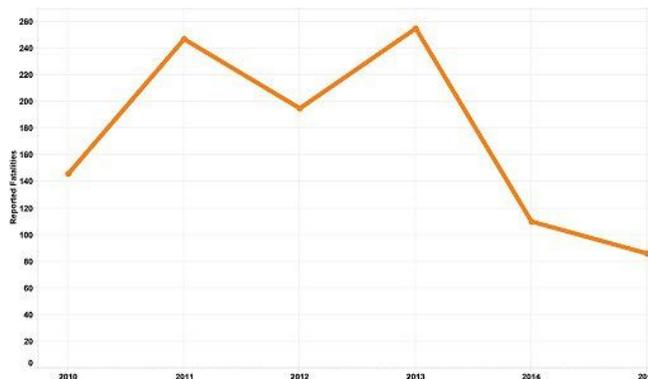


Figure 14: Reported Fatalities in Thailand 2010-2015

higher. Additionally, in 2015 there were 12 attacks on local infrastructure such as power poles and electronic transformers, in some cases causing mass blackouts (Bangkok Post, 2015). The objective of these attacks is also not to inflict mass casualties, but rather to create an inconvenient spectacle and show a willingness to innovate with their attacks and instigate chaos.

*Buddhists and Teachers as Targets*

Southern Muslim Separatists in Thailand remain deliberate and discriminate in their choice of targets, selecting targets that they perceive as symbols of their political struggle. Most frequently, the insurgents choose victims that are icons of the Thai state such as local government officials and village headmen, or kanman. Malay Muslim insurgent groups operating in Thailand’s south also perceive civilians affiliated with the educational system as representatives of state oppression due to the schools’ direct ties to the national government (Human Rights Watch, 2010) and frequently launch attacks near schools and on students and teachers.

As a result of this trend, the Thai government ordered government security forces to be stationed at many schools to provide protection (Human Rights Watch, 2010). These police and military officials in turn have become targets in their own right and attacks against these patrols have escalated over the past five years. In 2015, ACLED recorded 14 attacks on school-related targets, slightly higher than the average of 10 per year since 2010. This tactic has been used to spread terror among students and teachers and is highly disruptive to the quality of education in the southern provinces, as is the presence of armed government forces on school properties.

Buddhists are also repeated targets, as separatists see Buddhists’ presence in the southern provinces as a mark of the infiltration of Buddhist Thai culture. Separatists



## CONFLICT TRENDS (NO. 4)

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have declared that Buddhists should not live in these provinces ([Human Rights Watch](#), 2007), and continue to target Buddhist civilians explicitly on the basis of their ethnicity. There have been on average five attacks on Buddhist targets in Pattani, Yala, and Narathiwat each year since 2010. During the Songkran holiday in April 2015, there was a series of attacks against Buddhist civilians following intelligence reports that the separatists would launch attacks on Buddhists during the holiday ([Bangkok Post](#), 2015). Eight deaths were reported in one incident during the holiday.

#### *Scant Coverage of the Southern Conflict*

Over the past five years, there has also been a grave under-reporting of this still active insurgency. According to [Peace Direct](#), “the conflict in Thailand’s southern border provinces is one of the world’s least known” (2015), based on a lack of consistent and thorough reporting both within domestic and foreign media. Thailand’s faltering political system, however, has captured the media’s attention, thanks to years of military and parliamentary interventions, ever-emerging corruption and the deepening of political divides. While Bangkok’s instability is certainly newsworthy, the statistics over this six year period point to a situation that continues to smolder in the south. Analysts at the [International Business Times](#) agree that while Thai media focuses on the problems in Bangkok and global media cover crises elsewhere in the world, “a silent war continues to rage in the remote southern regions of Thailand” (2014).

From 2010 to 2015, there were a total of 502 violent events and 26 fatalities reported in Bangkok stemming from political tensions. During the same five years, the southern border provinces of Yala, Pattani, Songkhla and Narathiwat, experienced 466 instances of remote violence alone, in addition to 277 incidents of violence against civilians, 272 battles between government forces and militant groups, and 29 instances of non-violent but chaos-inducing attacks. This totals 1044 violent events with 812 fatalities. These numbers suggests a more active

insurgency. 1044 events were reported, though consistent concerns of poor media coverage in the south reveal perhaps an even more significant problem. Of the nine countries ACLED covers in the Asian sub-continent, Thailand’s level of political violence ranks fourth behind India, Pakistan and Bangladesh—countries with populations that more than double that of Thailand. [The Global Terrorism Index 2015](#), released by Sydney-based Institute for Economics and Peace, ranked Thailand as tenth after analyzing patterns in terrorism and measuring its impact in over 162 countries (2015). Thailand’s ranking remains unchanged from 2014, a year in which it saw a 16 percent increase from 2013, signaling a need for not only more international coverage and awareness of Thailand’s insurgency, but also a serious commitment from the Thai government to ending it.

Since Thailand’s military junta took power, it has vowed to end the insurgency and has taken steps to boost coordination between security forces, establish a network of checkpoints, and initiate a drive to collect fingerprints and DNA in hopes of making insurgent operation more difficult. But analysts agree that any success will need to involve a dedicated and consistent commitment from the government that involves addressing local grievances to avoid further alienation and increase trust in the region. The problem has been the inability to achieve lasting trust between the Thai government and insurgent groups over time—which can be attributed to frequent political shifts and changes of power in Bangkok.

Though Thailand’s Southern Muslim Insurgency remains confined to its southernmost provinces, the atmosphere of chaos paired with the inability (or lack of desire) of the Thai government to contain the violence suggests other violent actors could take advantage of the lack of government control and base their operations out of the south. While currently there are few fears about external extremist groups operating out of Thailand, the southern region should be carefully watched to avoid creating an environment fertile for the growth of foreign extremist groups.

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#### Sources

*Conflict Trends* reports are compiled from ACLED data and draw on news sources, civil society reports, and academic and policy analyses. Details of sources and coding processes are available online on the [ACLED website](#).