

BOOK REVIEW

Aditi Malik. *Playing with Fire: Parties and Political Violence in Kenya and India*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2024. xxvi + 285 pp. Maps. Illustrations. Bibliography. Index. \$34.99. Paper. ISBN: 978-1009444284.

Part of review forum on “Playing with Fire: Parties and Political Violence in Kenya and India”

This book makes an important intervention into the study of electorally related violence, which has occurred in a number of African states in recent years. While important advances have been made in the last decade on violence that is related to electoral and political party competition, rather than violence related to insurgency and crime, the outcome remains challenging to explain systematically.

Malik’s central contribution is to link such violence to political parties and in particular to relative party stability. Malik further reframes the outcome of interest away from “electoral violence” per se to “party violence” or “party-based violence.” Parties, she argues, can engage in more than just electoral violence. They can sponsor militias and vigilante groups, for example, that can enact violence that is not directly related to electoral competition.

The central theoretical claim is that less stable parties are more susceptible to using violence because of shorter time horizons. The building block of the theory is that voters dislike electoral violence, and they will sanction parties that use it. If party leaders expect to be competing in multiple future rounds—that is, if they are embedded in more durable parties—then they have incentives not to use violence because they anticipate negative accountability from voters.

The insight is a good one. The force of Malik’s theory centers on restraint, on why some political players would opt *not* to use violence. This is an important piece of any theory of violence: to consider not only the likely strategic benefit but also the strategic costs that would push towards moderation or nonviolence. Together with a focus on parties, this discussion of restraint is a key contribution.

The empirical foundation for the book is a comparison of Kenya and India, and I will focus on the former given the outlet for this forum. In Kenya, the periods of focus are the 1992, 1997, and 2007 elections in the Rift Valley, 1997 and 2007–8 in the Coast Province, and 2013 in the Tana River area. While Malik uses quantitative measures of the outcome (violence) and of party volatility, one of the strengths of the book is the inclusion of more than 200 original interviews. Malik includes long interview quotes in the book, which give the empirical material a lot of texture and allow protagonists’ voices to be heard.


While I very much appreciated the book’s central contribution of party incentives to use and not use violence, I raise here three concerns in the spirit of advancing conversation.

First, for a book that centers on political parties, those institutions remain something of a black box in the book. How do political parties work in these contexts? Who drives the decision-making about violence, or its absence—presidential candidates, parliamentary candidates, handlers, party leaders, party activists, or others? A future study might try to get inside political parties and how the proposed incentives manifest as decisions to pursue or refrain from violence.

Second, for observers of African politics, there are some comparative limitations to the book's central theoretical claims. In some countries with the worst electoral violence in recent years—Zimbabwe, Côte d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Tanzania (Zanzibar)—the parties most responsible for violence are institutionalized, durable ones. Even in Kenya, at least concerning the violence of the 1990s, the party that engaged in the most violence was KANU, which while increasingly challenged, was then a stable party. Parties being threatened speaks to a different mechanism than parties not being present. The risk of losing an election differs from the prospect of party survival. Malik proposes a measure for general party volatility in a country focused on shifting vote shares among parties. Nonetheless, the parties most responsible for the violence are incumbent, institutionalized ones, and the proposed mechanism (around short time horizons because of an expected future absence) would seem to apply less well to them. The book would have done well to anticipate this concern about significant electoral violence in countries with long-lasting political, usually ruling, parties.

Lastly, while the conceptual reframing from electoral violence to “party-based violence” is a generative idea, the empirical examples—at least from Africa—primarily relate to electoral contests. This is certainly true for the Kenyan periods of focus (e.g., p. 79). Indeed, the book seems to be about how parties position themselves in relationship to contesting and winning elections. Hence, while the theoretical focus on political parties is very welcome and a central contribution, it remains unclear what advantage “party-based violence,” as the outcome of interest, has over the more common focal point in the scholarship of “electoral violence.”

That said, *Playing with Fire* is a theoretically and empirically innovative book, written in a humane fashion, that advances the scholarship on political violence.

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