ACLED
Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project

CONFLICT TRENDS (NO. 2)
REAL-TIME ANALYSIS OF ASIAN POLITICAL VIOLENCE, MAY 2015

Welcome to the second 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 1st to May 31st 2015 are available for public download at https://www.strausscenter.org/strauss-articles/acled-3.html, as is the previous trend report (no. 1) completed in early April 2015. Trend reports will be available intermittently for the first year 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. Pakistan will be our first completed coded country, followed by India and intermittently smaller and less active states.

Since the previous report, ACLED-Asia has recorded a decrease in politically violent events throughout the subcontinent and Southeast Asia (see Figure 2). The decline in active politically violent events in Bangladesh has largely driven this decrease, as an active hartal called in the latter part of December 2014, ceased in March. We explore the volatility of the South and South-East Asian political violence below.

ACLED incorporates reporting on non-violent protesting into these counts by country and month; these events constitute the vast majority of reported events within South Asia, particularly.

As demonstrated here, the volatility in South Asia, and the decline from an approximate average of over one thousand aggregated events to 700 in April and May, is not
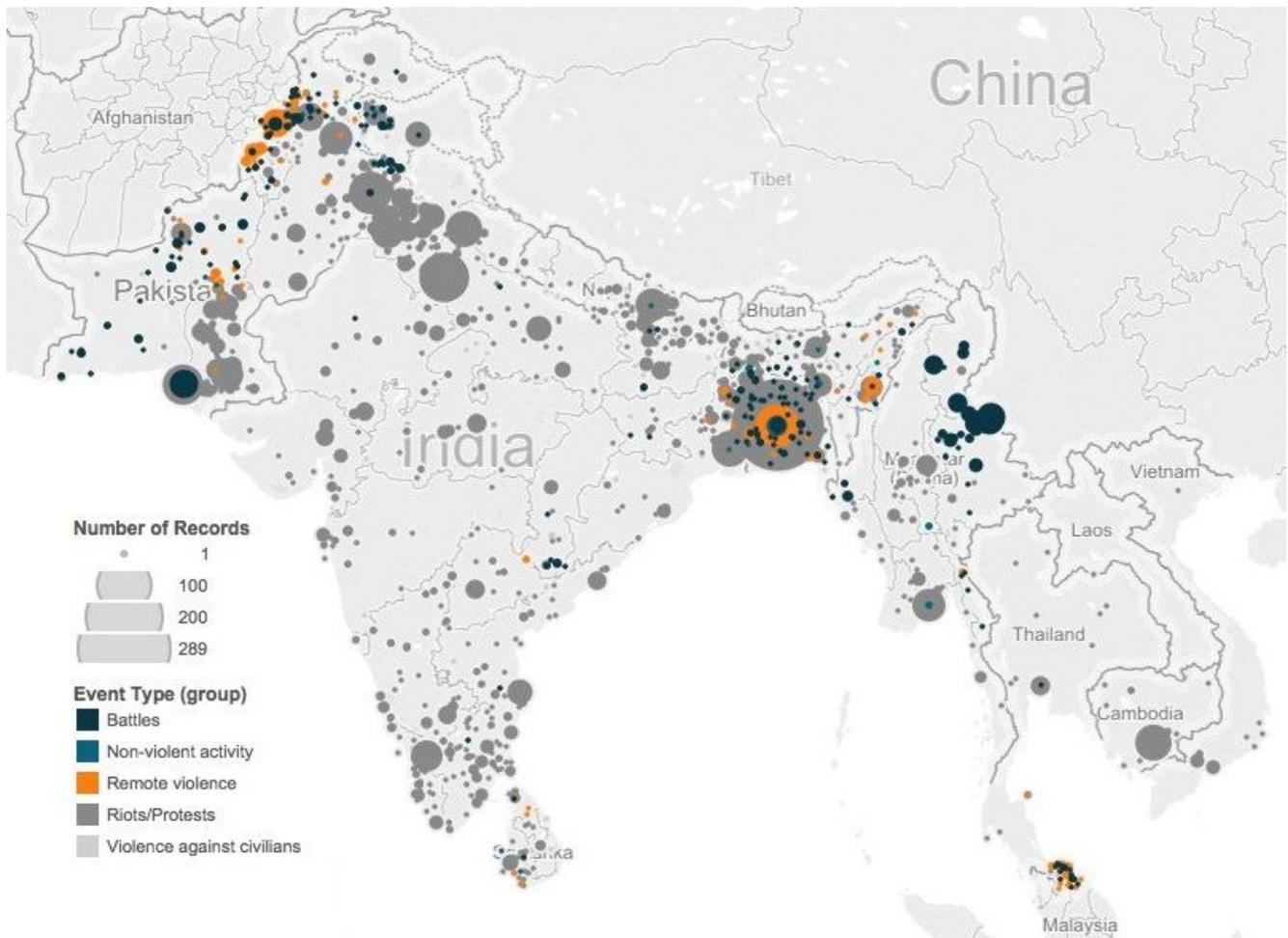

Figure 1: Number of Events by Location and Event Type, from March 2015– May 2015

solely due to Bangladesh's hartal, but is specific to the decrease in protests in India, which has recorded highs of 90 protests per week during the past and an average of 295. Pakistan, with the second highest number of protests, has generally volatile patterns running throughout the past months.

The changes in other event types also demonstrates the intense nature of campaigns in South Asia, as well as the generally low rate of significant battles and violence against civilians episodes outside of key unstable states including Pakistan and, intermittently, Myanmar. Along with riots and protests, violence against civilians declined significantly as Bangladesh's hartal ended in mid-March. All other states register low, and persistent, levels of violence against civilians.

However, fatality levels are not decreasing in the same way as events. Fatality numbers are generally driven by Pakistan and Myanmar, and illustrate 'campaign' behaviour in that sharp peaks and troughs are noted at key points throughout the period. Both countries are in an 'rising' or initial phase of a campaign during May, resulting in increased deaths.

The situations in individual states are covered throughout this trend report: the social and political upheaval due to changes in provisions regarding land acquisition by private companies suggests that the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) may be moving too swiftly towards neoliberal reforms; a review of the hartal in Bangladesh and the roots of this conflict between political parties is considered. Further, the short and long term consequences of the months-long hartal are discussed, including a lack of governmental control in rural areas, which experienced an increased number of land grabbing incidents and violent clashes of communal groups for the establishment of supremacy in rural areas. Finally, the derailing peace agreement in Myanmar is discussed, and the agendas and options for the existing parties in the conflict.

The situation in both Bangladesh and Myanmar suggest that while the 'big' stories demand attention, the smaller changes in political power should be acknowledged. Conflict actors- including the government, political parties, political elites, local and customary authorities- often use the veil of national or large regional conflicts to forward agendas that might otherwise be difficult to pursue, including land grabbing, personal profit, and changes in leadership structures. Local cleavages are often unreported, or under-acknowledged. Yet these fissures within rural and urban societies form the basis upon which larger contests are organized.

Other states covered by ACLED-Asia display far less violence generally, but are subject to periods of intense increases due to political unrest (e.g. Thailand, Sri Lanka, Nepal). However, during periods where an alternative instability is active, such as earthquakes that devastated Nepal in recent weeks, both incidents and reporting of political violence typically cease. Previous to the earthquake, Nepal had experienced a consistent level of protests, largely around the constitution writing process. These, and other demonstrations related to public goods access, political participation and justice, become secondary concerns during the difficult phase of grieving and rebuilding taking place in the state.
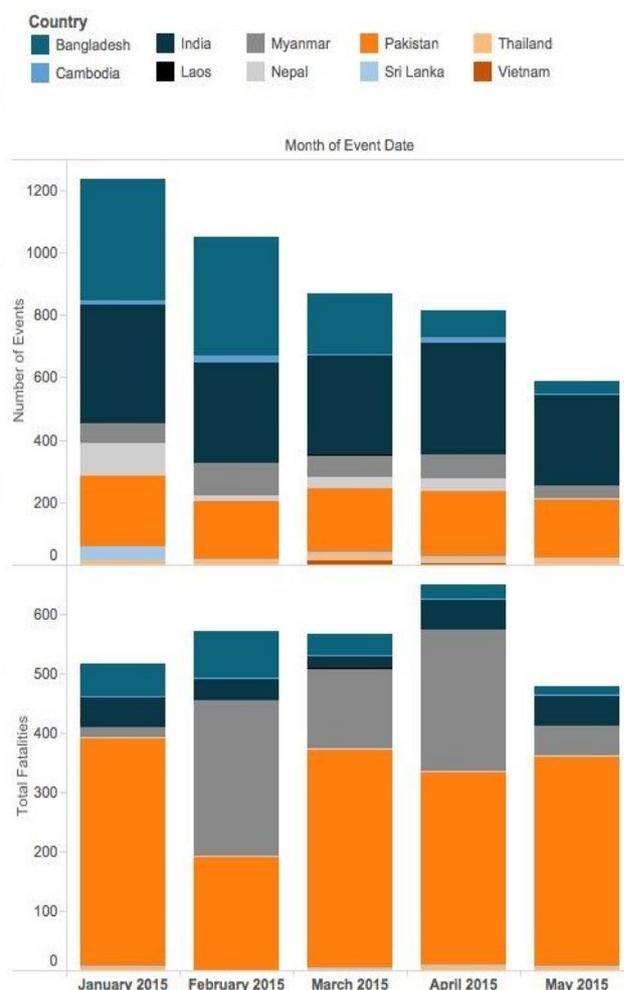

Figure 2: Number of Conflict Events and Number of Reported Fatalities by Country

Bangladesh

Bangladesh has been in political turmoil since early January, leaving more than 150 people dead and thousands injured. Confrontational politics are not new in Bangladesh, but they have intensified in the recent months, reaching its highest level in late January and the beginning of February. Two thirds of activity included vandalism, crude bombs, clashes between political opponents, rioters and the police, and high numbers of arrests. While violence against civilians escalated, political turbulence allowed religious and extremist militants to take advantage of the unstable political situation. The roots of this spike in violence are in the historic rivalries between two political parties – the ruling secular, socialist Awami League (AL) and its opposition, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) with its Islamic orientation.

Marking the one-year anniversary of Bangladesh's contested elections on 5 January, the opposition Bangladesh National Party (BNP), declared a transportation shutdown and general hartal (strike) to force the government to
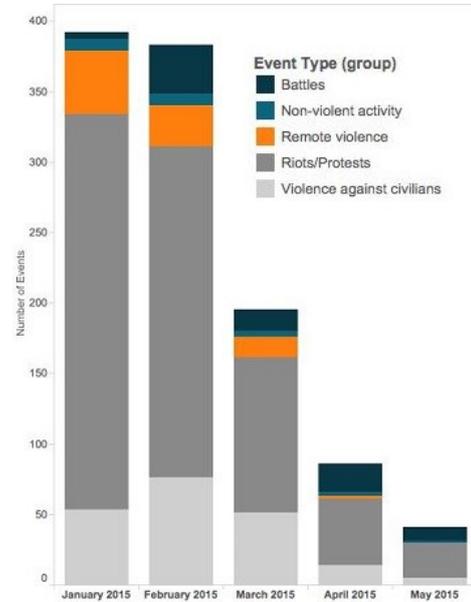
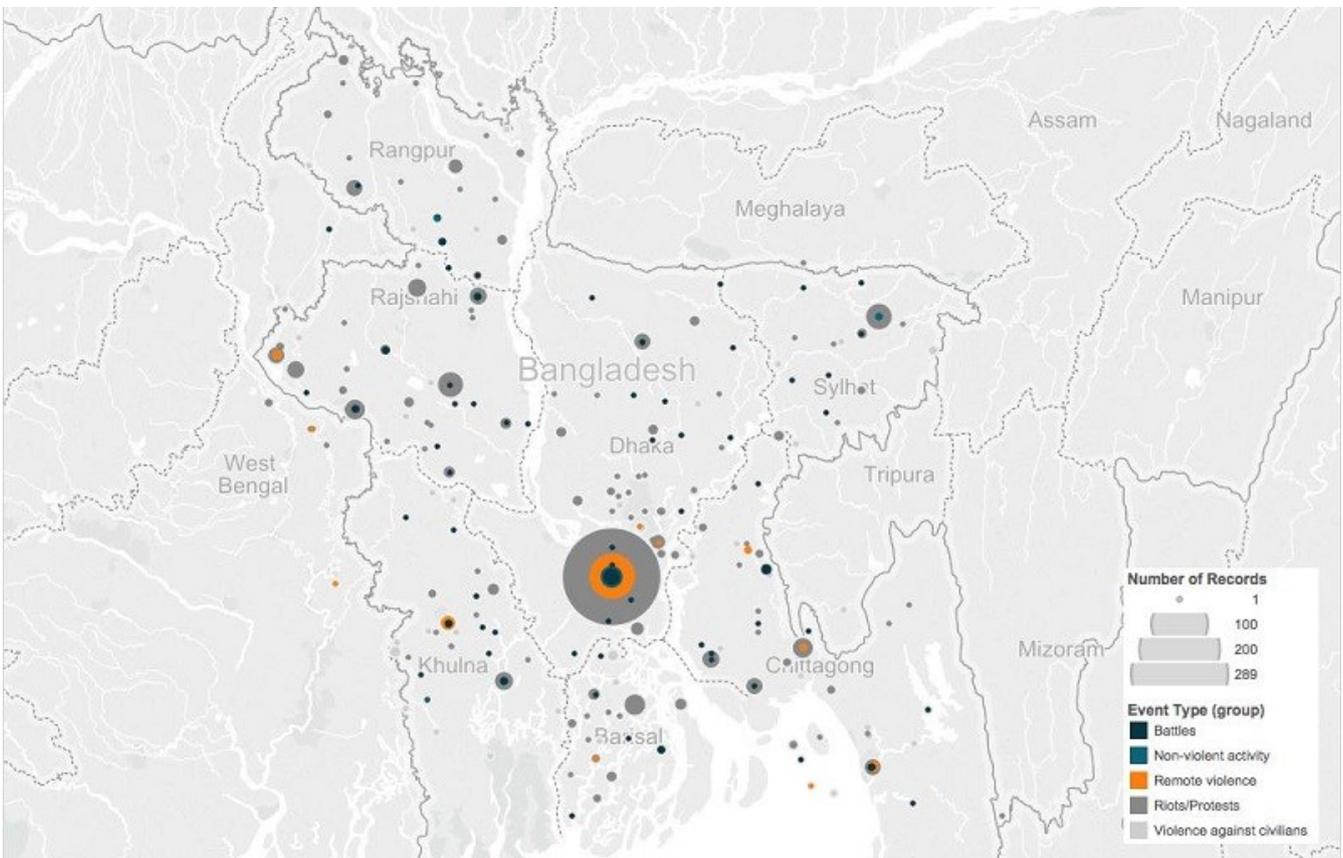**Figure 3: Number of Conflict Events by Type**

Figure 4: Number of Conflict Events by Type and Location

Bangladesh

resign and elections to take place. The ruling Awami League's (AL) decision two days earlier to confine BNP leader, Khaleda Zia (former prime minister), to her party's headquarters in Dhaka, triggered violent clashes between AL and BNP activists. Opposition protests were accompanied by a rise in militia activity, including the launching of a series of petrol bomb attacks against passengers travelling in buses and other vehicles, particularly trucks. About 200 people have been killed from burn injuries and thousands injured. The AL government responded to the opposition's countrywide demonstrations with a tough crackdown on protestors, including widespread detentions by the police. Media reports indicated that as many as 7,000 opposition activists were arrested by the police within a month after 5 January (HRW, 06.02.2015).

Mayoral elections were scheduled for late April in Dhaka and Chittagong, in which the BNP decided to participate, in an effort to resolve the political confrontation. In the days leading up to the elections, militants attacked Zia's electoral motorcade three times, leaving her bodyguards

Figure 5: Number of Conflict Events by Interaction Group

and several other people injured in bullet attacks. The elections themselves were largely peaceful, but ultimately boycotted by BNP because of vote rigging (IDSA, 01.05.2015).

Enmity between the two major parties have marked Bangladesh's history since its independence in 1971 and revolve around ideological fault lines, such as questions of secularism, Bengali nationalism and the role of Islam (ICG, 2015). In December 2008, AL leader Sheikh Hasina won the elections, putting an end to a two-year military-backed caretaker government. Hasina's government, however, was marked by a high level of corruption, partisan bureaucracy and a worsening human rights record (ICG 2012). The last general elections on 5 January 2014, the most violent in its history, were boycotted by the opposition BNP and its ally JeI, leaving the ruling AL to win the majority of seats.

Personal enmity between the two female leaders is as important for the understanding of the crisis as the ideological differences between the two parties. Both Zia and Hasina have lost close relatives in attacks – Hasina her father,the founder of Bangladesh Mujib ur Rehman, and Zia, her husband, former president Ziaur Rahman. Both hold the other side accountable for the murders. For many supporters personal loyalties are more important than ideological accordance.

The recent turmoil has clearly shown that residual capacities of subversive and extremist elements, including JeI (declared illegal by AL in 2013), and its student wing-- Islami Chhatra Sibir (ICS)-- are still significant, and their alliance with BNP remains strong. Both JeI and ICS have shown their propensity for violence in recent attacks, and are believed to have links to extremist jihadi groups. Further, surviving fragments of a range of other extremist outfits, including Jamaat-ul-Muslimeen (JMB) and Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), became more active in the last months (SATP). Particularly alarming was the killing of three liberal bloggers, Avijit Roy, Washiqur Rahman and Ananta Bijoy Das, attributed to Islamic militants opposed to the victims' secular views, including a 'sleeper cell' of Islamic militant ATB (The Financial Express, 02.04.2015). Human Rights advocates have also voiced their fear that the often lawless responses of police forces to violent protests is providing an opportunity to militant groups to attract new recruits from opposition supporters. In addition, Bangladesh's troubled situation led to a lack of governmental control in rural areas, which experienced an increased number of land grabbing incidents and violent
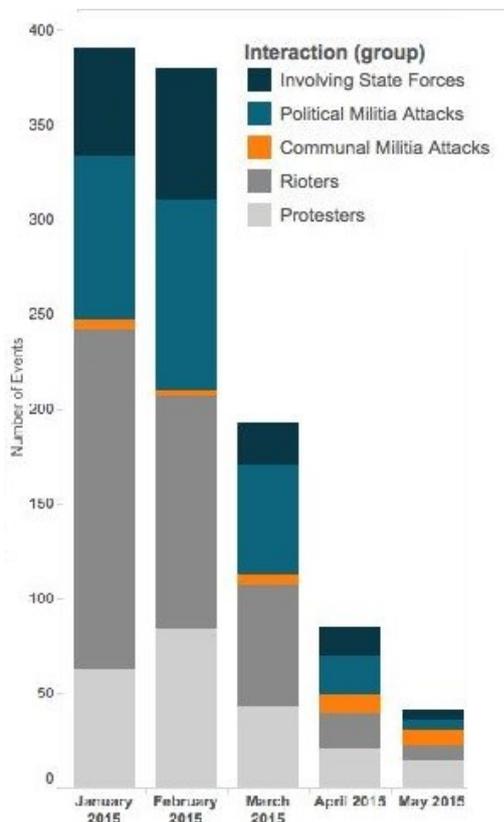
Bangladesh

clashes of communal groups of the establishment of su-premacy in rural areas.

Amidst violence and hartals, the majority of Bangladeshis continued with their routine, often taking on the risk of being attacked by hartal enforcers while proceeding to work. Relying on daily wages, the majority of Bangladeshis cannot afford to stay at home. Political turmoil has already caused economic losses of around $2.2 billion (1 percent of GDP), according to the World Bank. The garment industry, which makes up 75 percent of the country's exports and provides employment for a large number

of Bangladeshis, is particularly affected as delivery schedules are disrupted and garment buyers have started to shift their orders to other countries.

Political deadlock between the ruling AL and opposition BNP has recurred since the country's independence, but the latest wave of violence is unprecedented. Three months of turmoil have severely affected Bangladesh's economy and provided space for Islamist militants. Though violence has slowly come to an end, confrontational politics will continue to dominate the political agenda, leaving Bangladesh on the edge of instability.

Myanmar

Recent fighting between Myanmar Armed Forces and ethnic armed groups threatens to derail the Myanmar Peace Process. The Myanmar military has clashed with the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), Arakan Army (AA), Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), and Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) in the past three months. The MNDAA, TNLA, and AA are currently being excluded from ceasefire negotiations. In the 89 recorded clashes since the end of February, over 363 individuals were killed. In contrast, only 70 clashes were recorded between the Myanmar Armed Forces and ethnic armed groups from November 2014 through February 2015, with fatalities numbering around 200. This trend suggests a sharp increase in fighting between Myanmar Armed Forces and ethnic armed groups since the beginning of March.

These clashes come in the midst of nationwide ceasefire negotiations between the Myanmar government and ethnic armed groups. On March 30, the Myanmar government and several armed groups agreed on a nationwide cease-fire draft in Naypyitaw (Irrawaddy, 2015a). However, the draft remains unsigned by senior leaders on both sides (Myanmar Times, 2015). Though the Myanmar government has indicated its willingness to move forward with the ceasefire, the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordinating Team (NCCT) concluded its meeting with armed group leaders in Pangsang with a statement indicating armed group leaders would need to meet again before negotiations with the government could continue.

The MNDAA, TNLA, and AA have so far been excluded from ceasefire negotiations, despite their membership in the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) (The Nation, 2015). At the Pangsang conference, held from May 1-6, these groups expressed their concern about

their exclusion from the negotiations as well as ongoing fighting in their respective regions (The Irrawaddy, 2015b). At the end of the conference, ethnic rebel leaders called on the government to prove its commitment to peace "through constitutional reform and cessation of hostilities on the country's northeast and western frontiers" (Irrawaddy, 2015c). Furthermore, the NCCT indicat-
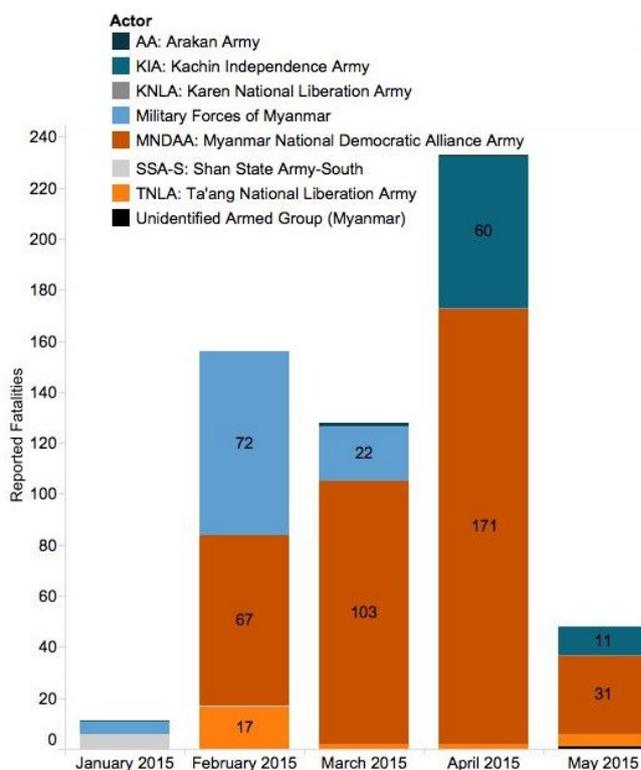

Figure 6: Reported Fatalities Between Separatist Groups and Myanmar Forces

Myanmar

ed that they would not sign a ceasefire with the government without the inclusion of the MNDAA, TNLA, and AA from the nationwide ceasefire agreement (Irrawaddy, 2015c). As a result, local news organizations have expressed doubt that ceasefire negotiations will be concluded in the near future (The Irrawaddy, 2015d) .

In April and March alone, the Myanmar Armed Forces and MNDAA engaged in 28 recorded battles, with 281 fatalities. Myanmar Armed Forces claimed to have regained territory in five of these battles. The Myanmar government issued a gag order on MNDAA statements coming from an ethnic armed group summit being held in Panghsan, Shan State near the beginning of May—telling journalists the MNDAA had "been outlawed by the government" and threatening legal repercussions for violations (Irrawaddy, 2015e). On May 15, the Myanmar military claimed to have seized the last MNDAA stronghold in

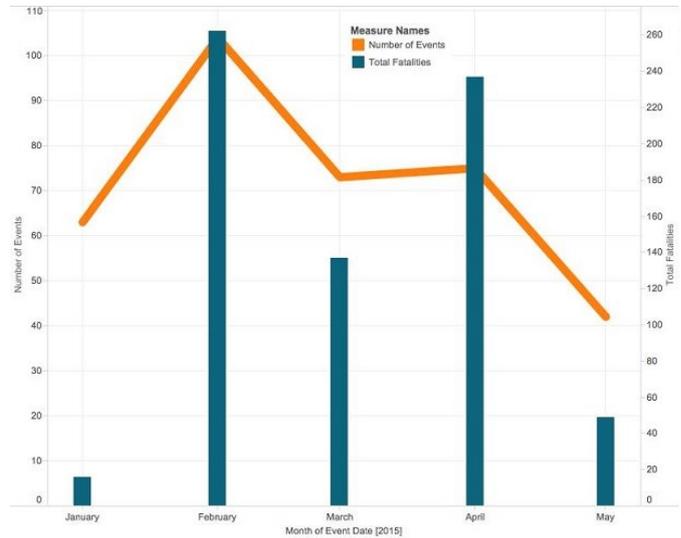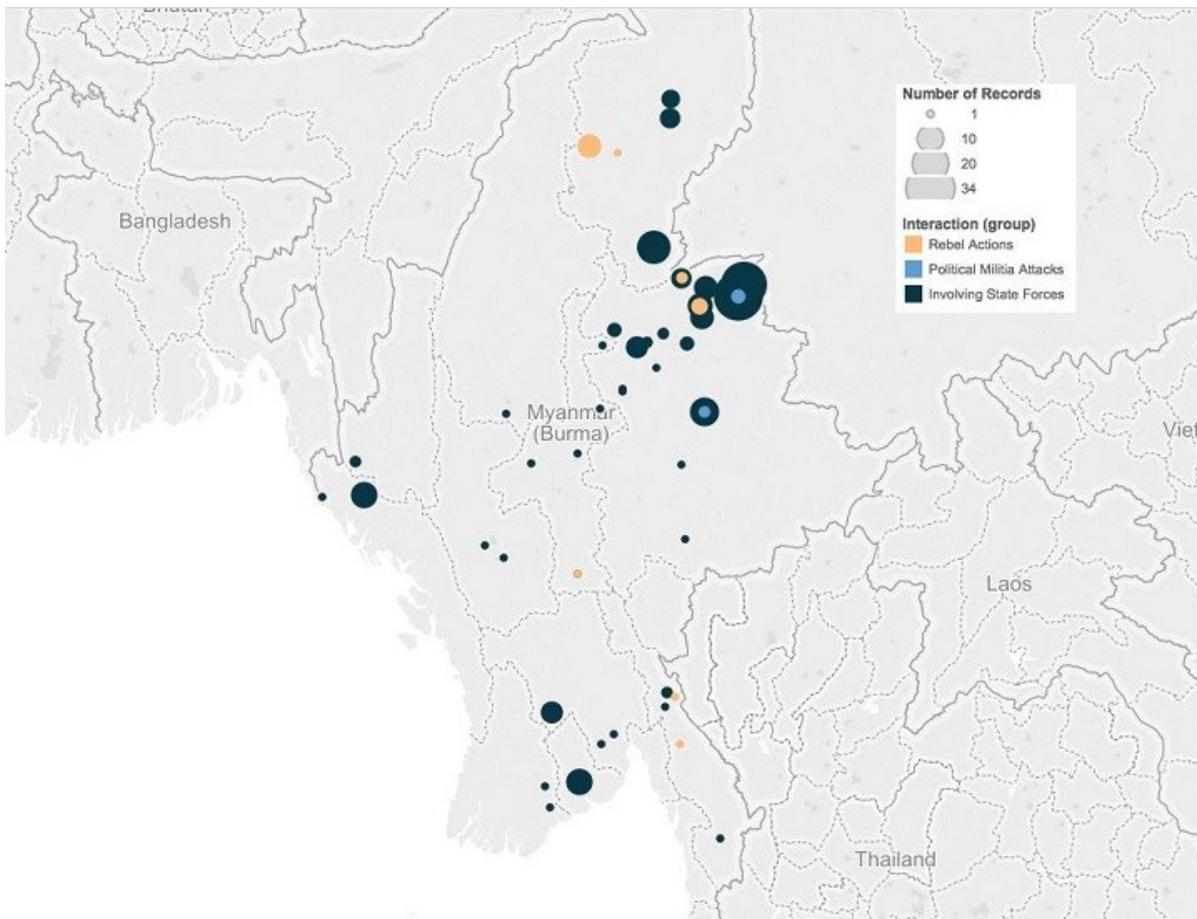**Figure 7: Number of Conflict Events and Reported Fatalities**

Figure 8: Reported Fatalities Between Separatist Groups and Myanmar Forces by Location

Myanmar

northern Shan state (Mizzima, 2015a). Nevertheless, MNDAA troops continue to clash with Myanmar military forces near Laukkai (Myanmar Peace Monitor, 2015a) .

In addition to domestic clashes, the Kokang conflict has strained relations between Myanmar and China. Several errant shells from the Myanmar Armed Forces aimed at Kokang rebels have landed in Chinese territory in the last several months. Two shells landed in China in March --one which killed five Chinese farmers. China immediately summoned Myanmar Ambassador Thit Linn Ohn to demand an investigation into the incident and urged Myanmar to take more precautionary measures (Reuters, 2015a). The Myanmar government has since officially apologized for the incident (The Diplomat, 2015). However, China complained on April 28 and May 20 that more Myanmar Army shells had fallen on Chinese territory (Reuters, 2015b and Irrawaddy, 2015f). China has also sent troops to the Sino-Myanmar border in an attempt to deter future cross-border incidents (South China Morning Post, 2015).

AA forces have engaged in five direct battles with Myanmar Armed Forces in Rakhine and Chin states since the beginning of March. According to the Myanmar military, AA forces in Chin state were in retreat on April 17 and five AA soldiers were captured in the battles in Rakhine. These clashes are believed to be the first time in

a decade that the AA has fought Myanmar Armed Forces in its home state (Democratic Voice of Burma, 2015a & Mizzima, 2015b). News organization Burma News International believes these clashes are related to the movement of AA troops to the Bangladesh-Burma border and the increase in Myanmar military personnel in the region (Burma News International, 2015).

The Myanmar army and KIA forces clashed 24 times in the past three months in Kachin and Shan states, resulting in 60 fatalities. The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the political wing of the KIA, accused the Myanmar military of attempting to capture five KIA outposts from April 18-20 amid nationwide peace negotiations, causing hundreds of civilians to flee their homes (Democratic Voice of Burma, 2015b). Representatives from the KIO and the Myanmar government met on April 27 to discuss the fighting, but on May 6, fighting between the KIA and the Myanmar military continued (Democratic Voice of Burma, 2015b and Radio Free Asia).

This fighting signals an increase in violence between Myanmar Armed Forces and armed groups, despite ongoing ceasefire negotiations. More battles and fatalities have occurred in Myanmar from March 2015-May 2015 than during the previous four months. If this trend continues, the Myanmar peace processes could be jeopardized.

Special Focus Topic: India's Land Bill

Widespread dissatisfaction over property rights continues to represent a significant amount of political activity in India. President Modi's recent effort to reform India's notoriously dysfunctional property laws has triggered hundreds of protests, galvanizing political parties across the spectrum. Although the bill has yet to pass India's upper parliamentary house, political parties have used the momentum behind the movement to unite in opposition against the Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) govern-

ment. Their efforts have often fueled further agitation among farmers, leading to an increase in protests over the last two months throughout India. The vociferous protests are the strongest indicator that Modi's political honeymoon has ended, thus jeopardizing his ability to implement pro-business reforms.

In March, the BJP passed an amendment to modify existing property laws, easing the rules for companies to acquire land for private development (Indian Express,
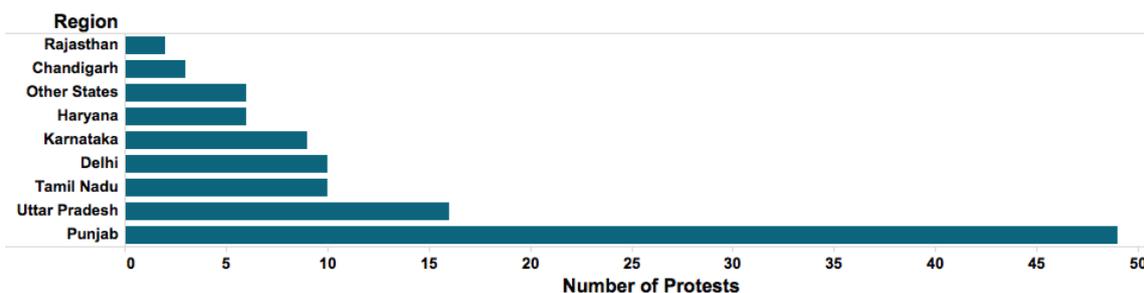

Figure 9: Number of Protests in India by Region

Special Focus Topic: India's Land Bill

March 2015). Known as the Land Bill, the amendment removes a previous requirement that projects carried out by private companies must have consent from at least 70 percent of residents in an area before their land could be bought for development. Additionally, the amendment removes the need for companies to assess the social impact of acquiring land for private development.

Legislative efforts to pass the bill sparked prolonged demonstrations across India beginning as early as January. Over the last two months, there have been 123 reported instances of riots and protests concerning land reform. Demonstrations are most frequent in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, where farming constitutes a large fraction of the local economy. Protestors from rural communities have

Figure 10: Number of Protests by Location, Before and After the Land Bill

also undertaken lengthy marches to the nation's capital to trumpet their message and draw attention to their concerns. Since February, 17% of land-reform protests have occurred in Delhi. In one notable event, 5,000 farmers from Haryana marched 60 miles to Delhi in February to express their opposition to the land bill amendment (Indian Express, May 2015). The event disquieted BJP members enough for them to consider modifying the original amendment (NDTV, February 2015).

Protests are frequently organized by opposition parties eager to absorb disaffected voters. The Indian National Congress, a long-standing BJP rival, and the Aam Aadmi Party, a recently created anti-corruption party, have been involved with over fifty percent of the demonstrations since February. In wake of the Land Bill, the INC and AAP's efforts to label Modi's BJP party as anti-farmer and anti-poor have struck a chord in a nation where nearly half the workforce depends on agriculture (CIA, 2012).

The INC and AAP have tapped into deep-seated unrest among farmers currently experiencing a dire farming crisis. Droughts, crop shortages, and price inflation of cash crops have imperiled their livelihoods (The Guardian, May 2015). As land-reform critics stoke fear among rural populations, farmers continue to appear at INC and AAP-led demonstrations.

The extent of the dissatisfaction is most evident in recent election results. Despite having widespread support the previous year, the BJP were resoundly defeated by the AAP in the Delhi local assembly election last month (Times of India, 2015). The AAP's landslide victory (gaining 67 out of 70 seats) is significant, as the Delhi elections are considered a bellwether of national sentiment. If the election is an indicator of larger trends, BJP's losses throw into question the future of the BJP party and Modi's efforts to push through pro-market policies.
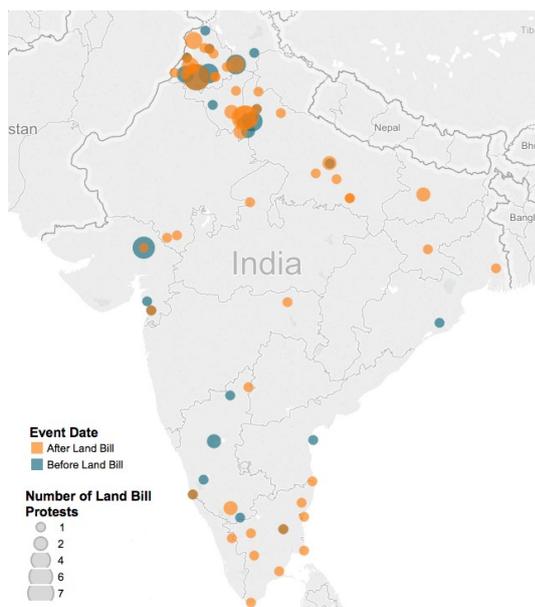
Special Focus Topic: Protest Movements in Sindh

Since January 2015, there have been 269 protests in Sindh. In comparison, Punjab, which is the province with the second highest number of protests in Pakistan, has had 145.

Sindh province is characterized by a variable population density across regions, with Karachi being an urban, financial, and political hub. Rural villages surrounding Karachi are the agricultural backbone of the nation's economy, as well as the force behind a strong, separatist, Sindhi identi-

ty that has its roots in leftist thought. This variation in demographic and social landscapes provides the appropriate contexts within which the different types of protests that take place throughout the province including unionised protests, political party protests, nationalist/separatist protests, religious protests, and civil society protests.

The All Pakistan WAPDA Hydro Electric Workers Union, the main union for the nationalised electricity provider (WAPDA), has been protesting against the proposed pri-

Special Focus Topic: Protest Movements in Sindh

vatisation of the authority, at least twice weekly since January. These protests are coordinated province-wide - and at times nationwide- with workers across localities in rural Sindh going on strike and holding public demonstrations. Several hundred protestors attend the events. School and University teacher associations also feature prominently in protests in Sindh, however almost all other unionised protests are held to demand the release of salaries, particularly in government jobs, where salaries have gone unpaid at times for over 8 months.

Political parties use street pressure in Karachi to express discontent with, or support for, current affairs that have gained traction in the local media. The emphasis during such protests is on validating statements made by politicians in the media by showing democratic support. The rivalries between the MQM, PPP and PTI in Karachi often time spills over during protests, which result in riots taking place.

Nationalist/ Separatist protests are unique to Sindh province. Every week since January 1st 2015 there has been at least one demonstration attended by several thousand individuals that focuses on either the influx of non-Sindhi's in the province, or the importance of maintaining a strong, detached province from the centre. Such nationalist groups have had violent pasts, linked with attacks on governance structures like railway tracks in the early 2000s and before, earning some of them proscribed statuses. However, today they are not seen as direct threats to the state after adopting a democratic approach. They often boycott elections on principle, holding that the state discriminates against them; however they have large followings that result in mass rallies and province-wide strikes.

Protests by banned religious outfits occur regularly in Sindh, and while the environment has been challenged by civil society groups, the government has often times sided with groups it has itself proscribed. The Ahle Sunnat Wal Jamaat is one such example. The group has been banned

since 2001 but until the beginning of this year was regularly protesting against the discrimination of its members as well as promoting hate speech. When two groups of protestors were convening at the same spot, a civil society group chanting against the hate speech indorsed by the ASWJ, and the ASWJ, the police forced civil society members to disperse and clear the area for the ASWJ members. This highlights the precarious relationship between religious organizations and the state in Pakistan, particularly in Sindh and in Karachi, which is arguably the only metropolis where the Taliban have a stronghold.

Protests movements in Sindh stand out in Pakistan not just because of the numbers, but also because of the type of protests. Groups that aren't active in the government, such as unions and separatist rights group, have regular street presence province-wide, more so than active political parties. Civil society groups protest regularly as well, with no political affiliations and can also question the power structures in place and gain public and media attention. For Pakistan, the case of protest movements in Sindh highlights the further democratization of a country that in its 68 years has only seen one democratic transition of power.
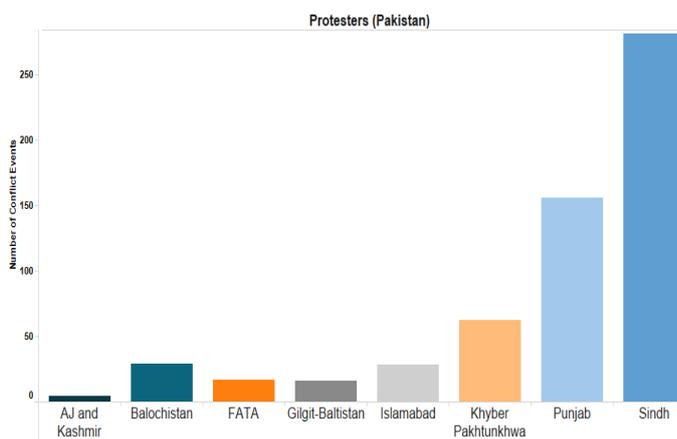

Figure 11: Number of Protests in Pakistan by Region

Support

Sources

Conflict Trends reports are compiled from ACLED data and draw on news sources, civil society reports, and academic and policy analyses.
Full details of sources and coding processes are available online on the ACLED website.