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"

Aditi Malik's book, *Playing with Fire: Parties and Political Violence in Kenya and India*, centers on the capacity and motivation of politicians to use political parties to supply political violence. It breaks from the focus on politicians as the ringleaders of political violence, which dominates the conflict literature (6). Malik posits that "*party instability* can crucially condition elites' decisions about supplying party violence as well as the scale at which to do so" (7). Parties that are unstable or short-lived, in weak legal and institutional environments, offer politicians an incentive to use violence to meet political ends because sanctioning from voters is less likely and less costly; politicians in unstable parties discount the future more heavily than those in stable parties (7). With this book, Malik provides an important contribution to the tools for predicting and preventing political violence by establishing the conditions under which political parties supply violence.

The political actor features as the protagonist in much of the literature on political violence—especially electoral violence. Experts consider a political actor's ambition, grievance, ability to build a coalition for violence, or the aggrieved community they represent, as rationales for fomenting violence. Other facilitating environmental factors may come into consideration, as scholars and practitioners attempt to understand the likelihood of violence: the role of the media, rule of law, or regime type. Yet, at the center remains the political actor and how they interact with these variables, as Malik summarizes in the literature review (8–11). However, from a practitioner's perspective, centralizing the political actor in political violence prevention is difficult. Political actors may conceal their true intentions for violence, fearing international backlash, for example. Such obfuscation may result in weaker prevention strategies. In *Playing with Fire*, categorizing party volatility on a four-point scale, from stable to extremely unstable, Malik provides a more visible signal of the probability of violence (25). The break-down and restructuring of political parties hides less easily than a political actor's commitment to peace.

Using political party instability as an indicator, stakeholders working to prevent violence can form more reliable predictions on the probability of violence and develop more appropriate mechanisms for mitigation. Malik's case study analysis of Kenya during the violence following the 2007 elections provides

an example of how party volatility can impact practitioners' anticipation and mitigation of violence (107, 115–16). In the years following the violence, the international, regional, and domestic response resulted in a new constitution, the establishment of counties, and indictments at the International Criminal Court against six Kenyans (including Presidents William Ruto and Uhuru Kenyatta), for their roles in the violence. These responses addressed the postelection violence appropriately, but proved insufficient, as violence persisted in subsequent elections. Violence prevention strategies did not account for the volatility of the political parties, and political violence continued. A conflict prevention strategy that accounted for party volatility may have focused more intently on the periods between elections, for example—focusing on the areas with the highest party volatility. Accounting for party volatility in Kenya's case may have entailed a more continuous level of intervention, rather than the episodic programming that materializes a few months prior to elections.

Understanding party volatility is novel and useful for practitioners engaged in preventing and mitigating political violence. Malik's book raises three broad questions and suggestions for further work. First, we should understand the drivers of party volatility more clearly. Does elite ambition to form fast lanes to getting to power result in party volatility? Second, related to the first, do some environments produce more party volatility than others? Do particular times in a nation render it more susceptible to political volatility (following conflict, for example)? Thirdly, what proxies can signal the different levels of instability? How do the different volatility levels manifest on the ground to those working to prevent violence? The three questions are inter-related and point to the same objective: practitioners engaged with violence prevention work are most effective when predictions of violence improve. Party volatility provides a more visible signal of impending violence. In this regard, Malik's book adds a new tool for preventing violence and opens the door for further research.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2025.39