

Scale Tactics: Researching Political Development and Violence in Post-Soeharto Indonesia

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The classic national monograph has ceased to be the predominant way to study Indonesia in American political science. While scholars of political development have largely “scaled up” to compare Indonesia’s historical trajectory with that of other countries, scholars of political violence have more often “scaled down” to assess fine-grained data and dynamics at the local level. These divergent “scale tactics” involve an eclectic mix of qualitative and quantitative methods. Yet they share a common epistemological goal transcending these methodological differences: identifying empirical variation in pursuit of making robust causal inferences about Indonesian politics. This review article examines both of these streams in Indonesian political studies in the post-Soeharto era, highlighting recurrent themes such as the role of coalitions in political development and the spatial heterogeneity of political violence.

Keywords: Indonesia, political development, political violence, comparative politics, subnational analysis, methodology.

What do Bolivia, ancient Rome, Myanmar, Argentina, Nigeria, Iraq, Singapore, Paraguay, Russia and Iran all have in common? Within the past two decades, every one of these diverse polities has been compared with Indonesia in American political science.¹ While some scholars have looked further and further afield to find cases with which to compare Indonesia, others have burrowed ever more deeply into Indonesia itself, assessing the astonishing political variation that exists across the archipelago’s diverse localities.

This review article examines both of these streams in post-Soeharto Indonesian political studies. For all their differences, they have two

major features in common. First, they similarly depart from the classic national monograph, which was traditionally the predominant way to write about Indonesia in American political science. And second, whether they “scale up” to the cross-national level or “scale down” to the local level within Indonesia, they engage in what we call “scale tactics” with a common epistemological goal in mind: identifying empirical variation in the pursuit of making robust causal inferences about Indonesian politics.

Our review uncovers some surprises and, we hope, some interesting lessons. A first surprise is that, while American political science on the whole may have shifted in a quantitative direction in the past two decades, its literature on Indonesia has remained deeply qualitative even while becoming increasingly comparative.² It bears stressing that of the three main empirical subfields in American political science (American Politics, Comparative Politics, and International Relations), qualitative research maintains its strongest position in Comparative Politics, within which Indonesian political studies is firmly housed. It is thus inaccurate to claim that advancing quantitative methods in American political science have come entirely at the direct expense of qualitative methods. If classic area studies scholars wish to tar the American literature on Indonesia with a single brush, it makes more sense to critique it for its pronounced positivism—which is indeed unapologetic and at times unreflective—than for any abandonment of qualitative methods and deep case knowledge.

Another surprise we uncover is a striking correspondence between the subject and scale of American inquiry on Indonesian politics. As we detail in our analytic reviews below, researchers on Indonesian *political development* have moved away from the classic national monograph almost exclusively by *scaling up*—i.e., comparing Indonesia with other countries. By contrast, the latest waves of American research on Indonesian *political violence* tend not only to scale up but also to *scale down*—i.e., comparing localities within Indonesia itself. Intriguingly, the violence literature only tends to scale up, à la the political development literature, when it addresses the subject that speaks most directly to the question of political development—i.e., the development of violent *organizations*. By

contrast, when analysing violence as an *outcome*, Indonesianists have typically scaled down to the subnational level.

Political Development: Scaling Up

Political development can be understood, quite generally, as the historical emergence of those institutions and organizations that shape the political arena (Huntington 1965). The first wave of American political science research on Indonesia—and on “Third World countries” writ large—overwhelmingly took the form of national-level monographs on particular key epochs in the newborn nation’s political development. Kahin’s (1952) masterful account of the anti-Dutch revolution, Feith’s (1962) definitive history of the breakdown of constitutional democracy, Lev’s (1966) analysis of the military-dominated “Guided Democracy” system that followed it, and Bresnan’s (1993) survey of Soeharto’s “New Order” all fit this classic model. In each, Indonesia has a grand, distinctive and singular political story to tell. Regional political variation was almost always acknowledged and occasionally even highlighted, but rarely emphasized.³ Comparisons with other countries were uncommon if not entirely absent.

After Indonesia’s democratic transition in 1998–99, however, this literature on political development took a decisively comparative turn. Importantly, this move to introduce cross-national comparisons has *not* signalled a sweeping and unidirectional shift towards quantitative methods, although statistics have certainly been one tool for tackling cross-national data. Rather, Indonesia scholars in American academia have more often favoured qualitative, paired comparisons in which Indonesia is analysed in considerable historical depth alongside other countries studied with similar seriousness.

The range of comparisons attempted has been nothing short of staggering, as we detail below. Whether more has been gained through these new attempts at general theorizing and causal inference, or lost through the necessary sacrifice of detailed attention to Indonesia’s undeniably distinctive political and historical context, is ultimately

a question only readers may answer. For the present purposes, our main point is that American research on Indonesia in political science has mostly scaled up to the cross-national level while remaining heavily devoted to qualitative methods, especially in the study of political development.

Political Institutions and Economic Performance

At least until the financial crisis of 1997–98 laid so many Asian economies (especially Indonesia's) to waste, the great puzzle of “the Pacific Rim” was its extraordinary economic development. In the search to explain rapid Asian growth, American political science research on the region was deeply influenced by a wider trend in political economy—the emphasis on the institutions that made growth possible, including those institutions' political origins. Studying economic development thus meant studying political development.

Indonesia's positioning in this comparative literature on Asian development has been intriguingly ambivalent. On the one hand, Indonesia's location in the world's fastest-growing region makes it something of a relative success story, *globally* speaking. Yet *regionally* speaking, Indonesia has generally lagged behind neighbours such as Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. Whether Indonesia has been explored as a case of relative economic and institutional strength or weakness has thus largely depended on whether its cross-national comparator has been located within or beyond Southeast Asia.

In one of the first cross-national studies of Southeast Asian economic institutions and development, Doner (1991) compared the evolution of national automotive industries in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand. Of particular interest was each country's capacity to leverage foreign direct investment for local technological gains. While Thailand led the regional pack and the Philippines lagged behind, Indonesia and Malaysia proved to be intermediate cases of success.

Like so many of the works on political development to be reviewed here, Doner explained this variation as a product of coalitional politics. Largely because of the divide between ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs and the *pribumi*-dominated state, Indonesia

failed to generate the kind of cohesive industrializing coalition that had advanced high-tech auto production in Thailand.

Both this substantive focus on political coalitions and the relative assessment of Indonesia as an “intermediate case” among Asia’s developmental states are echoed by Doner, Ritchie and Slater (2005). Here, the argument is that technological upgrading on a national scale depends on highly capable and socially embedded state institutions, and that these institutions originate in conditions of “systemic vulnerability”—a highly uncommon combination of popular pressure, external threat and resource scarcity. Since the Soeharto regime was born at a moment of intensely mobilized mass politics, it exhibited a relatively broad ruling coalition and developed the institutional capacity to target side-payments to restive popular sectors. Yet absent the kind of resource scarcity and external threat that confronted cases such as Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore, Indonesia’s leaders did not need to deliver those side-payments in a manner that avoided undermining export competitiveness and military preparedness. The result in Indonesia was a more impressive set of developmental institutions than existed in the Philippines, where coalitions remained stubbornly narrow and institutionally challenging side-payments remained politically unnecessary. But Indonesia was never prompted to attempt the kind of major state-building efforts that characterized Asia’s developmental leaders, and hence only managed to expand the economy, but not to climb the technological value chain.

On the whole, cross-national assessments of Indonesia’s political economy have stressed the relative debility more than the relative capacity of the country’s developmental institutions. This can be seen in Ross’s (2001) comparative study of the responses of Southeast Asian countries to timber booms. For Ross, such booms ironically undermined development by tempting politicians to engage in “rent seizing”—wresting control over the authority to allocate resources and contracts from bureaucrats who had an interest in ensuring natural resources were properly managed. The result was institutional decay and economic (as well as environmental) disaster.

Although Ross is well known to be one of the most quantitatively inclined scholars of Southeast Asian politics, his cross-national study of timber booms is entirely qualitative, consisting of a careful comparison of Indonesia with the Philippines and Malaysia. Whereas timber booms destroyed forest-management institutions in the latter two cases, Indonesia's profound institutional weakness was displayed by the absence of such bureaucratic apparatuses even before the country's timber boom commenced in the late 1960s. Intriguingly, Ross did not compare Indonesia with Malaysia writ large, as studies by Doner (1991) and Doner, Ritchie and Slater (2005) did; rather, he compared it with Malaysia's state of Sabah because of their shared dependence on customary law (*adat*) for the management of forest resources. On the whole, Ross assesses Indonesian institutions to have been so ineffectual that, unlike Marcos in the Philippines, Soeharto did not even need to run roughshod over them to seize rents on behalf of his familial dictatorship.

Moving from the rustic world of forests to the bustling world of finance, Hamilton-Hart (2002) echoed Ross's depiction of Indonesia as Southeast Asia's institutional laggard. As ever, the chosen comparison cases determine the relative assessment of Indonesia's developmental institutions. For Hamilton-Hart, the key variation relates to the governing capacity of central banks to manage financial assets and respond to recurrent crises of confidence. On this score, Malaysia and Singapore surpass Indonesia by a wide margin. This financial incapacity took its toll on Indonesia during the Asian financial crisis, when long-standing institutional weaknesses left the Soeharto regime unable to implement the capital controls necessary to stop the financial haemorrhaging. As a work of political development, Hamilton-Hart valuably recognized that near-term political responses to financial shocks in Indonesia, as elsewhere, cannot be reduced to short-term dynamics and considerations alone. They must always be situated in a longer vision and deeper appreciation of Indonesia's distinctive history of state-building and institutional development.

Perhaps the deepest comparative-historical treatment of the politics of Indonesian economic development has come from Vu (2010). In

direct contrast to the argument of Doner, Ritchie and Slater (2005) that broad coalitions are conducive to industrial and technological transformation, Vu saw Asian developmental states being built through the brutal exclusion by authoritarian regimes of the masses as well as elite rivals. His cross-national comparative strategy for furthering this argument was entirely qualitative and utterly original. In its relative incapacity to drive fundamental economic change in the wake of decolonization, Indonesia mirrors not so much its fellow capitalist neighbours like Malaysia and the Philippines as Southeast Asia's major case of communist revolution—Vietnam. The fact that Indonesian and Vietnamese leaders had such different ideological visions for their economies does not negate the deeper fact that both countries saw economic transformation hindered by weak state institutions, which in both cases were a product of elite compromise during periods of nationalist struggle. Only in cases of early and more decisive factional victory for radical and highly coercive state-building coalitions—as in the Northeast Asian cases of China and South Korea—did decolonization produce states capable of sweeping economic transformations.

Yet, by comparing Indonesia to its Asian neighbours alone, one arguably generates an unrealistically negative and one-sided assessment of the country's developmental accomplishments. Brutal and corrupt as the Soeharto regime undeniably was, the fact remains that, in a *global* comparative perspective, Indonesians went less economically unrewarded for their authoritarian sufferings than their counterparts in much of Africa, the Middle East and Latin America.

This perspective has been furthered by Lewis (2007), who found Indonesia's most natural comparator not in a Southeast Asian neighbour such as Malaysia or the Philippines but in another highly populated oil-producing postcolony—Nigeria. In this light, Indonesia's relative capacity for productive accumulation and poverty reduction becomes worthy of praise, much as its relative incapacity in regional terms to accomplish technological upgrading makes Indonesia a target of comparative derision. For Lewis, as for the other authors discussed here, Indonesia's developmental record represents a

product of its developmental institutions. As an “intermediate case”, Indonesia’s record of institutional and economic development has clearly inspired assessments ranging from the highly optimistic to the deeply pessimistic, depending on the cross-national perspective adopted and strategy pursued.

The Development of Political Regimes

The Asian financial crisis of 1997–98 was not only a bellwether moment for Indonesia’s economy, but it was also an epochal turning point for its political regime. In a matter of months, Soeharto’s “New Order” (1966–98) went from being one of Asia’s seemingly most stable authoritarian regimes to history’s rubbish bin. By late 1999, Indonesia had held a fully democratic national parliamentary election and seen that parliament replace Soeharto’s hand-picked presidential successor, B.J. Habibie, with one of Indonesia’s most respected democracy activists, Abdurrahman Wahid.

While some American political scientists have puzzled over why Indonesian authoritarianism collapsed so quickly, others have tried to explain why it lasted so long. And while some have stressed the maladies that afflict Indonesia’s struggling democracy, others have emphasized its relative vibrancy. Once again, Indonesia’s status as an “intermediate case”—in terms of its political regimes as much as its economic performance—makes it amenable to comparisons that both flatter and question the country’s accomplishments. As with the cross-national literature on economic development, its counterpart on political regimes trends towards the qualitative and places considerable stress on coalitions as the major driver of outcomes.

Smith (2007) provided a positive assessment of the Soeharto regime’s durability, reflecting the time period and case comparison he selected. Rather unusually, Smith’s outcome of interest was not the *collapse* of the New Order in the late 1990s, but its *survival* under considerable stress in the late 1970s. This puzzle takes comparative form through a paired comparison with another oil-rich Muslim country that, unlike Indonesia, saw its personalistic authoritarian regime succumb to popular pressures in that time period—Iran under

the Shah. Smith argued that the political and fiscal conditions at work when a country commences state-led industrialization—i.e., whether it faces a strong opposition and possesses easy revenue sources—determines the strength of ruling institutions and coalitions. Because the Soeharto regime rose to power in the mid-1960s against a backdrop of rent scarcity and oppositional strength, the New Order developed institutional capacity that allowed it to survive the massive urban protests of 1978. Smith thus portrayed Soeharto's Indonesia as a case of regime resilience, starkly divergent from the Shah's case of regime fragility in 1970s Iran.

Naturally things looked quite different by the late 1990s, when new events and new case comparisons came to light. The heart of Pepinsky's (2009) analysis of the New Order's collapse in 1998, for instance, is a careful comparison of authoritarian coalitions in Indonesia and Malaysia. Motivating this paired comparison is the marked divergence between the respective fates of these neighbouring authoritarian regimes: while the Asian financial crisis seemingly detonated Soeharto's New Order, its comparable economic effects in Mahathir Mohamad's Malaysia had strikingly different political effects. The Soeharto regime died, while the Mahathir regime survived. How can we explain this sharp variation in political outcomes amid parallel economic catastrophes?

Pepinsky embedded his comparative argument on Indonesia and Malaysia in a highly general and exceptionally clever theory of crisis adjustment in authoritarian regimes. In short, regimes dependent on coalitional support from holders of fixed capital as well as mobile capital find themselves unable to adjust to a "twin crisis"—one in which both the national currency and banking system find themselves under attack. Most importantly, they cannot impose capital controls because it would cost them the support of a politically vital constituency—holders of mobile capital. Herein rested Pepinsky's key Indonesia-Malaysia contrast: since internationally oriented (typically Chinese) capitalists had more sway over Soeharto than Mahathir, Soeharto could not use capital controls to stanch the financial bleeding and save his regime. As Mahathir's coalition in

Malaysia was fundamentally a cross-class alliance of Malays rather than a cross-ethnic coalition among Malay and Chinese elites, he could implement capital controls that pleased Malays across the board, even while dealing a blow to Chinese capital in the process.

The range of cross-national comparisons that Pepinsky deployed to develop and assess his theory was entirely global. Like Smith (2007), he used quantitative analysis to show the general value of his theory as a probabilistic argument across the entire world. But again, like Smith, his primary comparative approach was qualitative and deeply case-based. Whereas Smith compared Indonesia as a surprisingly similar case to Iran, Pepinsky only portrayed Indonesia as similar in its starting conditions to Malaysia. To establish the portability of his theory, Pepinsky qualitatively assessed several Latin American cases—with the Argentinean case being most comparable to Indonesia—and found that, despite their substantial initial variation from Indonesia, they similarly failed to respond to “twin crises” and collapsed under pressure for democratization.

Like Pepinsky, Slater (2010) was centrally motivated by the Indonesia-Malaysia comparison. Yet, in looking for additional comparative cases for explanatory leverage, Slater went more in-depth within Southeast Asia rather than testing his theory in other world regions. Much like Smith, Slater stressed the conditions surrounding a regime’s origins in shaping its long-term durability. Although Indonesia and Malaysia both saw authoritarian regimes born amid highly intense communal and class conflicts (Indonesia in 1965, Malaysia in 1969), the critical difference lay in what transpired in the crushing of what Smith would call the “strong opposition” in each country. In Malaysia, the Chinese-led Malayan Communist Party (MCP) may have been decisively defeated, but ethnic conflict remained a lingering perceived threat to political stability. By contrast, the Soeharto regime not only annihilated the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) but also eradicated communism as a feature of the nation’s ideological life. Thus, while Mahathir could still draw upon ethnic anxiety to weaken opposition in crisis-stricken Malaysia in 1998, Soeharto could no longer play

the communist bogeyman to divide and debilitate his opponents in Indonesia.

It would beggar belief, however, to claim that Indonesia and Malaysia merely differed in their histories of contentious politics. A more obvious difference relates to the greater forward role of the military in Indonesian than in Malaysian political life. Slater thus argued further that Indonesia can helpfully be portrayed as following a “militarization” trajectory, most comparable in the region to Myanmar, where militarization could similarly be traced to the nationalist struggle and, especially, a difficult history of armed regional rebellions and separatism. This comparability of Indonesia and Myanmar was echoed by Boudreau (2009), who uncovered fascinating and subtle differences in the character of authoritarian repression practised by two of Southeast Asia’s most militarized cases. While the Indonesian military tended to give a wide berth to urban dissidents but crack down consistently on oppositional organizations, Myanmar’s military responded much more fiercely to even the slightest expressions of urban protest.

To the extent that Indonesia and Myanmar are made comparable by their histories of militarization, it makes Indonesia a useful comparative case for pondering the divergent fates of top-down political reforms in both cases. An argument in this regard comes from Slater and Wong (2013), who argue that Indonesia, rather like Taiwan and South Korea, can be considered a case of *democracy through strength*. Although the New Order obviously collapsed in very hard times, the fact that the ruling Golkar party had reasonable hopes of thriving under fully democratic conditions made full-blown democratization a palatable scenario for civilian as well as military elites.

This sheds possible light on Myanmar, where democratic reforms emerged at a historical moment when mobilized opposition to the regime was waning rather than waxing. Paradoxically, the fate of democratization in Myanmar, as in Indonesia, hinged on the *ancien régime* being strengthened enough—especially through its fledgling civilian political party—to compete in genuinely democratic

elections. The inability of Myanmar's pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) to rival Golkar's electoral strength helps account for the fact that Myanmar's military ultimately refused to live with democracy, unlike its Indonesian counterpart (see also Self 2022).

The end of Indonesian authoritarianism in 1998–99 did not mean the end of Indonesian regime development, of course. Once Indonesia had democracy, the question obviously became what kind of democracy did it have? And how might it compare to other democracies worldwide? An early answer to these questions in American academia came from Slater (2004), who argued that—in surprising parallel with long-established Western European democracies—Indonesia had experienced the “cartelization” of its party system. In short, party elites had proven more inclined to share power than to impose defeat on ostensible rivals, with the consequence that Indonesia lacked an identifiable political opposition. This meant that even underperforming politicians could not necessarily be replaced, which constituted a serious threat to democratic accountability.

The thrust of this argument was not to compare Indonesia with specific European cases, but with a theoretical construct developed in the European context. Slater did not argue that Indonesia was “like” Belgium or Switzerland; rather, he argued that party systems can become cartelized virtually anywhere, and Indonesia suffered the similar disease of unclear opposition and weakened accountability that just so happened to have made its greatest headway in Europe.

In extending cartelization theory, however, Slater and his Latin Americanist co-author argued that Bolivia—a case with countless differences from Indonesia—had surprisingly experienced similar patterns of “promiscuous powersharing” among party elites (Slater and Simmons 2013). In Bolivia, this had led to a major populist upsurge against the ruling oligarchy; the question of why Indonesia had not experienced a similar bout of destabilizing populism begs further inquiry. An initial discussion of this puzzle comes from Slater (2013), who argues that—rather like India—Indonesia's massive scale

and historical experience with a highly inclusive national revolution might explain why anti-system populists have been unable to attract majoritarian followings for their political challenges. From this perspective, Joko Widodo's fending off of military strongman Prabowo Subianto in Indonesia's 2014 and 2019 presidential campaigns was not simply a near-term product of campaign-year dynamics; it was at least partly a reflection of the country's relatively fortuitous social and ideological foundations.⁴ It was only by casting aside his populist and chauvinist persona that Prabowo would finally capture the presidency in 2024, with Jokowi's enthusiastic endorsement, arguably the apotheosis of Indonesia's party cartel.

To the extent that Indonesian democracy has survived the current global age of democratic backsliding, civil society has played a vital role. The notion that Indonesian civil society possesses an inclusive and participatory character that helps sustain democracy was argued most forcefully (and comparatively) by Lussier and Fish (2012). In stark contrast to naysayers who saw little substance in Indonesian democracy, these authors placed Indonesia in comparative perspective with Russia and were struck by the vibrancy of its associational life. Much as Lewis saw relative strength in Indonesia's developmental institutions when he compared them with Nigeria's, and Smith found a comparatively strong authoritarian regime when he compared Indonesia's dictatorship with Iran's, Lussier and Fish stressed the positive in Indonesian democracy by comparing it with a case far more stricken with authoritarian maladies—the Russia of Vladimir Putin. Somewhat analogously, Horowitz's (2013) flattering portrayal of Indonesia's constitutional reforms, though structured as a classic national monograph, clearly drew upon his deep experience in cases where ethnic divisions and newly democratic politics combined in volatile ways to produce outright and ongoing communal violence.

Perhaps the most radical comparative critique of Indonesian democracy in American political science raised the question of whether any society with such steep economic inequality is best located under the sign of democracy in the first place. In his *Oligarchy*, Winters (2011) argued that super-rich individuals are

virtually untouchable to government powers in even the most robust democracies. Indonesia may be an especially pronounced case of oligarchy, with the extreme concentration of wealth that developed during the Soeharto years and has persisted almost without impediment despite political democratization. Yet Winters the comparativist sees oligarchy everywhere. With its fascinating and bracingly provocative in-depth case studies, ranging from ancient Rome to American Appalachia, Winters mirrored the qualitative focus of all the cross-national literature on political development discussed here. Hence, while American political science typically views Indonesian political development in broad comparative terms, it still largely does so with qualitative methods.

Political Violence: Scaling Up and Scaling Down

Scholarship on political violence in Indonesia has largely emerged as a result of three turbulent phases in the country's history: anti-colonial struggle through the late 1940s, communist killings in 1965–66, and the ethno-communal conflicts that erupted following the democratic transition in 1998. Perhaps because of the staggering scale of violence perpetrated during these events, analysts have tended to treat them as national-level phenomena despite their spatial heterogeneity. Initial contributions to this literature thus typically followed the familiar national monograph style. Increasingly, however, American-trained scholars have moved away from this approach, employing both subnational and cross-national comparisons to explain the dynamics of political violence in Indonesia. While the study of violent *outcomes* has most often been tackled through subnational design, research on violent *organizations* has trended—like the political development literature just reviewed—towards the cross-national.

Violence as an Outcome: Subnational Comparisons

The first two phases of violence in Indonesia—the anti-colonial struggle during the mid to late 1940s and the anti-communist pogroms of 1965–66—were predominantly explained by American academics and others through national monographs. These rich accounts, which

continue to inform our understanding of Indonesia, grapple with the specificities of the political events that culminated in unprecedented levels of violence. While most of the literature in this stream seeks to explain national dynamics (Kahin 1952; Reid 1974; Cribb 1990), some scholars have illuminated these macro processes in key sites of violence without explicitly comparing one locality with another (Anderson 1972; Anderson 2006; Robinson 1995).

Initial reaction of the American political science scholarship to the post-1998 ethno-communal and separatist violence, such as Bertrand's (2004) masterful *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict in Indonesia*, was very much in this vein. Covering an impressive breadth of events between 1998 and 2003 that included Christian-Muslim violence in the Malukus, ethnic riots in Kalimantan and separatist conflicts in Aceh, East Timor and Papua, Bertrand advanced a historical institutionalist explanation for the eruption of post-transition violence in Indonesia. He attributed the relative stability of the Soeharto years to the national model created under the New Order that accommodated or excluded specific religious and ethnic groups from state institutions. Soeharto's exit in 1998 provided an opportunity for the renegotiation of this model through comprehensive institutional reform. Bertrand described the conflagration of different types of violence across the archipelago as an attempt by ethnic groups to position themselves favourably during this process, where winners seeking to protect past gains and previously marginalized groups staking out new claims compete in defining a future model of engagement.

As one of the earliest systematic explanations of the post-Soeharto violence, Bertrand's account was compelling given the salience of the New Order regime in balancing communal interests and the timing of the violence so soon after its collapse. But this national-level explanation faced two persistent challenges. The first was a theoretical one: while the New Order's national model and its unravelling could explain the presence of widespread grievances and thus conflict between ethnic groups, it could not explain the *violence*. It was not clear why violence would emerge as the specific tactic to improve a group's standing during an institutional renegotiation.

Even if violence was a strategic option, it was still not clear why some groups had the necessary *capacity* to organize and sustain it for months and in some cases years.

The second challenge was empirical: there was wide variation in the levels and duration of violence across the country that could not be accounted for by the national-level considerations that form the basis of Bertrand's explanation. Quantitative data collected through the United Nations Support Facility for Indonesian Recovery (UNSFIR) famously showed that over 85 per cent of all fatalities resulting from ethno-communal conflict took place in only fifteen districts, representing a mere 6.5 per cent of Indonesia's population (Varshney et al. 2008). Why did the opportunity for institutional renegotiation of ethnic interests lead to violent confrontation in these specific areas but not others?

These gaps in the early national monographs prompted a new phase of scholarship that emphasized *subnational variation* in the way violence is experienced in Indonesia. This agenda used a diverse range of methods. One group of scholars employed regional case studies to juxtapose broad national-level dynamics with specificities of subnational sites. In his comprehensive analysis of ethnic riots in West Kalimantan, for example, Davidson (2009) demonstrated how the politicization of ethnic identities in Indonesian Borneo preceded the New Order. Challenging Bertrand's national-level narrative of institutional change as the trigger for anti-Madurese violence in 1999, Davidson claimed that these riots were in fact the path-dependent consequence of the anti-Chinese pogroms conducted in the province since 1967. He argued that the legacy of these early, formative events made violence a routine way of settling disputes between ethnic groups in specific districts of West Kalimantan during the New Order.

Sidel (2006) advanced a similar claim by using a sociological approach. He argued that religious violence regularly erupted in Indonesia throughout the New Order era during times of political uncertainty. Furthermore, such violence was concentrated in sites where "local anxieties" about the place of Islam in the Indonesian polity were particularly high. In addition to explaining the temporal

and the spatial variation of religious violence, Sidel explained the variation in forms of violence over time. A set of carefully selected case studies dating back to Indonesian independence showed that the intensification of religious violence in the post-transition years corresponded with local actors' increased experience in organizing violence and the emergence of specific religious networks.

It is interesting to note that while Bertrand's focus on national dynamics claimed that post-transition violence was the result of a break in the New Order's institutional model, Sidel and Davidson reached a different conclusion by evaluating local dynamics. According to these latter studies, ethnic and religious violence that swept across Indonesia following the collapse of the New Order was the culmination of trends that were already prevalent. Also worth noting is that, in contrast to Bertrand, both Sidel and Davidson chose to examine relatively low-intensity episodes of violence alongside more prominent ones. For example, Bertrand's account somewhat exclusively engaged the escalation of a separatist conflict into a full-scale civil war in Aceh after 1998, prolonged religious war in Maluku, and the Madurese massacres in Kalimantan. In contrast, Davidson's analysis included the frequent but relatively short-term ethnic riots in West Kalimantan. Sidel also examined episodic violence like anti-Christian riots in Java, the notorious Ninja killings and widespread lynching to make his case. Indeed, an emphasis on the relatively low-impact but frequent forms of violence is common across all subnational studies of violence in Indonesia, regardless of their methodological orientation.

A third approach to subnational research on violence in Indonesia was driven by the long tradition of violence data collection in the country. As described previously, the first comprehensive effort to provide a toll of post-transition communal violence in Indonesia was made by Varshney et al. Based on the successful compilation of communal violence data in India, the UNSFIR dataset used national- and provincial-level newspapers to compile similar data in Indonesia between 1990 and 2003, estimating 10,758 deaths across fourteen provinces (Varshney et al. 2008).⁵ Furthermore,

the UNSFIR dataset made a lasting contribution to the subnational research agenda in Indonesia by demonstrating the rich variation in incidence and impact of post-transition violence across the country. More recently, a partnership between academics, think tanks and the Indonesian government has led to the compilation of the National Violence Monitoring System (NVMS) dataset, the largest single-country dataset on subnational violence anywhere in the world (Barron et al. 2016).

Whereas earlier works traced the emergence of ethnic grievances and focused on social causes of communal violence, later scholarship drew on these quantitative data sources to develop compelling causal explanations for the variation observed in violence levels across Indonesia during the post-transition period. Yuhki Tajima's (2014) work was distinctive in showing how a national-level shock to state capacity produced uneven effects on the local opportunity structure for violence. He argued that violence erupted in specific sites because of a mismatch in coercive power between formal and informal institutions. Specifically, areas that were highly dependent on the state for maintenance of communal order became most vulnerable to violent expression of ethnic grievances as the state's coercive apparatus was disrupted during regime transition. Empirical investigation of this argument uses large-N data to identify villages that experienced an incidence of communal violence during this period and measures their previous exposure to state coercive institutions. The data confirms that villages that experienced communal violence tended to be closer to military posts (representing higher exposure to the state's coercive capacity) than those villages where such violence did not take place.

In a similar vein, Risa Toha (2021) drew on district-level data to explain why ethnic riots were clustered in some parts of post-Soeharto Indonesia and not others. Whereas Tajima stressed variation in local dependence on state coercion, Toha located the relevant variation in the uneven competitiveness of local political arenas during democratic transition. Her argument is that riots were more likely in ethnically divided districts where low electoral competition

and continued dominance of Soeharto's Golkar party signalled the entrenchment of old regime forces and the exclusion of opposition candidates at the local level. Violence, in this account, was less a simple byproduct of transition than an alternative form of political engagement through which disappointed local elites sought leverage after uncompetitive elections, with riots tending to decline as electoral competition increased and opposition turnover occurred.

Despite the common emphasis on local dynamics to explain subnational variation across the diverse methodological approaches described above, there were disparate views on what constitutes a "local" factor. In Tajima and Toha's analyses, the local factors under consideration were the subnational manifestations of national-level explanatory variables—decline in the state's coercive capacity and electoral competitiveness, respectively, in post-Soeharto Indonesia. These were national-level changes but were expressed differently across subnational units for historical reasons. Both accounts describe post-transition violence as the result of a break in New Order policies rather than the culmination of past trends. In Davidson's case study, local factors appear to be a function of the unit of analysis. For example, he examined the interests of those elites who operate at the subnational territorial level. While the specifics varied across cases, the general expression of these "local" factors travelled across contexts. The fact that all three scholars drew cross-national comparisons based on subnational analysis from Indonesia seems to confirm this view. In contrast, Sidel's version of local factors is less comparative. Defined in terms of the "distinctive" experience of class relations in Indonesia, the "peculiar" ambiguous position of political class within it and the "intimate" connections between religious networks and social mobility, violence is explained as the culmination of local processes that are unique to Indonesia.

Indeed, Sidel defined his research contribution in explicit opposition to what he calls the "religious violence industry". In his view, large-scale data projects and anti-terrorism studies have paid little attention to Indonesian history and social context, often employing a prefabricated and alien lens to observe local events.

New quantitative efforts responded to these critiques through further disaggregation of violence into its various forms and the adoption of context-sensitive coding schemes (Varshney et al. 2010). Others responded by adopting a creative mix of methods. Panggabean and Smith (2011), for example, used quantitative data to identify pairs of towns that experienced low and high levels of anti-Chinese violence in 1998. They then used qualitative process tracing to demonstrate that anti-Chinese riots were orchestrated by the Indonesian security forces to shift attention away from pro-democracy demonstrations by student activists.

Violence as Organization: Cross-National Comparisons

The rise of subnational research on violence in Indonesia was accompanied by the development of a thriving cross-national agenda, mirroring the literature on Indonesian political development reviewed above. Subnational comparisons of violence in Indonesia are diverse in the methods they have used but united in their substantive object of investigation: varying *levels* of violence. In contrast, the substantive questions addressed by studies that compare Indonesia to other countries covered a range of topics related to the *organization* of violence. Most of these cross-national attempts were resolutely qualitative in their choice of method—also much like the studies of political development described earlier.

Given the salience of separatist movements in Indonesia's political history, most cross-national work on the country's violence has unsurprisingly centred on the study of civil wars. Ross (2003) selected Aceh and Papua as two of fifteen cases to generate hypotheses about the effect of natural resources on the ability of belligerents to sustain hostilities during civil wars. The separatist nature of conflict was attributed to the "unlootable" nature of the resources present in these two provinces. Moreover, Ross argued that because resources like natural gas, copper and gold are relatively "unobstructable" in nature, they could not be appropriated by the rebels for their financing needs. This explains what Ross described as the relatively low-intensity violence (fewer than 100 casualties per year) in Aceh

and Papua. However, contrary to this claim, Aceh experienced more than 1,500 annual war-related deaths during the final phase of the conflict between 1999 and 2004.⁶ If the nature of resources in Aceh made them exclusively beneficial to the Indonesian army, how was the rebel group Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) able to wage costly battles against the Indonesian state? According to Hastings (2010), GAM was able to overcome this disadvantage by (a) leveraging its transnational presence to create safe international bases from where its leadership could operate; and (b) forging lucrative links with members of the Indonesian armed forces to ensure provision of illicit weapons even as the two parties continued to fight on opposite sides of the conflict.⁷

Limitations of resource-based theories in explaining the Indonesian case become apparent when we consider that the most deadly civil war in Indonesia was waged in East Timor, a region that did not have the kind of natural wealth found in Aceh or Papua. What then explains the Indonesian state's response to secessionist demands? Based on a mix of experimental, statistical and case study data, Walter (2009) argued that a state's response to separatist demands is determined by expectations about the likelihood of future challenges. States that expect a high number of potential rebellions in the future invest in "reputation building" by taking a tough stance against present challengers. This hypothesis was tested by examining Indonesia as a case with a high number of potential challengers owing to its diverse ethnic make-up. Jakarta's aggressive response to self-determination movements in Aceh and East Timor was described as a signal of the state's willingness to pay a high cost to deal with rebellions. In contrast, the Philippines was presented as a case where a relatively homogenous ethnic make-up decreased incentives for reputation building, allowing the government to make deep concessions to the Moro and Igorot groups.

Walter's deftly executed comparison advanced an intriguing theoretical argument but was limited in its empirical scope for two reasons. First, the Indonesian case was described selectively as one where the outcome variable comprised two prolonged, deadly civil

wars because of the government's aggressive stance. The fact that Indonesia has successfully concluded these conflicts despite higher reputation-building incentives, while the Philippines struggled to negotiate with its rebels, received less attention. Second, while this theory was useful for thinking about the incentives for state response to separatist demands, it could not explain how rebel groups reacted to the state's positioning. For example, why is it that the Acehnese settled for regional autonomy within the Indonesian state, while the Moro long refused what Walter depicts as relatively generous concessions made by the Philippine state?

A different answer emerges from Barter's (2017) comparison of civilian strategy in Aceh, Patani and Mindanao, which shifts attention from state calculations to the social foundations of separatist organizations. Rather than treating civilians as passive bystanders, Barter showed how patterns of support, evasion and resistance shape the strength and legitimacy of armed groups themselves. The Indonesian case is especially revealing in this regard: GAM's endurance depended heavily on extensive civilian collaboration, even as minorities aligned with the state and some civilians sought to resist rebel demands from within Acehnese strongholds. This perspective usefully complemented Walter by suggesting that the trajectory of separatist violence depends not only on the reputational incentives of states but also on the varied forms of civilian engagement that sustain or constrain armed challengers.

While the civil war literature has attempted to explain how state actors organize violence in Indonesia, the role of non-state actors in organizing coercion has also been examined in the cross-national literature. Sidel (2004) noticed the growing salience of "local strongmen" in Indonesian politics following the implementation of competitive local elections across the country since 1999. Contrary to the prevalent view that attributed the presence of these actors to web-like *social* structures, Sidel argued that local strong men arise as a consequence of *state* institutions. Specifically, he argued that it is the subjugation of the state apparatus to competitively elected officials that creates opportunities for local power wielders to peddle

muscle in exchange for access to state resources. Compared to the Philippines and Thailand, Indonesia is a relative latecomer to competitive local elections as district heads (*bupati*) were handpicked by the central government until the end of the New Order. This, according to Sidel, explains the relatively late emergence of non-state coercive actors.

This raises another question: even if it is the configuration of state institutions that accounts for the presence (or absence) of non-state coercive capacity, what explains the construction of the state in this way? Ahram (2011) tackled this question by placing Indonesia among a different set of comparative cases. While acknowledging the existence of local power sources in all societies, he contended that traditional modes of coercion are more likely to become empowered during times of violent revolutionary struggle. Thus, states such as Indonesia and post-revolutionary Iran are more likely to inherit fragmented coercive structures in the form of militias. Whether or not states centralize means of coercion later on depends on the nature of the threat they face. Effective management of external threat requires deployment of highly organized and hierarchical use of force that militias and other informal groups cannot provide. This could explain why Iran aggregated previously fragmented sources of coercion during its protracted war with Iraq. In contrast, Indonesia was faced with a relatively low probability of external threat and therefore continued to devolve coercive power to the powerful regional militias inherited from its anti-colonial struggle.

Note that while Sidel described Indonesia as a negative (or at the very least a “late”) case for the presence of militias compared to the Philippines and Thailand, Ahram’s (2011) analysis used Indonesia as a positive (or even extreme) case for a similar outcome variable when placed next to Iran and Iraq. This contrast is useful for illustrating the most obvious advantage of cross-national design over the national monograph and subnational designs described earlier: the ability to classify the same country case along a continuum of outcomes. Recall that Bertrand explained post-transition violence in Indonesia as a consequence of the renegotiation of ethnic power

relations prompted by the collapse of the New Order. In this single country analysis, the value of post-transition violence in Indonesia is fixed as “positive”. However, if Indonesia were evaluated in comparison with countries such as South Africa and Nigeria, where renegotiation of the ethnic model was a central theme in transition politics but resulted in different levels of violence, Indonesia might qualify as an intermediary case. This comparison would then call for the investigation of a different set of national-level factors to explain Indonesia’s post-transition violence.

More recent comparative work has pushed this literature beyond militias and local strongmen by examining more diffuse and networked violent organizations. Comparing vigilante organizations in India and Indonesia, Jaffrey (2021) argues that right-wing populists can appropriate decentralized repertoires of violence for broader ideological projects, using loosely coordinated violence to discipline minorities while relying on collusive ties with state actors to preserve deniability and secure impunity. In a different vein, Chernov Hwang’s (2023) comparison of jihadist networks across Southeast Asia has highlighted Indonesia’s importance for understanding how extremist violence is organized through interpersonal ties and processes of communal embedding rather than formal hierarchy alone. The broader comparative payoff of examining the micro-foundations of violent organizations in both these studies is to show that violence depends not simply on ideologies, but on the social mechanisms through which violent networks are built and reproduced.

Conclusion

In this review article, we examined how Indonesian politics has been studied in American academia and noted a decisive shift away from national monographs in favour of comparative work. While comparative scholarship on political development has been done mostly through cross-national comparisons, studies of political violence have looked both beyond and within Indonesia to gain comparative explanatory leverage. We suspect that this correspondence

between scale and subject is mostly due to the preponderant importance of *national-level causal factors* in shaping Indonesia's political development, making it highly suitable for comparative, cross-national research designs. For example, the collapse of Soeharto's New Order is more naturally explained by national than by local-level dynamics, making authoritarian breakdown more tractable as a cross-national than a subnational research question. Furthermore, despite sweeping decentralization reforms, Indonesia has yet to produce the kind of stellar regional performers in terms of economic development or public goods provision that have motivated subnational comparisons in other parts of the world, even with the election of so-called "reformist mayors" in cities such as Surabaya and Bogor that once raised hopes for such salutary local developments. Yet, even if Indonesia does not currently have an obvious counterpart to India's Kerala or Brazil's Curitiba, increasing variations in local electoral outcomes, government performance and other features of political development could readily be leveraged in subnational studies to build the next phase of research on Indonesian politics.⁸

The promise of leveraging both subnational and cross-national variation in the study of Indonesian political development—scaling up *and* scaling down—has most recently been signalled by Kuipers (2025). Operating subnationally, Kuipers's *States Against Nations* shows how projects of bureaucratic rationalization generated uneven patterns of incorporation within the Indonesian state, as meritocratic recruitment has reproduced underlying social disparities. The subnational variation here is not only across territorial regions but also across social groups. This analysis is combined with an array of cross-national comparisons, creatively juxtaposing Indonesia with China and India on the one hand, and with the United Kingdom and the United States on the other. In the comparativist's defining quest to explain empirical variation, Indonesia's vast internal heterogeneity will always struggle to gain equal attention to its countless divergences from countries both within and beyond Southeast Asia.

The draw for scholars of Indonesian political violence to scale down is far more powerful. In contrast to political development, the

stark spatial heterogeneity that characterizes the levels and forms of political violence in post-Soeharto Indonesia makes it especially amenable to causal inference through subnational analysis.⁹ However, scholars seeking to explain the organization of violence have mostly used the Indonesian case in cross-country analysis to explain a diverse range of substantive outcomes related to the emergence of militias, networks of clandestine groups and civil wars. This divide is partly driven by the relative lack of comparable data on violence levels across country cases. Also, the organization of violence in Indonesia, especially by the state, has been linked to national dynamics. But future scholarship in this field could benefit from investigating the presence of subnational causal factors in Indonesia, across other country cases and vice versa. Reconciliation of these two scales of analysis would require conceptualization of explanatory variables in ways that balance Indonesian specificities with generalizable interpretations of local factors.

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NOTES

1. The scope and boundaries of “American political science” are inevitably somewhat arbitrary. One could reasonably focus on where scholars are born, trained or employed. For our purposes, we generally include work by scholars who fit at least two of those three criteria, although we ignore this rule of thumb in several instances without apology.
2. This aggregate methodological shift masks important variation and countervailing trends. The apogee of quantitative domination in American political science is actually over thirty years old, marked by King, Keohane and Verba’s (1994) invocation that even qualitative research needed to expand its observations (or “n”) to make credible causal inferences. Critical reactions to “KKV” have been legion but are nicely reviewed in Mahoney (2010).

3. A notable exception is Liddle (1970), who approached the national-level question of ethnic integration through local-level analysis in Central Java. One might also perhaps consider Anderson (1972) a subnational case-study of Java, except that Java's centrality in the dynamics of the anti-Dutch revolution make the distinction between a subnational and national monograph a rather hollow one.
4. On Indonesia's beneficial cleavage endowment of multipolar fluidity, see Horowitz (2013).
5. Note that this figure does not include fatalities incurred in the course of the separatist conflicts in Aceh, Papua and East Timor, estimated to be in additional tens of thousands.
6. Estimates based on NVMS Indonesia data. The conflict in Papua has indeed not escalated beyond the 100 deaths a year threshold.
7. This kind of mutually beneficial cooperation among belligerents during civil wars is quite common across cases (Staniland 2012).
8. See Fossati (2016) on health insurance and Pierskalla (2016) on territorial district-splitting for examples of what subnational research on Indonesian political development might increasingly look like.
9. However, the development of this comparative agenda will require recognition that some subnational units (e.g., Papua) have had an especially peripheral relationship to the Indonesian state, thus complicating comparative causal inference (Pepinsky 2017).

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