

Panel 17: Violence, Public Authority and the Bargaining State in South Asia

Panel organisers: Bert Suykens & Nel Vandekerckhove

In this panel we seek to counter the popular argument that the presence of armed, terrorist or criminal groups automatically leads to state decay. Although the emergence of armed groups can pose a substantial security threat to the state, it does not always have to be the case. As this panel will demonstrate, these 'criminal' or 'terrorist' agents of power can function as a tool for the state to bargain its way back into society. Especially in a context in which the formal state has been struggling to control internal dynamics in society, seeking (temporary) alliances with local 'criminal' or 'terrorist' agents of power can help to increase the governability of particular regions. Although such bargained type of statehood might be miles away from the Weberian idea of state, a better understanding of such everyday politics is requisite to understand how public authority is being constructed, affirmed and consolidated in contexts where the state has not been able to monopolize public power. For this panel, we invite papers that specifically focus on these links between formal stakeholders and non-state 'criminal' or 'terrorist' agents, and how such interplay affect our understanding of the everyday state and public authority within South Asia. We would like to encourage papers based upon extensive ethnographic fieldwork.

Abstracts:

Beyond the Twilight: Tangled Public Authority, Threat of Violence and Dynamics of Natural Wealth Extraction in India

Nel Vandekerckhove, ASSR, University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands)

Bert Suykens, Conflict Research Group, University of Ghent (Belgium)

Although the Indian state is popularly perceived as stable and solid, it has to tolerate several long-standing rebellions on its territory. Many of these armed groups have organised themselves as an alternative source of power and public authority to the Indian state. Although these different governance activities are often seen as diametrically opposed to the Indian state, in this article we want to demonstrate that this is not automatically the case. By critically applying theoretical frameworks that have been most commonly used in the African contexts of fragile states, we will show that also in relatively stable states like India, a constant bargaining process takes place at ground level in which local actors negotiate their access to critical resources with both state and insurgents modes of authority. Employing field work data from the beedi trade in Andhra Pradesh and the ginger trade in Assam, we will demonstrate that despite the long-standing conflict in these so-called zones of durable disorder, several potentialities for cooperation between state and rebel forms of authority continue to exist.

Why are the Longest Conflicts Low Levels of Violence? A Sub National Analysis of the Maoist Insurgency in India

Shivaji Mukherjee, Program on order, conflict and violence, Yale University (US)

What explains the nature of long-term low-intensity conflicts? I theorize that state side motivations play a significant role in explaining why these conflicts are low scale and intractable, and need to be studied along with rebel side motivations. I would like to challenge the assumption in certain rational choice models of civil war that the 'state' always wants to militarily defeat the 'rebels' when it has the capacity to do so. Instead I want to demonstrate that there are certain circumstances in which the 'state' derives higher utility from containing an insurgency or living with an insurgency, rather than trying to destroy it militarily. A detailed understanding of the varying and conflicting motivations of the 'state' would help us answer the puzzle of why sometimes certain states do not crush an insurgency even when they have the capacity to do so, and rather allow it to continue. It would also be incorrect to assume that the 'rebels' are interested in a military victory as their only goal. Over the course of a conflict which lasts for a long time, multiple motivations develop for the different actors within the rebel side—leaders, cadres, sympathizers, collaborators. The rebels may also get higher levels of utility from continuation of the conflict than from winning the war, as long as certain conditions are fulfilled. My project uses case study of the Maoist insurgency in India, which has been ongoing in several states since late 1960s to try and understand why is it that the Indian state is willing to tolerate such a conflict. Data collected during field work on the Maoist movement in the state of Chhattisgarh, suggests that low state police capacity, low threat perception from rebels, centre-state relations, and attention issues facing politicians in a state with multiple internal tensions are some of the factors which explain why state elites prefer a policy of containment towards rebels. Covert state-insurgent linkages become common. The Maoist rebels keep using iterated, low level and selective violence and do not escalate beyond a certain level. This produces a peculiar situation where there is coordination around a certain band width of violence between the state and the rebels.

Landlordism, 'Criminal' Violence and Formal Authority in Nepal's Eastern Terai

Fraser J. Sugden, School of GeoSciences, University of Edinburgh (UK)
Jacob Rinck, Kathmandu (Nepal)

Based on ethnographic evidence this article argues that formal and informal political authority in Nepal's eastern Terai are mutually constitutive and that the current 'lack of law and order' does not represent a post-conflict phenomenon but a longstanding feature in the reproduction of political and class power. The control over access to land, mediated by patronage relations between landlords and tenants, still constitutes the basis not only for the reproduction of class-relations but political authority as well. Importantly, however, political authority is also based on the capacity for violence of local elites and their resulting ability to exert informal regulatory authority, negotiate state-regulation and access state-resources. Examining violent competition for public contracts, this paper argues that local politicians depend on the informal modes of appropriation enabled by local strongmen as well as on their control of vote-banks. The negotiation of formal authority, as well as violent competition between different caste-based patronage-networks, it will further be argued, also form the background against which the involvement of middle-caste landlords in Terai armed groups has to be interpreted.

Violence, livelihoods insecurity and functioning of the state: Experiences of a decade of armed conflict in Nepal

Bishnu Raj Upreti, South Asia Regional Coordinator of NCCR North-South, Kathmandu (Nepal)

Violence and livelihood insecurity has direct relations in everyday life in highly politicized settings of armed conflict and civil unrest. Similarly, root cause of armed rebellion and associated violence relates with the functioning of the state: how it works, how is its relations with society, how state power is exercised and who benefits from the state power and resources? More importantly, what makes local people of rural areas alienated from the state and supporting the violence and armed rebellion against the state? This paper examines these issues/questions with the special focus on the differentiated impacts of different forms of violence, coercion and control on rural livelihoods in rural Nepal vis-à-vis state response. This paper retrospectively analyses local livelihood strategies of rural people during the time of armed conflict, state functioning and dynamics of local people-rebel-state relationship and its impact on socio-political transformation process in Nepal. The paper argues that violence and armed conflict in its different guises does not only produce destructive and disempowering impacts in society, but also induces social and political transformation and provides opportunities for developing inclusive, democratic people-centric state. The dynamic tripartite relation between the formal agents of the state (security forces, administration and other law enforcing agencies) and the non-state actors (rebels, their supporters) and local groups and individuals not only develops a complex entanglement of violence, fear, vulnerability and livelihood insecurity, but also provides opportunity for public authority to alter their conventional practices and create new *governable spaces* by creating spatial and temporal configurations of rules.

Hybrid order in Eastern Sri Lanka: a political marketplace in transition

Bart Klem, Political Geography, University of Zurich (Switzerland)

The subject of this panel – the bargaining state in relation to non-state armed groups – is particularly relevant in countries emerging from war. After all, contemporary peacebuilding strategies increasingly resemble the ambition of statebuilding. The underlying policy rationale suggests that effective governance and a liberal version of order are a prerequisite for peace. The Sri Lankan government strategy to defeat the Tamil rebels on its soil has adopted this discourse to legitimate its victory and counter critique of the massive human losses that came along with it. This article seeks to debunk the proclaimed prevalence of legitimate order. Highlighting the entanglement of the state and non-state or counter-state forms of governance, it feeds into the literature on hybrid orders. The main argument is that multiple forms of rule exist within the same space and they connect and compete on the political marketplace. Taking issue with the rigidity that emanates from much of the governmentality literature, I highlight people's ability to navigate multiple forms of rule. While the state uses non-state proxies to bargain its way back into society, political formations at the periphery bargain their way into the state. But although such actors often mimic the state, they develop alternative governance strategies as well. Hybrid order was particularly salient when the LTTE maintained its pseudo-state structures in north and east Sri Lanka, but their demise in recent years has not put an end to this. The war to peace transition declared by the government harbours many continuities including violence and contestation. Although cast and dynamics have changed, the struggle for loyalties on the political marketplace continues and the means – such as coercion, patronage, identity mobilisation, sedimented practices – are remarkably similar.

Re-Imagining Margins, State Power, Space and Territoriality in the Naga Hills

Debojyoti Das, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, SOAS, University of London (UK)

Territoriality, far from being undermined by global processes, is increasing in importance and sophistication as a state resource control strategy in North East India and Nagaland in particular. The paper argues for re-imagining state power through the colonial politics of territoriality and boundary making. Colonial intervention in the frontiers of North East India was carried out through territorial control. It was achieved through boundary making and cartographic exercise carried out by military officials, survey parties, forest officers and district administrators. Territorialization is a powerful governmentality practice of controlling and classifying subjects. These days it is articulated in state schemes of governance through the use of GIS and Remote Sensing technologies. By drawing maps and boundaries the colonial and the contemporary post-colonial state have succeeded in rearticulating the fluid boundaries with notions of 'fixity' and 'functional spaces'. Spaces have emerged as the new grids of appropriation by state and neo-liberal agents, the market. In this paper I argue that there was a nuanced evolution of multiple spaces in Naga Hills since the late 19th century, and demonstrate how these spaces have been appropriated at different points of time and history through legislations and jurisprudence. The Naga Hills evolved as a space of accumulation, deficit and no-man's land of slave takers and head hunters, rather than being 'unifyingly' identified as the margins of the British Indian Empire. Three distinct administrative spaces evolve that shape territorialization and conscript the lives of the natives. First, the areas of the foothills where colonial capitalist interest were embedded. Second, the areas of political administered tracts as spaces of deficit and military control. Third, the land that lies beyond the politically administered territories formed the 'blank spaces' of colonial administration.

‘I am not a jihadi, I am a night watchman!’: Child vigilantism, communal violence and state institutions in a Hyderabad slum

Atrayee Sen, CIDRA, University of Manchester (UK)

This paper is an exploratory exercise within the anthropology of child militancy. It studies violent actions of children in a communally sensitive slum in Hyderabad, a city in southern India. Groups of Muslim children created and coordinated ‘child armies’ which closely monitored public life within their neighbourhoods. Child vigilantes not only patrolled and protected slum borders from the threat of enemy attacks (primarily from local Hindu nationalist mobs), but self-styled, retribution teams also regulated the internal dynamics of slum life. I show how the police, state-run social services and state-sponsored religious organisations navigated this urban ‘warscape’, and used the networks created by child soldiers to retain their access to and domination over a complex, violence-prone, marginalized urban space. This paper argues further that riot-affected children can also creatively self-stage and self-interpret themselves as victims and aggressors, create quotidian violent child worlds with its own modalities and moralities, and manipulate governmental and non-governmental institutions and actors to accrue affective and material resources to support their militancy. My ethnography aims to highlight strategic child ‘soldiering’ as a new culture of urban violence in India, study its impact on creating and/or destabilising familiar power structures within the slums, challenge contemporary perceptions of organised and aggressive Muslim children as modern, city-based ‘terrorists’, and problematise romantic and reductionist portrayals of childhoods in urban poverty.

Moneypower and Muscelpower in a Gujarati Locality: On the Usefulness of Goondas in Indian Politics

Ward Berenschot, ASSR, University of Amsterdam (The Netherlands)

This article discusses the cooperation between small-time criminals (or *goondas*) and politicians in a locality in Ahmedabad, Gujarat (India). Based on fifteen month-long ethnographic study of local politics, this article argues that the regular cooperation between politicians and *goondas* should be understood as a product of the inaccessibility of the Indian State to poorer citizens. As inhabitants of especially poorer localities need the help of politicians to gain access to (and alternatives for) state services, political success is largely premised on the capacity to ‘get things done’ for voters. Goondas are very useful in such a political contest: local politicians need both ‘moneypower’ and ‘muscelpower’ of *goondas* to settle local issues, enforce their authority and manipulate electoral success. At the same time local *goondas* need to collaborate with politicians to prevent police intervention in their illegal activities. The paper concludes that the ‘criminalization of politics’ is not a sign of moral decay, but a product of the difficulties of (poorer) citizens to deal with state institutions and the specific nature of local political competition that these difficulties engender.