

APRIL 2023

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Reshaping India

Hindutva and Heritage

Pralay Kanungo

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Elizabeth Chatterjee

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Shandana Khan Mohmand, Miguel Loureiro, and Lewis Sida

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COMING IN MAY

Africa

AFRICA'S COLONIAL LEGACIES resist resolution, even as foreign powers continue to jockey for influence on the continent. A recent intergovernmental deal that calls for Germany to pay over a billion euros in reparations for its genocidal history in Namibia drew widespread criticism because descendants of the victims were not consulted. In West Africa, where COVID-19 was just the latest in a series of epidemics, disease control still bears the stamp of colonial practices. The May issue of *Current History* will cover these developments and more across the region. Topics scheduled to appear include:

- **Land and History in Namibia**
Ellison Tjirera, University of Namibia
- **Learning from West African Epidemics**
Kalala Ngalamulume, Bryn Mawr College
- **Foreign Influence and Local Agency in the Horn**
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- **Decolonize Everything?**
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- **Mining and the Jobs Disconnect**
Nelson Oppong, University of Edinburgh
- **The African Union's Push for Women's Rights**
Aili Mari Tripp, University of Wisconsin, Madison

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CURRENT HISTORY

April 2023

Vol. 122, No. 843

CONTENTS

- 123 India's Oligarchic State Capitalism** *Elizabeth Chatterjee*
The Indian economic model, once known for state planning and cumbersome regulation, has come to be dominated by gigantic conglomerates with close ties to the ruling party.
- 131 A Country in Abeyance: Sri Lanka's Continuing Crisis** *Nira Wickramasinghe*
The economic and political collapse in 2022 was the culmination of years of misrule. Despite mass protests, the governing class has yet to show any readiness to change.
- 137 In Myanmar, Generation Z Goes to War** *Shona Loong*
After the military seized power once again in a 2021 coup, young people took to the streets—and in the face of a brutal crackdown, many eventually took up arms.
- 143 How the Taliban Are Losing the Peace in Afghanistan**. *Ashley Jackson and Florian Weigand*
Since rolling triumphantly into Kabul in August 2021, the Taliban have struggled in their return to governing the country as an isolated emir dictates hardline policies.
- 149 What Lies Beneath Pakistan's Disastrous Floods** *Shandana Khan Mohmand, Miguel Loureiro, and Lewis Sida*
The devastating floods of 2022 showed how the country's vulnerability to climate change is compounded by resource mismanagement and political polarization.
- PERSPECTIVE**
- 155 India's Heritage Conflicts Come to Varanasi** *Pralay Kanungo*
Hindu nationalists have brought their campaign to remake the country's history in their own image to the ancient city on the Ganges known for its diverse, interwoven culture.
- BOOKS**
- 158 India's New Water Works** *Debjani Bhattacharyya*
The politics of water management reveal how market liberalization and state bureaucracy have struck an uneasy balance in India, reproducing inequalities.

Erratum: In the March 2023 issue of *Current History*, in the article “Finland and Sweden’s Road to NATO,” by Tuomas Forsberg, the year should be 2013, not 2016, in this sentence on p. 93:

Sweden had faced a provocative Russian violation of the airspace near Gotland Island in the Baltic Sea on Easter in 2013, and subsequently had bolstered its readiness, reintroducing military conscription.

CURRENT HISTORY

April 2023

“Although it may galvanize much-needed industrial and infrastructural investment, the new oligarchic state capitalism brings with it a host of unpleasant side effects.”

India’s Oligarchic State Capitalism

ELIZABETH CHATTERJEE

It was an extraordinary outburst. At the end of 2019, Rahul Bajaj, veteran chairman of one of India’s most venerable business houses, addressed an audience that included three powerful cabinet ministers. He spoke for many of his fellow industrialists as they faced an increasing climate of intolerance that discouraged criticism of state policy: “We are afraid.”

When Narendra Modi took office as prime minister in 2014, business pundits hailed him as India’s Margaret Thatcher or Ronald Reagan—a neoliberalizer-in-chief for the world’s largest democracy. After all, both as chief minister of Gujarat from 2001 to 2014 and on the national stage, he had invoked a series of anti-state mantras: “Government has no business being in business,” he declared, promising instead “minimum government, maximum governance.”

After almost nine years of national rule by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), though, it is difficult to discern any meaningful commitment to free markets in its economic policy. While a pair of private conglomerates have come to dominate swaths of the economy, making their leaders the richest men in Asia, many other businesses fear that they have been left out in the cold. In international trade, protectionist tariffs and interventionist industrial policy have been the order of the day. On the social policy front, well-publicized welfare schemes have doled out both cash and tangible private goods like toilets, cooking gas, and electricity connections. Privatization of state-owned enterprises has been rare, though the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted renewed efforts as the government seeks to rein in the

ensuing fiscal deficit. How, then, should we make sense of India’s evolving economic model?

One way forward is to move beyond a fixation with the binary of public versus private ownership. There have been major changes in the underlying character of the Indian economy since the “big bang” of liberalizing reforms in 1991, but these are not best understood through the canonical processes of privatization and deregulation. Rather than a simple diminution in the quantity of state intervention in the economy since the days of central planning, there has been a transformation in its quality.

Even as the state has withdrawn from direct service provision in favor of the expanded presence of markets, its role has not necessarily been reduced in key sectors. This is an ideologically pragmatic state activism with altered priorities and new strategies of intervention, treating the market as means rather than master. As in other reinvented “state capitalist” systems, from Brazil to China, the state remains the dominant actor structuring India’s capitalist system, the pole star around which many large private firms continue to orbit.

Yet the incestuously close links between state and business have also proved to be a source of political and economic risk. By the time the BJP took power in New Delhi, India was facing a slow-burning crisis of both investment and legitimacy, generated by the state-dominated financial system and the previous government’s propensity for handing out resources to politically connected firms. The Modi administration has experimented with strategies to address this crisis—most significantly, a turn to centralized decision-making and investment mobilization through tight partnerships with a narrow set of favored business houses. Although this solution has delivered a form of

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renewed economic dynamism, an increasingly oligarchic state capitalism brings structural distortions and sharply curtailed political accountability.

THE REINVENTION OF STATE CAPITALISM

After independence in 1947, India's nationalist leadership committed to a strategy of state-led industrialization to accelerate economic development. While central planners endeavored to coordinate resource mobilization within the constraints imposed by electoral democracy and a lack of hard currency, state-owned enterprises (SOEs) proliferated across the economy. This was far from the state socialism of the Soviet Union: large private firms remained important players in many key sectors. But there, too, the state's supervisory hand weighed heavily.

Direct state intervention intensified from the late 1960s into the early 1970s, when banking, coal, and other important sectors were nationalized even as economic growth slumped to a dismal rate barely above population growth. Contrary to the popular narrative of state bloat, the Indian state remained distinctly undermanned in relation to the country's huge population. Nonetheless, India's "License Raj" was denounced for its corruption and red tape; by the early 1980s it had become a cautionary tale deployed by free-market economists to delegitimize state intervention around the world.

In fits and starts from the early 1980s onward, India's development model shifted in the face of such anti-state critiques. A cash-strapped state increasingly looked to private investment as the panacea for all its woes. The balance-of-payments crisis of 1991 opened a window of opportunity for reformers in New Delhi. A minority government led by the wily Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao of the Indian National Congress party pushed through ambitious economic reforms.

India's economic liberalization was itself a state-led project, initiated by senior bureaucrats in the face of resistance from incumbent industrialists. Central planning diminished in scope, and deregulation opened many sectors to competition. Private enterprises flourished in sectors from software and telecoms to pharmaceuticals and airlines.

Still, liberalization proceeded within limits. Early reforms concentrated on the elite domain of macroeconomic and trade policy; tariff levels steadily dropped, especially from the early 2000s, though the economy remained comparatively closed off to foreign influence. But popular opposition stymied major agricultural or labor market reforms, just as a yearlong farmer's movement would thwart Modi's attempted agricultural liberalization in 2020–21.

Similarly, large-scale privatizations proved politically unpalatable. Instead of being closed outright, many SOEs were exposed to the discipline of competition. Simultaneously, a stealthier form of disinvestment hollowed out these firms from beneath: many of their street-level functions, like billing or day-to-day maintenance, were outsourced to a growing "contractor raj" of private companies and their often poorly paid and casualized workforces.

In the years before 2014, the public sector's main contribution to the economy shifted from industry to infrastructure and finance. State-owned incumbents continued to dominate in critical sectors, including energy and mineral extraction and processing. Several remained among the largest of India's firms by revenue and market capitalization, especially those with control over natural resources.

The biggest were floated on the stock market, bringing their operations under the scrutiny of minority shareholders—and raising useful revenues for the national government as it divested partial control. Yet the firms' growing on-paper autonomy could not always protect them from political interference. The government demanded countercyclical spending and milked them for special dividends. SOEs continued to have a major presence in key sectors despite, not because of, state policy.

THE GUJARAT MODEL

The three decades of liberalization after 1991 survived several changes of government and ever more competitive elections, testifying to a surprisingly robust elite consensus on the need for further rounds of economic reforms. The commitment to radical deregulation found its most vocal expression during the BJP's first-ever extended stint holding national power, the 1998–2004 premiership of

*This was a state capitalism that
dared not speak its name.*

the urbane Atal Bihari Vajpayee. It was far from predetermined, though, that the Hindu nationalist party would embrace liberalization.

From the beginning of the post-independence era, secular conservatives were committed to free enterprise. Yet leading ideologues within the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the huge Hindu nationalist volunteer organization that today boasts almost 60,000 branches across the country, were more ambivalent. While valorizing private ownership, they tended to echo Gandhian preferences for small-scale appropriate technology over heavy industry, frugality over consumerism, and decentralization over big business. The economic thinker Dattopant Thengadi accordingly called for a “third way” between the individualism of Western capitalism and Soviet collectivism, lionizing economic nationalism and self-sufficiency (*swadeshi*).

All this began to change with the colonization of the Hindu nationalist movement by a growing middle class disillusioned with the increasingly personalistic and scandal-prone Congress. Founded in 1980, the BJP became ever more urban and associated with a “pro-rich” outlook, marrying its cultural nationalism to an embrace of the market. This drew dissent in the broader movement’s ranks: the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh and the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh, the Hindu nationalist trade union and farmers’ organization (both founded by Thengadi), have been fierce critics of economic liberalization—thorns in the side of more business-friendly BJP politicians. Since 2014, the tensions between economic nationalism and global opening have continued to haunt the BJP’s second extended period in national power.

No leader has embodied this business-friendly turn more than Narendra Modi, a middle-aged RSS activist parachuted into the seat of power in the western state of Gujarat in 2001. His 13-year stint as chief minister saw Gujarat confirmed as the darling of free-market economists, lauded for its minimal state and business-friendly atmosphere. As Modi adopted austerity to confront a deep fiscal crisis, the lower bureaucracy was stripped down, with many positions deliberately left vacant. Human development indicators lagged far behind economic growth, as inequality widened and labor did not share in the fruits of development.

Nonetheless, the “Gujarat model” retained a muscular role for the state. New technocratic agencies sought to attract private firms with incentives like cheap land, tax holidays, and low wages.

Gujarat’s early leadership in solar energy, for example, relied on aggressive state support for the infant industry, though tendencies toward oligarchic consolidation undercut competition.

In key sectors, state enterprises were revamped rather than abandoned. Gujarat’s much-touted electricity reforms selectively combined private power plants with public distribution utilities, proactively compensating bureaucrats who stood to lose out in order to ease the process of transformation. This salvaging of a once-bankrupt sector came at the cost of loading the state with debt and underused electricity capacity. In hydrocarbon exploration, public-sector champion Gujarat State Petroleum Corporation was favored alongside big private players, though this uneven playing field could not save it from huge losses when an expensive bet on natural gas exploration failed to pay off. Overall, the state appeared to promote powerful and politically connected domestic firms, coordinating regular, high-profile state–business con-claves both at home and abroad.

This was a state capitalism that dared not speak its name, having been thoroughly infused with liberalizing critiques of bureaucratic excess. Unlike the old state planning, it had dual vocations. On one hand, the state carried out classic developmental activities, such as midwifing new industries and promoting economic interests on the international stage. On the other, it developed an essentially corrective vocation, a project of state repair that aimed to mitigate the excesses of older state planning. This meant administrative reform to discipline the bureaucracy, and a loose division of labor: state retreat and deregulation in sectors deemed non-strategic were matched by assertive intervention in others, especially energy and infrastructure. In practice, tenets of free-market economics—like competition or fiscal discipline—were often sacrificed in favor of the pragmatic drive to mobilize investment and stimulate growth, even at the cost of rising inequality and risky debts.

THE CRISIS OF STATE CAPITALISM

From around 2003 to 2010, this reinvented state capitalism powered record economic growth, both in Modi’s Gujarat and in the country at large. India’s annual growth rate reached a scorching 8.5 percent in 2010. Yet this short-term achievement had precarious foundations.

To accelerate economic development through a great infrastructure buildout, the Congress-led

United Progressive Alliance coalition government, in power in New Delhi from 2004 to 2014, had begun massive giveaways of state-controlled natural resources like coal and land, with little transparency or oversight. Public sector banks continued to account for as much as four-fifths of all debt issued in the country. In the 2000s, they provided an unprecedented wave of credit, much of it flowing to infrastructure projects like power plants, roads, and airports.

The beneficiaries of this splurge were disproportionately private firms with deep political connections. Many of them were not the storied business houses of the planning era, but first- or second-generation upstarts with little prior experience. Their structure reflected the continued importance of state finance. Unlike the single-industry corporations that have come to dominate the United States, large Indian firms often became sprawling conglomerates with multiple and horizontally diversified subsidiaries. This octopus-like form allowed them to channel cheap state financing from one arm to the other through a maze of loans and cross-holdings, leaving the taxpayer on the hook for any losses while the tight-knit founding families retained close control without putting their own equity at risk.

To be sure, there was also the emergence of what are now well-known entrepreneurial firms in software services and pharmaceuticals. But the hefty profits of the new conglomerates in the 2000s created a plethora of dollar billionaires, half of them conspicuously drawing profits from sectors still heavily structured by state licensing and intervention, such as mining, energy, telecoms, and construction. Given the share of national wealth cornered by the billionaire class in this new patronage system, India entered the ranks of the most unequal societies in the world. Commentators dubbed it an Indian “Gilded Age.”

As in the late-nineteenth-century United States, such crony capitalism sparked a popular backlash. From 2010 onward, regulatory agencies, the judiciary, and the media combined to unearth a series of scams around the state’s allocation of national resources, from telecom spectrum to coal fields. Anticorruption activists led mass protests on the streets of the capital. Fearing investigation, bureaucrats and bankers stalled on licensing and policy decisions. As demand slumped and debt-laden

infrastructure projects sat incomplete or idle, the full costs of the overleveraged “resource raj” became painfully apparent.

With the economy slowing amid scandal and recrimination, Arvind Subramanian, chief economic adviser to the Indian government between 2014 and 2018, offered a pungent verdict. Under central planning, he said, India had been plagued by “socialism without entry,” an inefficient regime in which production was restricted to privileged incumbents able to capture state licenses. Now, India faced “capitalism without exit,” devoid of creative destruction.

As risk-averse public sector banks indecisively resorted to “extend and pretend” tactics, endlessly rolling over bad loans, zombie firms staggered on. The banks reeled under the burden of soaring defaults, while overleveraged private firms proved equally reluctant to expand. Amidst this “twin balance sheet problem,” public and private investment slumped.

The result was a slow-burning financial crisis. Eventually it would claim some of the biggest scalps

in Indian industry, among them businesses like Kingfisher Airlines and conglomerates Lanco and Essar. By 2020, even Anil Ambani, younger brother of the multibillionaire head of Reliance Industries, filed for bankruptcy in Lon-

don to stave off the Chinese creditors circling his insolvent firms. (The Pandora Papers revealed that he still had \$1.3 billion squirreled away offshore.) It was this crisis of graft and policy paralysis that the BJP promised to solve, touting the incoming prime minister as India’s “development man.”

THE MUSCULAR EXECUTIVE

Once in office, the Modi government was swift to act. The Planning Commission, a once-powerful organ long enfeebled by the decline of central planning, was abolished and replaced with a state think tank, while the Prime Minister’s Office took on a newly dominant role. Its centralized and secretive approach notoriously culminated in the sudden invalidation of all large banknotes in 2016, to the horror of mainstream economists. Demonetization disrupted the cash-dependent economy, even as this purported anticorruption move proved surprisingly popular with many voters.

The government was much less decisive in addressing the banking crisis. Although state

The state remains the dominant actor structuring India’s capitalist system.

statisticians controversially shifted their methodology to generate more flattering calculations of national economic performance, the twin balance sheet problem only deepened. Improved bankruptcy laws were introduced, but efforts to punish large delinquent firms became mired in litigation. Talk of creating a “bad bank” to consolidate non-performing assets was slow to translate into action; stressed loans did not peak until 2017–18. The declining share of public sector banks in the financial system has been a symptom of degeneration as much as it reflects the rising dynamism of their private rivals.

As beleaguered state-owned banks reluctantly began writing off vast piles of soured loans, the government was forced to infuse some \$50 billion to bail them out. Meanwhile, the debt problem spread to the underregulated “shadow banks” that had stepped in as the flow of state credit dried up. The nonbank lender Infrastructure Leasing & Financial Services defaulted on its obligations in 2018, forcing effective nationalization. The impacts reverberated throughout society. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic struck, consumer spending fell for the first time in four decades. As growth rates languished well below their heights of the 2000s, commentators lamented a lost decade for the Indian economy.

THE AA ECONOMY

The Modi regime has found an unorthodox solution to the investment problem, reinventing state capitalism in the process. Instead of the indiscriminate resource giveaways of the previous government, in which firms competed to buy influence at every level of a porous state, the Modi administration has sought to impose discipline on state–business relations. As a result of this newly centralized approach, two huge private conglomerates have flourished and spread their tentacles across the Indian economy.

Since they were created to take advantage of proximity to the interventionist state, they might be considered a form of state-capitalist hybrid. Their activities are concentrated in domestic infrastructure and energy sectors that are heavily shaped by state regulation and shielded from international competition. They are treated like national champions; their form makes the distinction between public and private increasingly blurred.

The first is Reliance Industries, headed by Mukesh Ambani, the elder son of a Gujarati

entrepreneur who built up an empire in polyester textiles through political shrewdness and an iron grip on the country's then-nascent stock exchange. Today its market value of around \$203 billion makes Reliance India's most valuable company, with revenues equivalent to almost 3 percent of national GDP. Reliance spans many capital-intensive industries that require close cooperation with state licensing authorities, especially petrochemicals, oil, and gas. It has also diversified into retail, selling everything from groceries to apparel and consumer electronics. Since 2016, its subsidiary Jio has rapidly emerged as the country's leading mobile phone company by launching a ferocious price war to gain market share—aided by regulatory changes that hobbled its incumbent rivals. More recently, Reliance has struck a lucrative deal to process cheap Russian crude oil, peddling gasoline and diesel to Europe in a sign of India's assertively independent foreign policy.

The rise of the Adani Group has been even more eye-catching. Gautam Adani started a commodity trading firm in 1988, moving from polymers into metals, textiles, and agricultural products. A turning point arrived in 1995, when his firm won a contract from the government of Gujarat to develop a port complex on the north shore of the Gulf of Kutch, 30 miles from what would soon become the world's largest single-site oil refinery, owned by Reliance. Adani has described the firm's business model as “adjacency-based”: from ports, it moved upstream and downstream to vertically integrate control of entire value chains, from fuels and other inputs to logistics.

Adani is now India's largest private controller of ports and airports and its leading private coal trader and private electricity provider, as well as a major player in logistics, agribusiness, natural gas distribution, and data centers. Since Modi's arrival in office in 2014, Gautam Adani's personal wealth has grown thirtyfold. In 2022 he was briefly the second-richest person in the world.

Together, the two conglomerates' aggressive expansion has ushered in an unprecedented concentration of wealth and economic power in India. As they snap up the assets of distressed rivals at fire-sale prices, oligarchic consolidation has proceeded apace in steel, cement, telecoms, and other industries. To the disquiet of many observers, both firms have bought ownership stakes in media houses. With privileged access to domestic credit—even facilitated by India's central bank, some critics have contended—these conglomerates have also

embarked on overseas shopping sprees, buying up not just high-profile retail brands (like the British toy store Hamleys), but also small high-tech firms that offer an edge in renewable technologies.

The so-called AA economy (referring to Adani and Ambani) is more than an example of state capture. It offers significant reciprocal advantages for the ruling party. Most obviously, the government has centralized financing for India's ferociously competitive elections—the world's most expensive—via an opaque system of electoral bonds, which have facilitated contributions worth \$1.34 billion since March 2018. The lion's share has likely flowed to the BJP, though monitoring this is next to impossible. Even while demonizing the petty corruption of street-level bureaucrats, the government has effectively regularized the payment of access money for state favors.

The new economic oligarchy also offers a solution to the deeper problem of sustained resource mobilization in the wake of the twin balance sheet crisis. Whereas public sector banks and most private firms have remained reluctant to invest, the Ambani- and Adani-led conglomerates have expanded with alacrity. As with Amazon in the United States, they appear less concerned with immediate profits than with strategic longer-term growth in market share. Reliance alone is responsible for roughly a fifth of all capital investment among India's 500 largest non-financial companies. Though some of its subsidiaries are lucrative, its overall return on investment has been modest, and it often plows profits back into capital-intensive investments in new sectors. As for Adani, despite its founder's soaring personal wealth, its expansion into diverse sectors has been heavily fueled by debt and high risk tolerance.

Together, the Ambani and Adani firms have rapidly helped to overcome many of India's infrastructural bottlenecks—albeit at the cost of increasingly monopolistic control. The two business houses hold out the tantalizing prospect of an indigenously led structural transformation of the economy. India has long struggled to expand its share of global manufacturing; Modi's more traditionally developmentalist campaign, "Make in India" (launched in 2014), had little success in galvanizing industry. In contrast, both Ambani and Adani are rapidly expanding into green energy. Reliance has invested more than \$60 billion of its

own cash in hydrogen technologies and solar component manufacturing. Adani has pledged similarly large investments, extending its existing capacity in manufacturing solar panels and wind turbines.

Many foreign multinationals have opted for partnerships with these conglomerates instead of standalone projects. The recent surge of foreign investor interest in such collaborations may be less a gesture of confidence in the BJP's economic management than a recognition that going it alone in twenty-first-century India is too risky.

Yet as this piece went to press, the huge new risks generated by oligarchic state capitalism itself were thrown sharply into focus. On January 24, 2023, Hindenburg Research, a small, short-selling US investment firm, accused Adani of "pulling the largest con in corporate history." Hindenburg's report alleged a decades-long scheme of artificial share price inflation and accounting fraud, enabled by a shadowy web of family-owned shell entities based in wealthy Indians' favored tax haven of Mauritius. Within a week, the Adani Group's listed subsidiaries had lost almost half of their market value; Gautam Adani's personal fortune had hemorrhaged more than \$50 billion.

By spotlighting the conglomerate's eye-watering levels of debt, much of it recently incurred from foreign creditors and in need of regular top-ups, the scandal

exposed the precarity of the Indian developmental model. Revealingly, the Adani Group's spokesmen stood before an Indian flag to denounce its critics as anti-national. As the backlash mounts, it remains to be seen whether the Modi government will decide that its private national champion—the keystone of its infrastructure and industrial policy—is too precious to sacrifice.

THE RETURN OF PRIVATIZATION?

The highly infectious Delta variant of COVID-19 hit India hard, with the estimated death toll as high as five million by June 2021. Contending with a fiscal deficit that was high even before its (relatively conservative) pandemic stimulus, the state has touted a new policy of disinvestment. It has declared its intention to withdraw almost entirely from direct ownership in the economy, retaining a presence in only four strategic (if strikingly broad) areas: atomic energy, space, and defense; power, petroleum, and minerals;

Huge private conglomerates have spread their tentacles across the economy.

transport and telecommunications; and banking, insurance, and financial services. Disregarding the popular opposition that hobbled previous attempts at disinvestment, the government vows that SOEs in “non-strategic” sectors will be either closed or privatized.

The most headline-grabbing example of the new approach has been the sell-off of the chronically loss-making Air India to the Tata Group; previous governments had unsuccessfully attempted to dispose of the state-owned airline. With less fanfare, coal mining was opened up to private participation, exposing the state-owned behemoth Coal India to rising competition. Still more meaningful is the belated action taking place in the dysfunctional state-controlled banking system, with the planned privatization of several large public sector banks. But the government has already hesitated, moderating its disinvestment targets and putting on hold the privatization of the profitable oil company Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd. Real movement is likely to wait until after the 2024 general election.

Even if privatization finally accelerates, the result is likely to be more of the same: increasing private participation, but on a highly uneven playing field. This has dovetailed with the state's rising economic nationalism. Since the peak of the pandemic, the government has doubled down on its insular and protectionist rhetoric with the slogan *Atmanirbhar Bharat* (Self-Reliant India), doling out subsidies for job creation. Domestic manufacturers are sheltered behind rising import tariffs, still among the highest in big emerging economies. With government finances strained and state assets on the auction block, the country's largest private incumbents look ideally positioned to continue their steroid-fueled growth.

OLIGARCHIC STATE CAPITALISM

In the short term, at least, India appears to exhibit a symbiotic relationship between the state leadership and a small coterie of favored businessmen. Instead of the impersonal character of idealized market exchange, a personalized and highly centralized system has arisen to mobilize private resources through elite exchanges of power and wealth. How sustainable is this narrow alliance, both economically and politically?

Scholars of China have argued that not all corruption is equally bad for growth, pointing out that the United States' own Gilded Age saw notorious influence peddling coincide with rapid industrialization. International investors and

commentators seem to agree. A surge of foreign investment has headed for India, helping to power respectable growth rates even as many other emerging economies face sovereign debt crises in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The *New York Times* recently declared that the next decade will see the emergence of “India's world.”

Yet there are reasons to question this sanguine verdict. Although it may galvanize much-needed industrial and infrastructural investment, the new oligarchic state capitalism brings with it a host of unpleasant side effects. It generates economic distortions, inequality, and vulnerability to political and economic crises.

The exchange of access money for political favors exacerbates the arbitrariness of government rule-making, undermining the rule of law. Investments have been disproportionately allocated to capital-intensive and often ecologically ruinous sectors, with few spillovers into the labor-intensive development that India so badly needs. Such distortions contribute to the skewed shape of Indian capitalism: a plethora of tiny, unprofitable firms beneath a clique of massive, gatekeeping incumbents, with a missing middle in between, throttling an important source of economic innovation. The overwhelming capture of the fruits of economic growth by the very top of Indian society—Oxfam estimates that by 2022, the richest 1 percent of the population owned 40.6 percent of the country's total wealth—creates rampant inequality.

Such close state-business ties also increase the risk of both economic and political crises. Corruption scandals can become politically toxic, as the policy paralysis between 2010 and 2014 shows, and produce new sources of regulatory uncertainty which businesses must navigate. The current scandal over Adani's empire threatens both to undermine foreign investor interest in India and to delegitimize the government's development approach at home. The conglomerate's highly leveraged portfolio also creates the risk of systemwide contagion in the event of a debt default, though the apparently limited exposure of state banks to the Adani stock collapse suggests that many were already well aware of the firm's precarious and opaque finances. As we have seen so often, large private firms may capture superprofits in good years but socialize losses during lean times, dumping sick enterprises “too big to fail” onto the state—and taxpayers.

Even without outright scandals, India has developed a personalized system reliant on key

individuals—another source of instability, as was illustrated by recent rumors of Mukesh Ambani's ill health. Could any politician other than Modi—with his charisma, his freedom from children and other relatives demanding favors, and his personal reputation for incorruptibility—successfully balance electoral democracy with capitalist oligopoly?

Most worryingly, the new state capitalism undermines that very democracy, already being

whittled down to the formal performance of elections. The opacity of campaign finance, flowing overwhelmingly into the coffers of the ruling party, helps to insulate the executive from popular accountability, even as it makes shadowy corporate influence a legal pillar of the political system. If there is to be any meaningful check or challenge to the new concentration of economic and political power, it will have to come from outside this system. ■

“If the immediate economic collapse was due to complete mismanagement by the government, it must also be read as the culmination of years of misrule by the Rajapaksa clan.”

A Country in Abeyance: Sri Lanka’s Continuing Crisis

NIRA WICKRAMASINGHE

There are few historical precedents for the events that unfolded in Sri Lanka between March and July 2022. Under the gaze of the global media, a movement of citizens—in mostly nonviolent scenes reminiscent of Eugène Delacroix’s painting *Liberty Leading the People*—ousted a prime minister and a president, brothers held responsible for the country’s economic collapse. During the period preceding these exceptional months, events had accelerated, multiplying and sharpening hardships to a point where it became impossible for people to contain their anger and desperation.

In April 2022, the government defaulted on its debt for the first time in its history. Lack of foreign currency reserves made it difficult to purchase imports and drove up domestic prices of goods. As inflation spiraled out of control, fuel shortages paralyzed everyday life. There were island-wide power outages and massive hikes in the cost of essentials such as milk powder. Amid shortages of medicines, vital surgeries were postponed indefinitely in a country accustomed to a high standard of free health care.

All this led Sri Lankans of all classes to join mass protests calling on President Gotabaya Rajapaksa and his government to resign. The Rajapaksa family had ruled since 2005, save for a hiatus between 2014 and 2019; their corruption- and nepotism-ridden regime was identified as the main reason for the collapse of the economy. The protests started as small vigils on street corners at the beginning of 2022. The cry of “Gota go home!” soon reverberated in all parts of the island. A

“Gota Go village” (*Gota Go gama*) was set up on the Galle Face Green in Colombo, opposite the Presidential Secretariat, and it became the central place for people to gather in solidarity with the protest movement.

For a moment, the dream of regime change seemed a reality. Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa stepped down on May 9, 2022. His brother Gotabaya, the president, followed suit on July 9, and then fled to Singapore on July 14. But the status quo remained unchanged.

To fill the vacuum in the presidency, the Parliament, dominated by the Rajapaksas’ Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (Sri Lanka People’s Front), elected Ranil Wickremesinghe—a six-time former prime minister who was clearly a proxy for his predecessor and a protector of the Rajapaksa family. Disgusted, the crowds rebaptized him “Ranil Rajapaksa.” In the months that followed his accession, Wickremesinghe ordered the military to crack down on protesters who had occupied government buildings. Draconian law-and-order regulations were used without hesitation.

As of this writing, the worst appears to be over. Sri Lanka is no longer in the international news, a sure sign that nothing as spectacular as the storming of the Presidential Secretariat by irate citizens is still happening, much less the now-iconic image of some of them enjoying the presidential swimming pool. Colombo has returned to its normalized chaos of cars, three-wheelers, and overcrowded buses racing along tree-lined avenues. No longer are there fuel queues extending for miles; power cuts are less frequent. Children in white school uniforms are back on the streets after months of uncertainty.

But in a predominantly rural country, Colombo is not a mirror of the nation, and first appearances

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are deceiving. The crisis—a composite of social, political, and economic vectors—is far from over. Inflation remains devastatingly high: food inflation peaked at 95 percent in September 2022, and staple foods are unaffordable for millions. Educated men and women are leaving the country. Participants in the protests remain in jail, held under the Prevention of Terrorism Act.

Sri Lanka was once a model for developing nations, with a fast-growing economy, low poverty, and the highest social indicators in the South Asian region. Today, the Indian Ocean island of 22 million people is virtually bankrupt, facing unprecedented humanitarian and health crises. Many Sri Lankans are asking how they fell so low, and so suddenly. Can a country ruled by the same group that presided over its downfall find a path to recovery? If not, what are the other options?

ROAD TO RUIN

In hindsight, the roots of the present crisis can be traced as far back as the aftermath of the country's independence in 1948. Sri Lanka continued the colonial economic model of exporting primary goods—tea, rubber, and coconut—to earn enough currency to import essential goods that it did not produce. This model never really worked, even at the best of times. The development of an export-oriented garment industry, a booming tourism sector, and remittances from overseas Sri Lankans were not sufficient to offset the balance-of-payment deficit.

The ruling political class adopted populist macroeconomic policies in order to consolidate power. Parties competed with each other in doling out largesse. Election promises included a cocktail of subsidized rice, cheap bread, free fertilizer, and lower taxes. Decades of running fiscal deficits and printing money to cover them resulted in a chronically high inflation rate and dwindling government revenue.

During election periods, it was customary for political parties to promise supporters jobs in the bloated state sector, especially in the police force, ministries, or state corporations. It is estimated that over a sixth of the country's current total workforce is employed by the state, amounting to 1.4 million employees. Furthermore, even after the end of the 1983–2009 civil war, Sri Lanka retained a 350,000-strong army. Its military is the

17th-largest in the world. The revenue needed to pay salaries and pensions has left little room for investment in health care, education, or research and development.

Sri Lanka's debt ballooned in the early 2000s, when the government shifted from a policy of borrowing mainly from international donors and bilateral lenders, such as Japan and the United Kingdom, to reliance on international financial markets and China, the country that provided Mahinda Rajapaksa with the weapons to crush the Tamil separatist movement. A number of large Chinese-financed infrastructure projects, such as the Lotus Tower in Colombo and a new harbor, international airport, and cricket stadium in Hambantota, the Rajapaksas' home district, are viewed as colossal, loss-making white elephants. During Mahinda's two terms as president, corruption was practiced with total impunity by relatives of the Rajapaksa clan who controlled state finances and took generous commissions on such projects.

More recent causes of the country's downfall include a deadly terrorist attack on Easter Sunday in 2019. An Islamist group targeted high-end tourist hotels and churches in Colombo and two other cities, Batticaloa and Negombo; 277 people were killed and more than 400 were wounded. This atrocity led to plunging revenues for the tourism industry and other businesses dependent on it.

Then in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic severely compromised Sri Lanka's income from both the struggling tourism sector and migrant labor remittances—its largest foreign exchange earners aside from tea. Since the late 1970s, Sri Lankans—mostly women from low-income backgrounds—have been employed in the Arabian Gulf countries, mainly as domestic workers. Their remittances amounted to \$7 billion in 2020, but dropped to \$1.3 billion in the first five months of 2022. The situation further worsened due to the war in Ukraine, which led to an increase in the price of oil, a fall in Ukrainian and Russian tourist numbers, and a drop in tea exports to Russia.

Many of these issues had global effects. But it was a series of decisions by the Rajapaksa brothers, starting in 2019, that brought the island to the brink of collapse. First, Gotabaya Rajapaksa enacted his campaign promise of abolishing seven taxes, thus reducing the number of taxpayers from 1,550,000 to 412,000, and lowering the value-

Rajapaksa's rule displayed many continuities with past regimes.

added tax rate from 15 percent to 8 percent. This single policy shift sharply reduced government revenue.

Faced with a shortage of foreign exchange, the regime suddenly imposed a conversion to organic farming and halted imports of fertilizers and other chemical inputs, ignoring warnings from specialists in the field. The consequences were shattering. Production of tea, the second-largest export category after garments, fell by 40 percent. Production of rice, the staple food of the Sri Lankan people, fell by 20 percent. It became necessary to import rice; until then, Sri Lanka had been self-sufficient in rice except in exceptional climatic circumstances. Food price inflation rose, and farmers' livelihoods collapsed. A fuel shortage impeded the work of fishing boats, limiting the supply of the country's staple protein.

The food crisis experienced by Sri Lankans today is undoubtedly of local making and the product of incompetent leadership. If the immediate economic collapse was due to complete mismanagement by the government, it must also be read as the culmination of years of misrule by the Rajapaksa clan.

FAMILY MISRULE

How did a clan succeed in hijacking an entire country? As president-elect in 2005, Mahinda Rajapaksa presented himself as a new beginning. His posture as a leader born of the people led the rural majority to see him as *ape kena* (one of us). Though Mahinda came from a bilingual, rural middle class, with whom less-Westernized social groups could more easily identify than with most political leaders who were urban-based and Anglicized, he was not a subaltern in any sense of the term. Unlike Ranasinghe Premadasa, who was president from 1989 to 1993 and hailed from a non-elite caste and an underprivileged urban background, Rajapaksa belongs to the dominant Goyigama caste. His ancestors include a famous statesman, D. M. Rajapaksa.

Political dynasties in Sri Lankan politics are not exceptional; they can be found at the national, regional, and local levels. Ranil Wickremesinghe, president since August 2022, is the nephew of J. R. Jayewardene, who led the United National Party and served as prime minister and then president from 1977 to 1989. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) was also long dominated by a single family. Its founder, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, his wife, Sirimavo Ratwatte Bandaranaike, and their daughter,

Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, have all served as prime minister and/or president of Sri Lanka in the past four decades. The rise of the Rajapaksas in the southern part of the country, the Ruhunu, began with Don David Rajapaksa, Mahinda's grandfather, and continued with D. A. Rajapaksa, Mahinda's father, who became a member of Parliament after independence.

But the Rajapaksas were always at the margins of the SLFP. The loyalty of the party's members and leaders to the Bandaranaike family, and to Chandrika Kumaratunga in particular, partly explains why Mahinda Rajapaksa turned to a much smaller group of loyalists. During his presidency, from 2005 to 2015, the power center was constituted by his brothers: Gotabaya served as defense secretary, Basil was in charge of the Ministry of Economic Development, and Chamal was speaker of Parliament. Approximately 70 percent of the national budget fell under the control of the ruling family. The president's eldest son, Namal, elected to Parliament, was groomed for future national responsibilities. Hundreds of other family members were brought in to occupy government positions, from clerks to high officials.

In 2010, the year he won a second term, Rajapaksa implemented measures to strengthen the presidency and dismantle the institutional obstacles curtailing his power. The 18th Amendment to the Constitution removed the provision limiting the president to two terms in office and abolished the Constitutional Council, which reviewed presidential appointments to independent commissions and senior positions in the administration and the courts. The end of the civil war in 2009 could have heralded a period of unparalleled openness and experimentation in society and politics. Instead, the postwar state revealed its true nature—that of a corrupt, dynastic, and violent entity. The leadership appeared determined to maintain a regime of oppressive stability for the foreseeable future.

But then the unthinkable happened. In January 2015, peaceful and democratic change dismantled a seemingly invulnerable edifice. In the January 8 presidential election, Rajapaksa was defeated by Maithripala Sirisena, a former health minister and general secretary of the ruling SLFP, who won with 51.3 percent of the vote; Rajapaksa took 47.6 percent. Leftists, rightists, Buddhist nationalists, and minority parties cobbled together a coalition and put forward a reform plan that promised to restore

the institutions of governance and revise the constitution.

Yet the coalition government, with Ranil Wickremesinghe as prime minister, performed dismally—though it did succeed in passing the 19th Amendment, which diluted many presidential powers. In November 2019, the Rajapaksa family returned to power after Gotabaya Rajapaksa's winning presidential campaign promised law and order, in contrast with the inaction and ineptitude of the Sirisena–Wickremesinghe tandem—which had, in the view of the electorate, failed to prevent the Easter Sunday 2019 bomb attacks.

Gotabaya appointed his younger brother Mahinda as prime minister; the former president was now the leader of the newly formed Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (People's Front). The power of the family was consolidated in the parliamentary elections of August 2020, when the party won a landslide victory, capturing 145 seats in the 225-seat legislature. Nearly 60 percent of the electorate and around 80 percent of Sinhalese Buddhists endorsed a return to Rajapaksa family rule.

The new administration brought members of the military and Rajapaksa family members to center stage. Its first few months signaled a toughening of the state's position vis-à-vis Tamil and Muslim minorities. The government withdrew from its commitment to Resolution 30/1 of the United Nations Human Rights Council, co-sponsored by the previous government, which prescribed institutional steps for reconciliation and accountability in Sri Lanka, as well as the establishment of a judicial mechanism to investigate human rights violations. The COVID-19 pandemic created space for the normalization of the military's presence in the civilian sphere as it shouldered responsibility for the national response.

The bill providing for the 20th Amendment to the Constitution was passed on October 22, 2021, with a two-thirds parliamentary majority, after a two-day debate. It reversed key aspects of the 19th Amendment, reducing the prime minister's role to a ceremonial one and strengthening the president's powers with the authority to dissolve the Parliament after one year and sole discretion to appoint all judges of the superior courts.

The Rajapaksas displayed many continuities with past regimes: patronage, family politics, and

a special relationship with the rural majority in the south were a constant during the post-independence period. But their rule also introduced new features, such as rhetorically separating the citizenry into two groups: the pure and patriotic people versus the corrupt others. The latter category encompassed minorities who refused to recognize their inferior level of citizenship, as well as all nongovernmental organizations, civil society members, and cosmopolitan elites with different notions of an ideal society.

PEOPLE POWER

The protest movement that came to be known as the *aragalaya* (meaning “struggle” in Sinhalese) consisted of a broad variety of groups opposing the power bloc that had brought the country to its downfall. Though they had different agendas, and sometimes no clear vision as to what should replace the status quo, they shared a commitment to nonviolence and a will to sustain protests until a new government could be formed, untainted by corruption and competent enough to address the social and economic collapse of the country.

Sri Lankans are generally not known for public protests, though this form of action was common in the north until the late 1960s.

The Pottuvil to Polikandy five-day protest march in February 2022, demanding justice for Tamil-speaking people, was grounded in nonviolent Tamil political struggles of the 1960s. The last real nonviolent public outburst in the south was the *hartal* (general strike) of 1953 against a reduction of subsidies and tripling of the price of rice. That protest, spearheaded by Marxist parties, resulted in the resignation of Prime Minister Dudley Senanayake after repressive measures led to over 10 deaths.

The 2022 *aragalaya* started, like many protest movements of the twenty-first century, as a social media campaign against economic hardships. But it soon expanded to street protests voicing anti-regime sentiments and calls for accountability for a political elite denounced as corrupt and self-serving. Unlike the near-orientalist images that appeared in international media, emphasizing mobilization on religious lines, this was a space where people of all faiths interacted freely, a place of equality where Christians, Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus mingled, in contrast to the expected standards of Sri Lanka's divisive politics.

*The law used against protesters
is a relic of the civil war.*

As months went by, the Gota Go Village on Galle Face Green overlooking the Indian Ocean acquired a movie theater (Tear Gas Cinema), a people's university, a legal aid and medical center, a community kitchen, and all kinds of artistic and musical performances. Well-wishers provided free Wi-Fi, tents, and bottled water. Every day, occupants cleaned the site, and people congregated with placards calling for the resignations of the Rajapaksa clan. Similar protest sites emerged all over the island.

The people who marched on July 9, 2022, including the present writer, belonged to all classes, ethnicities, professions, and genders. Left-wing political parties such as the Socialist Frontline Party and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front), the radical student movement, trade unions, associations of lawyers and academics, religious leaders, and artists were active participants. In a country where the majority of the people are young, there were many youthful protesters who used the language of social media to demand an end to "deal politics" and "a new political culture."

After Wickremesinghe was installed as president, middle-class participants withdrew from the demonstrations, willing to give him a chance. That left the protest site mainly to groups affiliated with radical leftist parties.

The track record of the aragalaya is not without blemishes. Violence was unleashed at particular moments. On May 9, 2022, a riot broke out when Mahinda Rajapaksa called on his supporters to attack the protesters at the Galle Face site. In retaliation, 65 residences of parliamentarians were vandalized. One member of Parliament from the ruling party who was surrounded by a mob fatally shot a man, and was later found dead with his driver.

On July 9, following the unprecedented nonviolent uprising in Colombo, unknown assailants set fire to the prime minister's residence. On July 13, protesters stormed the prime minister's office, leading to another clash with the police. The president declared a state of emergency and ordered the clearing of the protest site and the arrest of the movement's leaders. This was an obviously partial move, since no attempt was made to apprehend those who had committed violence against the protesters. Over 4,000 people who were identified as being prominent in the protests and on social media, or who had entered the presidential compound, were arrested.

PATHOLOGIES OF CIVIL WAR

The legacy of the civil war in contemporary Sri Lanka lingers on. The 26-year conflict devastated agriculture and fishing in the north and east of the country, destroyed the infrastructure in war zones, and prompted a large-scale migration of Sri Lankans, mostly from the Tamil community. During those years, Sinhala Buddhist nationalism became the dominant state ideology. Turning this legacy around to create a non-sectarian state is a nearly insurmountable challenge.

The history of the conflict is still very much present in the repressive nature of the state. The law used against protesters, the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), which allows the state to detain a suspect for months, is a relic of the civil war. The state's cultivation of fear through a blasphemy law and intimidation of public intellectuals is another leftover from the war, as is the reliance on the military and police to deal with the protest movement.

This heavy-handed approach has had counterintuitive effects. Many within the majority community have realized that their present predicament is no worse than what people in the north and east endured during two decades of civil war. This has planted the seeds for a rejection of polarization on ethnic lines, and signs of other solidarities are emerging.

Yet the animosity cultivated by the state for generations will not disappear with the wave of a magic wand. Is there a way out through mainstream politics when the political elites have based their mobilization apparatus on stoking the fear of the other?

A LONG PATH TO RECOVERY

The crisis is not only one of financial governance; it is also deeply social and political. For many people, the aragalaya inspired fresh hopes for a better future in which political democracy would involve participatory practices. There is little trust in the practices of the representative liberal democratic system enshrined in the 1978 Constitution, which has bred autocratic authoritarianism and weak parliamentarism.

Demands for constitutional change prompted the present government to push a 21st Amendment through Parliament, but it does not go far enough, stopping short of abolishing the executive presidency. The Frontline Socialist Party, a small, radical outfit that is influential in the aragalaya and much feared by the business community and

Colombo elites, is pushing for a People's Council. The National People's Power party, which holds three seats in Parliament, is another pivot in the movement—many student formations and trade unions are affiliated with its core element, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna.

The government and the private sector remain focused on a purely technical solution to the collapse, in the form of an International Monetary Fund (IMF) bailout. In September 2022, the IMF said it had reached a provisional agreement with Sri Lanka for a \$2.9 billion Extended Fund Facility agreement. To fulfill the IMF's conditions, Sri Lanka needs to restore macroeconomic stability and restructure its external debt with bilateral creditors, particularly China and India. The government has already introduced austerity measures that include removing subsidies for fuel imports, instituting tax reforms such as raising the VAT, and lowering the compulsory retirement age in the public sector from 62 to 60 in order to reduce the payroll. Further measures proposed by the IMF, such as privatizing loss-making state enterprises and making deeper cuts to public spending, could lead to a new round of domestic unrest.

Austerity measures will have to be balanced with a state commitment to invest in poorer and war-affected areas. Quality primary and secondary education as well as public health and transport facilities should be prioritized. Sri Lanka's high literacy rate and recent emigration of skilled people hide deficiencies in education for the masses. Technical and financial literacy are lacking. Unlike India, which invested very early in high-end institutes of technology in collaboration with foreign countries, Sri Lanka devalued technical education and instead developed a highly competitive and restrictive system of admission to its universities. Resources need to be reallocated so that the labor force can be retrained in future-oriented skills.

The question is whether the present government and Parliament have the ability to take the

country down a new path that involves systemic change. Wickremesinghe, who is acting as finance minister as well as president, has ignored the cries for political reform. Instead, he is working hand in glove with his disgraced predecessor's supporters. Gotabaya Rajapaksa is back in the country, living at public expense in his guarded residence, a sure sign that he does not fear prosecution. Sri Lanka's corruption problem is not limited to the heads of corporations and parliamentarians. It is pervasive at all levels.

The opposition is divided on ideological lines between left-wing statist and right-wing liberals. If it fails to form a united front and put forward a viable socioeconomic plan, the status quo will remain in place. Even the left has not come up with an alternative vision, beyond opposing privatization and claiming that unprofitable state-owned enterprises can be made viable with clean leadership.

Wickremesinghe has brushed off demands for early parliamentary elections issued by opposition parties that have yet to offer a new vision for the future. In January 2023, however, the election commission announced that local council elections postponed in 2022 would be held in March. This will be the voters' first opportunity to weigh in at the polls since the protests. It will pose a test both for the opposition and the ruling party.

Though there are signs that the country's situation is improving, with a fall in imports that contracted the trade deficit and a suspension of debt repayments, the months to come may be even worse than in 2022. Fuel and coal shortages are looming once again, and there are no signs that the government will reverse its attempt to clamp down on emerging protests. Until systemic change is envisaged, planned, and implemented—or unless a January 2023 call by 200 international economists and scholars for canceling the country's debt is heeded—Sri Lanka will remain in a state of abeyance. ■

“[Y]oung protesters-turned-fighters are reimagining the country’s future in unprecedented ways.”

In Myanmar, Generation Z Goes to War

SHONA LOONG

Days after Myanmar’s February 1, 2021, military coup, tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets. The protests had a tongue-in-cheek tone at first. Besides carrying signs demanding justice and democracy, protesters marched as princesses (“I don’t want dictatorship, I just want a boyfriend”), bodybuilders (“Love fitness, hate coup”), and jilted lovers (“My ex is bad, but Myanmar military is worse”). While denouncing the coup, protesters emphasized that they were young, funny, and social media savvy: a generation that had come of age during Myanmar’s so-called decade of democratization.

Four months earlier, five million people had voted for the first time in the 2020 general election. Myanmar Facebook had been awash with photos of inked pinky fingers that day. These posts indicated not only that people had voted, but that they were part of a generation proud to participate in Myanmar’s turn to democracy.

The coup shattered these hopes. Having oriented their lives around the belief that the country’s future would be brighter, more democratic, and more peaceful, Generation Z protesters experienced the reinstatement of junta rule as an existential blow. This is why anti-coup protests continued apace even as the Myanmar military detained protesters and fired at them with rubber bullets and live rounds. As of this writing, more than 16,000 people have been arrested by the State Administration Council (SAC) junta, and at least 2,500 have been killed.

Protesters also took up arms against the SAC. Some joined ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) that had for decades fought for autonomy in the country’s peripheries. Others organized small cells, called People’s Defense Forces (PDFs), which

attacked SAC targets in parts of inner Myanmar that previously had been spared conflict.

The first armed clash between protesters and the SAC came in late March 2021. In Kalay, in the northwestern region of Sagaing, civilians used hunting rifles and homemade weapons to fend off an attack on a protest camp. Although the military killed four protesters that day, the protest camp held out for ten more days until SAC forces destroyed it, killing eight civilians.

By mid-2021, clashes had escalated into a multi-front, countrywide conflict. As of December 2022, there had been fighting in at least 310 of the country’s 330 townships since the coup. Myanmar’s young bodybuilders, princesses, and jilted lovers have gone to war. Despite the protracted ethnonational conflicts in the borderlands, armed resistance on this scale is unprecedented. Nearly two years after the coup, it does not appear to be abating.

Understanding the nature and direction of the anti-coup movement, including its shift from non-violent protest to armed resistance, requires shedding two analytical frames that have been applied to the country in the past. First, politics in Myanmar has been mistakenly viewed through the lens of liberal democracy. An excessive focus on attaining the hallmarks of democracy—general elections, freedom of speech, and an active civil society—resulted in analysts overlooking or maligning EAOS, which were cast as warlords’ armies and spoilers of the democratic transition. Today, some of these armed ethnic groups are key to the anti-coup movement, sheltering protesters and training PDF fighters.

Second, Myanmar has been misread through the lens of state failure. Due to the perception of ethnonational conflict as driven by greed, criminality, or sectarianism—signs of a failed state—conflict actors were not recognized as political actors with aspirations for making the state anew. Today, many protesters-turned-fighters are fighting not

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solely to dismantle the junta, but for a new vision for the country.

Key to this vision is the National Unity Government (NUG). Through varying relationships with PDFs and EAOS, this government-in-exile is striving to establish policies and processes for a civilian-administered Myanmar. The NUG, protesters, and fighters of various stripes see the current conflict as a “last fight”: a final confrontation between the military and civilians that will leave a federal democratic union in its wake.

DEMANDS FOR DEMOCRACY

Myanmar is no stranger to junta rule, nor to mass protests. Resistance to the British occupation of Burma began in the mid-nineteenth century. Sporadic at first, anticolonial movements grew in fervor and culminated in the Hsaya San rebellion, which spread across lower Burma’s countryside between 1930 and 1932, amassing thousands of participants. The British crushed the rebellion, resulting in 3,000 dead or injured and the arrests of over 8,000 villagers.

In the use of force to crush uprisings, there are stark parallels between the Hsaya San rebellion and present-day protests, as well as earlier pro-democracy protests in postcolonial Burma. The “8888” uprising, named for its peak on August 8, 1988, was the most notable of the latter. At the time, Burma had been under junta rule for 26 years after a coup led by General Ne Win. His Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP) ruled Burma autocratically and sealed it off from the wider world.

Resentment of one-party rule ran deep, but the 8888 uprising is often attributed to the BSPP’s economic mismanagement. In 1985 and 1987, Ne Win imposed abrupt currency demonetizations, rendering select kyat bills invalid. In 1987, Burmese citizens could not exchange their notes for valid tender, and their savings were instantly wiped out. University students, incensed at their devalued savings for tuition, began to protest in late 1987. From the outset, the protests were met with violence. In March 1988, the military and riot police cornered demonstrators near White Bridge, close to Rangoon’s Inya Lake. This event is memorialized as the “Red Bridge” massacre for the blood that was spilled that day; dozens were killed and wounded.

Ne Win resigned in July 1988, promising to restore multiparty democracy. Although the BSPP

immediately voted down this proposal, protesters were energized. Previously unfocused protests, centered in Rangoon and Mandalay, united around demands for democracy and spread to even more towns and cities. By the time a general strike was held on August 8, the largest protests drew tens of thousands.

The military had already used violence to stamp out protests, but the crackdowns intensified in September when General Saw Maung established the State Law and Order Restoration Council—the BSPP’s successor—which subsequently changed the country’s name to Myanmar. Army units moved through Rangoon, breaking up protests and shooting at crowds, including outside the US embassy, where more than 1,000 students had been peacefully demonstrating. In a matter of days, the violence escalated. Fierce battles ensued as protesters began to fight back against state agents, police officers, and soldiers, but were swiftly overwhelmed by the military. The civilian death toll in 1988 is generally estimated to have surpassed 10,000. Not for the last time, pro-democracy demonstrations drew

a response of asymmetric violence, at an immense cost to civilians.

In 2011, Myanmar became a semidemocracy, with the military-affiliated Union Solidarity and Development

Party (USDP) at its helm. A multiparty election had been held the previous year, and for the first time in over five decades the results of such an election were respected. Although the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, boycotted the 2010 election, it won the 2015 general election by a landslide.

In both 2010 and 2015, there were considerable challenges to conducting free and fair elections. Most notably, the military-drafted 2008 constitution reserved one-quarter of seats in the parliament for military officers. Nonetheless, in the decade before the 2021 coup, it seemed that the 8888 protesters had achieved their demands, if imperfectly and at great cost. Public commemorations of the 8888 uprising were held on August 8 most years, often by survivors of the crackdowns—something that would have been unthinkable before 2011.

PERSISTENT REBELLION

People in the embattled peripheries were less sanguine about the country’s so-called democratic

*The military is in a quagmire
of its own making.*

transition. Myanmar's first multilateral cease-fire was signed in 2015 under the USDP government. Though it was called the Nationwide Cease-fire Agreement (NCA), only 8 out of more than 20 active ethnic armed organizations agreed to it that year.

NCA signatories attended peace negotiations during the NLD government's term in power, but the talks faltered over the military's intransigence. The generals were unwilling to revise the 2008 constitution, whereas NCA signatories insisted on ending the military's role in politics. As the peace process ground to a halt, protests recurred in the ethnic states. They were triggered by local events, but protesters were united in their resentment of how the "Burmanization" of Myanmar's peripheries had persisted under the guise of democratization.

The roots of ethnonational conflict run deep. Myanmar's oldest EAO is the Karen National Union (KNU). The KNU was formed in 1947, months before Burmese independence, out of existing Karen organizations that had petitioned the British for autonomy within an independent Burmese federation. The KNU began its armed struggle two years later, after several failed attempts to negotiate with the British and then with Burma's independent government.

Since then, EAOs have emerged to represent most non-Bamar groups, including the Kachin, Shan, Wa, Karenni, and Chin. These minorities have been continually sidelined by efforts to enforce Buddhism as the dominant religion and Burmese as the official language. No central government could claim to control the full extent of the country's territory, and attempts to quash ethnonational rebellions have been unsuccessful.

The military has relied on three main strategies for dealing with EAOs, none of which have taken ethnic demands for self-determination seriously. First, the military has deployed brutal counterinsurgency campaigns against EAOs and civilians in the areas they control. Ne Win's BSPP government originated the "four cuts" policy—named for its objective of severing links between insurgents and their sources of food, funds, recruits, and intelligence—which resulted in mass displacement and the razing of entire villages.

Second, the military has struck cease-fire deals under which EAOs transform into allied paramilitary forces in exchange for business concessions offered to their leaders. These deals have often resulted in reduced grassroots support for EAOs, since civilians perceive their leaders as benefiting

at their expense. This discontent galvanizes further rebellions.

Third, the military has practiced a strategy of divide and rule. Facing multiple ethnonational rebellions simultaneously, the military has made a cease-fire deal with one EAO only to break an existing truce with another group. In the early 2010s, when the military was courting the KNU for a cease-fire, it reneged on its 17-year-old truce with the Kachin Independence Organization. Divide and rule has allowed the military to manage its resources expediently in a multifront conflict, thereby keeping the country in a permanent state of neither-war-nor-peace.

DEMOCRACY VS. ETHNONATIONALISM

The brutalities experienced by Myanmar's borderland minorities had long been invisible to the Bamar majority in the country's central plains. Before 2011, successive juntas had suppressed freedoms of expression and association, making it nearly impossible for civilians to learn about the wars raging on the country's frontiers. Scholars estimated that in some periods, as much as 30 percent of the country's territory was contested or under EAO control.

After 2011, enthusiasm for multiparty democracy arguably drowned out the impetus to resolve the protracted ethnonational conflicts. In Myanmar, struggles for democracy (in the center) and ethnonationalism (in its peripheries) have long run on separate tracks.

One opportunity for reconciling these struggles presented itself in the late 1980s, after the 8888 uprising and the subsequent crackdown. Some 5,000 student activists fled urban areas for KNU-held territories and regrouped there, forming various pro-democracy organizations in exile. This made the KNU's then-headquarters at Manerplaw an epicenter of resistance, buzzing with democracy activists and ethnonational groups keen to pursue a new future for the country in unison.

But the tenuous alliance between these camps soon fell apart. The KNU, which had been at war for decades, felt that the democracy activists it hosted did not grasp the gravity of its grievances against the military. Some democracy activists did not support EAOs' insistence on armed resistance, casting them as "rebels" rather than treating them as legitimate political actors.

The Myanmar military dealt the final blows to a coordinated multiethnic resistance by stepping up its counterinsurgency campaign against the

KNU. This culminated in the fall of the KNU headquarters in 1995, forcing at least 150,000 people, mainly Karen, to flee across the border to Thailand; many more were displaced internally. The KNU remained one of Myanmar's strongest EAOs, but the nascent alliance between activists and "rebels" fractured.

In the decade before the 2021 coup, the tensions between democracy and ethnonationalism played out repeatedly. The NLD government's decision to erect monuments to Burmese independence hero Aung San—first a bridge in Mon State, and then a statue in Karenni State—caused thousands to protest in both states, where cease-fires had recently been signed with local EAOs. Karenni and Mon protesters saw Aung San not as a hero, but as a representative of Bamar ethnocentrism and the founder of the very institution that had violently suppressed minorities—the Myanmar military. In Karenni State, the military responded to protests with rubber bullets, tear gas, and water cannons.

But perhaps it is the violence against the Rohingya that most starkly embodies the blind spots of Myanmar's democratic transition and the military's capacity to thwart the inclusion of minorities. In 2017, in response to a Rohingya armed group's attacks on an army base and police posts, the military responded with "clearance operations." The use of mass killings and arson to root out insurgents caused 700,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh.

Two years later, the military faced accusations of genocide before the International Court of Justice. Aung San Suu Kyi—the daughter of Aung San and still, at the time, an emblem of democracy and civilian rule—defended Myanmar at The Hague, supported by a significant proportion of the Bamar population.

The relationship between the Rohingya and other minorities in Myanmar is complex. Unlike other minorities, Rohingya are effectively barred from citizenship. Since they are Muslims, the military and previous governments have also cast them as threats to Theravada Buddhism, the majority religion, to an extent that Christian, Buddhist, and animist minorities have not had to endure.

Nonetheless, tensions between democracy and ethnonationalism have flared up throughout Myanmar's history. The military has often met

struggles for both causes with violence. But that violence has fallen disproportionately on minorities, who have faced discrimination and protracted displacement, even during the country's purported decade of democratization.

WHAT IS THE MYANMAR MILITARY?

To grasp the nature of violence in Myanmar, it is necessary to understand the Myanmar military. For most of its history, the military (known as the Tatmadaw) has been the country's most powerful institution. But misunderstandings of the military are rife. One reason for this is that the military is secretive and insular. It has its own hospitals, schools, and banks, effectively isolating its personnel from the rest of Myanmar society.

International analyses of the military are further clouded by assumptions deriving from the clearly delimited role that armed forces play in liberal democratic states. The Myanmar military has never been confined to the barracks. By reserving one-quarter of parliamentary seats for the military, the 2008 constitution gives it an effective veto over

constitutional change, for which a supermajority of at least 75 percent of votes in parliament is necessary.

The military is also heavily involved in the country's economy. All officers hold shares in the Tatmadaw's public conglomerates—Myanmar Economic Corp. and Myanmar Economic Holdings Ltd.—which are linked to more than 130 business entities. These diverse enterprises span banking, food and drink, natural resources, and manufacturing.

The Myanmar military also prides itself on protecting the country from external intervention and internal unrest. The institution traces its roots to the Burma Independence Army, a Japanese-trained anticolonial force that helped Japan seize control of Burma from the British in 1942. But in 1944, its successor, the Burma National Army (BNA), revolted against the Japanese. The BNA then assisted the Allies in retaking Burma, after which its leader, Aung San, led independence negotiations with the British.

Upon Burmese independence in 1948, the BNA became the Burmese military. In what was characterized as a "coup by consent," it took control of the government for the first time in 1958, acting in response to factional strife within the ruling party. Ne Win remained in power for 18 months through

Military violence has fallen disproportionately on minorities.

a “caretaker government.” This experience reinforced the military’s perception that generals could govern the country better than civilian leaders. It carried out another coup in 1962, ostensibly to protect the country against ethnonational insurgents. Military rule, this time installed without the elected government’s consent, would last 49 years, punctuated by the 8888 uprising.

This history provides some clues as to why the Myanmar military seized power again in 2021, and why it has crushed the anti-coup movement with such force. First, the military prioritizes control over the country, having previously staved off perceived threats from the British, the Japanese, and insurgents of various stripes. Notably, the country envisioned by the military is predominantly Buddhist and Bamar, like the military itself. It is suspicious of attempts to grant minorities autonomy, fearing that doing so will energize secessionist movements that threaten Myanmar’s Bamar Buddhist core.

Second, the military considers violence essential to enforcing order. It grants itself—not the state—a monopoly over the legitimate use of force. The parallels between the military’s counterinsurgency campaigns against EAOs in decades past and its crackdowns on protesters in the post-coup present are no coincidence. The “four cuts” strategy, under which the military razed the homes of suspected EAO affiliates, has been used systematically against regime opponents since the 2021 coup.

Third, the Myanmar military perceives itself as being above civilian oversight. In response to international sanctions imposed after the coup, a senior military official stated that Myanmar would “have to learn to walk with only a few friends.” The military also applies this logic to civilian leaders, whom it sees as inept and feeble at best, traitors and threats to the national cause at worst. These aspects of the military’s self-image are promulgated throughout military-run institutions, including schools for the children of its personnel.

Even so, the ongoing anti-coup movement is the biggest challenge the Myanmar military has faced. Many ethnic armed organizations have resumed fighting in Myanmar’s peripheries, while People’s Defense Forces are engaging in guerrilla warfare in Bamar-dominated areas. Though their relationships vary, some EAOs—most notably in the southeast, northeast, and northwest—are training and conducting joint operations with PDF forces. In the

central plains, PDFs have become a thorn in the junta’s side. They were initially loosely organized and armed with homemade weapons, but they have since upgraded their weaponry and coordination tactics.

The Myanmar military’s campaign against PDFs, and those suspected of supporting them, has effectively turned the military against Bamar Buddhist civilians—the very people whom it claims to protect. This countrywide, multifront conflict has forced the Myanmar military to overextend itself to an unprecedented degree. The war’s outcome is still in the balance, but Myanmar’s protesters-turned-soldiers—with the help of EAOs—do not appear to be relinquishing the fight.

A FEDERAL FUTURE

Now the Myanmar military is in a quagmire of its own making. Arguably, the crackdowns after the 2021 coup gave pro-democracy protesters a taste of the violence that ethnic minorities had experienced for decades. When protesters saw nonviolent demonstrations being met with gunfire and arrests, they acceded to EAOs’ insistence that violence was necessary to counter the military’s might. This allowed democracy activists and ethnonational groups to overcome a key hindrance to previous alliances: disagreements over the use of arms in efforts to establish democracy and peace. As a protest sign (widely shared on Facebook) put it, “First they came for the Karen, and we didn’t speak out. Then they came for the Rohingya, and we didn’t speak out. Now they are coming for ALL OF US.”

As a result, the goals and means of the anti-coup movement are distinct from those of previous pro-democracy uprisings in Myanmar. The ongoing movement is, for the first time, driven by a triple desire to instate civilian rule, restore multiparty democracy, and respect ethnic minorities’ demands for self-determination. The word “federalism” is often used to encapsulate these goals. This is clear from the two-part Federal Democracy Charter, which was published as a political framework for the anti-coup movement.

Less than two months after the 2021 coup, NLD lawmakers ousted by the military declared the 2008 constitution nullified and released the Federal Democracy Charter Part I. It declared that ousted lawmakers and their allies would commit to eradicating all forms of dictatorship, including military dictatorship, while pursuing human rights, democracy, and minority rights. In accordance with the Charter, the National Unity Government was

formed in mid-April 2021, comprising NLD representatives as well as protest leaders and civil society representatives of various ethnicities. Part II of the Charter was released in March 2022, elaborating on the actors and institutions involved in attaining the goals set out in Part I.

As a whole, the Charter orients the anti-coup movement toward the decentralization of power from the federal level to the subnational level, thereby acceding to one of the key goals of EAOs. The military has long been deeply suspicious of the term “federalism,” seeing it as a recipe for the fragmentation of the country.

Various actors—ousted lawmakers, young protesters, EAOs, and civil society groups—are collaborating to achieve these goals, bridging Myanmar’s long-standing divide between those engaged in “conflict” and those involved in “politics.” This new coalition has treated EAOs as political actors; they participated in drafting the Federal Democracy Charter. The Charter also recognizes EAOs’ roles in administering areas in which the junta’s authority has collapsed. Various EAOs have run health care systems, schools, courts, and police forces for local populations. Though the previous peace process did not fully recognize these activities, the Charter designates EAO governance as part of a countrywide federal system.

Conversely, the NUG and protesters recognize that armed resistance is necessary to achieve federalism, for which they rely on EAOs’ arms and experience. Alliances between PDFs and EAOs are becoming increasingly formalized. In December 2022, the NUG declared that it had established three military regional commands—Northern, Central, and Southern—headed by top EAO leaders, with EAO forces and PDFs fighting side by side.

THE SPRING REVOLUTION

Within months of the 2021 coup, protests featuring humor had given way to a grave civil war. A new Burmese generation that had come of age in a country seemingly destined for democracy and

civilian rule took up arms in the name of the Spring Revolution. The ongoing war has brought together democracy activists and ethnonational fronts. Though both groups have long resisted the Myanmar military’s role in politics, they were divided in their approaches until the 2021 coup. Now they largely agree that armed revolt is necessary for establishing a federal system that will undo decades of violence against the country’s minorities and dissenters.

But not all EAOs are on board with the anti-coup movement. Most notably, the Arakan Army (AA) has largely charted its own path since the coup. A formidable EAO that controls most rural areas in Rakhine State and southern Chin State, the AA staunchly opposes the Myanmar military but is also reluctant to cast its lot with the NUG. In part, this is because the AA had strained relationships with both the military and the NLD government before the coup. Now it worries that the anti-coup movement’s blueprints for federalism might reinstate the dominance of the center over the periphery.

These fears are shared, to varying degrees, by some other EAOs. After decades of counterinsurgency campaigns, EAOs have been primed to think first about their own survival; the future of Myanmar is a secondary concern. The failures of previous attempts to reconcile democracy and ethnonationalism still reverberate today. It is a tall order for the anti-coup movement, which has lasted only two years so far, to undo decades of hurt and betrayal.

Even so, the 2021 coup was a pivotal moment in Myanmar’s history. It testified to the Myanmar military’s perception of its role—holding the country together by force—but also revealed that young protesters-turned-fighters are reimagining the country’s future in unprecedented ways. Many have put their lives on the line for this vision. In doing so, as Burmese writer and former political prisoner Ma Thida observed, they have defiantly declared that “picking off new shoots will not stop the spring.” ■

“[T]he Taliban state appears increasingly at odds with the international community and most of its own population.”

How the Taliban Are Losing the Peace in Afghanistan

ASHLEY JACKSON AND FLORIAN WEIGAND

The Taliban have been back in power in Afghanistan for almost two years. There had been hopes that they might chart a different course than they did in the 1990s, creating a more representative government and allowing women greater freedoms. Those hopes have all but disappeared. Amid growing political divides within the movement, led by an emir who seems fearful of losing control, the Taliban state appears increasingly at odds with the international community and most of its own population. Yet the Taliban is also a political movement with nuances and fissures that are essential to understand. How differences of opinion and power struggles within the Taliban ranks play out may ultimately determine the government's chances of survival and shape the future of Afghanistan.

The Afghan population continues to suffer not only from increasingly limited freedoms and rights, but also from a deepening humanitarian crisis. This crisis has been caused mainly by the end of international support and the freezing of the Afghan central bank's assets. The international community is limiting political and developmental engagement with the Taliban, focusing on humanitarian relief instead.

Yet this relief is clearly insufficient, particularly in the absence of any serious political dialogue or aid focused on addressing the drivers of humanitarian need, such as drought, entrenched poverty, and weak service-delivery institutions. The number of Afghans in need is rising. The United Nations claims that some 28 million people—nearly two-thirds of the population—require assistance. In addition, the extremist group Islamic

State Khorasan Province (ISKP) presents a growing threat, orchestrating attacks on civilians and the government in Kabul and elsewhere in the country.

THE ROAD BACK TO KABUL

The Taliban movement was founded in the mid-1990s by religious students amid the brutal violence wrought by civil war. The Taliban—which, literally translated, means “students”—were a rural movement that gained momentum by launching an uprising in response to the violence and atrocities committed by the mujahedin, the guerrilla factions that had fought the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan.

The Taliban movement quickly gained control of the south and then expanded its influence throughout the country, ultimately conquering Kabul in 1996. Their governance at that time was characterized by particularly conservative traditions and interpretations of Islam, as practiced in some parts of rural southern Afghanistan. This resulted in women being banished from public life, including education and work, as well as the enforcement of strict dress codes and a ban on music.

Soon after 9/11 and the beginning of the “global war on terror” declared by US President George W. Bush, the Taliban were condemned for harboring al-Qaeda and ousted in a US-led military invasion. The invasion was conducted with the help of Afghan commanders, mainly former mujahedin, from the so-called Northern Alliance. Many senior Taliban leaders retreated to the borderlands of Afghanistan and Pakistan. In December 2001, the United States and its Afghan and international allies gathered in the German city of Bonn to draft a plan for a democratic future for the country, creating the foundation for what was now called the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.

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The newly created state was supported with billions of dollars in international aid over the following years. However, the Taliban began to reorganize across the border in Pakistan from 2002 onward. The first few years of the insurgency were marked by scattered hit-and-run attacks, mainly in the south and east. Starting in 2006, violence spiked and spread across the country.

In late 2009, US President Barack Obama ordered a surge of military forces aimed at defeating the insurgency. But by the end of 2014, when the international coalition handed security responsibility over to the Afghan government, having greatly reduced its numbers in the country to around 20,000 soldiers, the insurgency was already regaining momentum. The Taliban took on Afghan forces in head-to-head battles, often retreating but still expanding their influence.

In addition to violence and coercion, the Taliban applied more subtle practices of governance aiming at building local support and legitimacy, and thereby expanding their control over the population. They established sharia court structures, based on their interpretation of Islamic law, in which the population could solve conflicts in a faster, cheaper, and often less corrupt way than in the government courts. The Taliban also began to co-opt—and take credit for—the internationally funded delivery of services such as health care and education in areas under their control or influence, shaping how these services were delivered at the local level. This also enabled them to bolster their claim to legitimacy.

By contrast, the internationally supported Afghan state was plagued by corruption, which undermined its legitimacy and popular support. Although no definitive figures exist, reporting by agencies such as the office of the US Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction suggests that a considerable amount of international aid was pocketed by corrupt elites rather than used for the public good. Both the World Bank and Transparency International consistently ranked Afghanistan as one of the most corrupt countries in the world.

The Taliban's violent attacks drove the state to focus on protecting itself instead of its citizens. An increasing number of walls went up in civilian areas like downtown Kabul, which were patrolled

by heavy deployments of security forces with armored vehicles. As the United States once again increased airstrikes in 2017, such measures further undermined claims that the Afghan government could provide security to the population. By 2018, the Taliban had encircled every major urban center and moved freely in much of the countryside.

Direct negotiations between the United States and the Taliban, excluding representatives of the internationally supported Islamic Republic, resulted in a February 2020 agreement to end the US military engagement in the country. Under the deal, the United States would withdraw its forces in exchange for the Taliban agreeing to provide certain counterterrorism guarantees and to negotiate with representatives of the Republic. But as the US forces began withdrawing, making it clear that the international military presence would soon end regardless of dynamics on the ground, progress on an intra-Afghan dialogue lagged and fighting intensified.

In the spring of 2021, the Taliban launched an offensive that would see them capture hundreds of Afghan districts in a matter of weeks. In early August, the Taliban began to seize provincial capitals. As the insurgents closed in on Kabul, President Ashraf Ghani fled the country by helicopter. Taliban fighters took control of the capital on August 15, 2021.

The withdrawal of the remaining international troops, many of whom had been pooled at the airport in Kabul, continued as international organizations, embassies, and aid agencies attempted to evacuate people in a variety of often poorly coordinated efforts. Thousands of people desperately tried to enter the airport and board one of the last flights out of the country. On August 26, a suicide attack (later claimed by ISKP) within the waiting crowds killed more than 170 Afghan civilians and 13 US soldiers. Acting on fears of another ISKP attack, a US drone strike killed 10 civilians, including children, in downtown Kabul on August 29. On the next day, the final US military plane departed.

The following weeks and months were just as chaotic. The Taliban themselves appeared surprised by the speed of their conquest and uncertain of how to run the country. Initially they kept most of the state's institutions and tried exercising

*This is a ruling system unlike
any other in the world.*

power through them, which created a false sense of continuity. But by September 2021 they had abolished the Ministry of Women's Affairs and reintroduced the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (PVPV) in its place, making it responsible for enforcing the Taliban version of sharia.

Over time, the Taliban invested increasingly in their security apparatus, especially the General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI), which is slowly creating the foundation for a police state. Unmoved by international protests, they have introduced increasingly conservative policies, such as bans both on higher education for women and on women's employment by nongovernmental organizations.

THE EMIR'S WILL

Why do the Taliban continue on this unpromising pathway, despite local protests and international condemnation? Different dynamics are at play. As in the 1990s, the movement is led by an emir based in the southern city of Kandahar, surrounded by loyalists and rarely interacting with people outside of his inner circle. The formal Taliban government, however, sits in Kabul, including the prime minister's office and the ministries. The divide is more than geographic; it represents to many the tensions between more pragmatic and politically savvy elements of the movement, based in the capital, and more extreme and ideologically focused elements, associated more closely with the emir in Kandahar, Haibatullah Akhunzada.

Although many in Kabul may not recognize the importance of female education, they do recognize that the restrictions decreed by the emir have been politically disastrous both domestically and internationally. Those in Kandahar simply do not care or adequately understand what is at stake, or they believe that the political consequences are a necessary pain to bear in order to achieve a pure Islamic society. This is a ruling system unlike any other in the world, run by a leader who rarely interacts with the population, does not meet with the international community, and sits in isolation from the country's capital and ostensible organs of government.

Yet the divide is hardly as simple as Kabul versus Kandahar, or pragmatists versus ideologues. Though the Taliban try to portray themselves as a unified front, different people, poles of power, opinions, and approaches compete within the movement. Sirajuddin Haqqani, son of Jalaluddin, the founder of the Haqqani network, and Mullah Yacoub, son of the first Taliban emir, Mullah

Omar, are often pointed to as key players, holding the positions of interior minister and defense minister, respectively. They are also considered to be more pragmatic than the emir's circle, recognizing Afghanistan's precarious political position, and they are certainly more accessible to the population, attending public events and appearing in the media. Alongside these figures are a host of actors, mainly former military commanders, who control their own power bases within the movement and have complicated motives and alliances. But these players appear to have little influence over the emir.

A struggle for control of the Taliban movement is unfolding as the emir and the circle around him attempt to consolidate power. Increasingly, Afghanistan is at their mercy: the emir's decrees are the final word. The decrees are written and released in a profoundly untransparent manner, and often come as a surprise. The decree banning girls' education was a shock to both the Ministry of Education, which had several high-profile school opening ceremonies planned for that day, and key officials across the government.

The emir is using the GDI and the PVPV to carry out his will. These actors exist in competition with, and often at the expense of, the wider security sector and most other authorities—from ministries to provincial and district governors. They are often seen as an extension of the emir, and so have outsize influence. Those within the movement who are more pragmatic, or who understand how hardline policies undermine any domestic support and external legitimacy that the Taliban still has, dare not speak up. Some may be anxious to avoid undermining the unified appearance of the movement.

Communities and civil society activities might be able to shape the practices of the Taliban at the local level, operating in the gray areas outside of the emir's knowledge. But they have little chance to change the Taliban's policies, even if local-level commanders can be convinced. And these gray areas are increasingly shrinking as the emir continues to consolidate power at subnational levels.

The consolidation has proceeded through the frequent rotation of provincial and local government officials and military commanders—moves intended to prevent any one contingent or individual from developing or maintaining a local power base. They also limit local leverage over these actors, who are no longer from the community and so tend to be less concerned about its welfare. More recently, ulema councils comprising

religious authorities have been introduced at the provincial level, which many see as an attempt to link local governance with the will of the emir.

RESPONSIBILITY AND REVENUE

Even before 2021, when the Taliban were still an insurgency, the movement governed populations in the areas under their control. They collected taxes from households, farmers, businesses, and truck drivers, as well as from development projects. They provided courts, where judges ruled on questions of land ownership, inheritance, or divorce. They also tried shaping the curriculums of schools and enforced restrictive rules on women. The movement had ministry-like commissions dealing with different subject areas and appointed shadow governors at the provincial and district levels.

But when the Taliban took control of the state in August 2021, they were suddenly responsible for a considerably more complex set of institutions and highly specialized technical governmental bodies, such as the central bank. Unprepared and having no experience in such sectors, the Taliban asked most of the technical staff who had remained in the country to stay in their positions. In some cases, however, these staff members were not paid and eventually left, and it took time to replace them. This resulted in challenges across sectors. For instance, the Taliban had difficulty establishing systems to manage weapons stockpiles. Large quantities of arms were sold off by corrupt commanders and fighters.

Over time, the Taliban have increasingly brought state institutions under their control. There is at least some continuity between how the Taliban governed as an insurgency and how they govern as the de facto government of Afghanistan today. For example, the Taliban generate most of their revenue through taxes. A World Bank report released in January 2023 concluded that the new government's revenue generation was strong. It collected \$1.54 billion between March and December 2022, primarily through levies charged at the borders. As in the past, though, these reports are not necessarily neutral assessments; they are primarily based on data provided by the Afghan government.

Nonetheless, the revenue has enabled the Taliban to pay more regular salaries to civil servants,

even though the international aid covering more than two-thirds of the state's budget under the Republic has been cut off. Revenue has also allowed the Taliban to invest in infrastructure projects. The most prominent example is the Qosh Tepa Irrigation Canal, designed to provide for a large number of communities in northern Afghanistan. The project had long been discussed during the Republic era, but it was left unbuilt because of concerns about diverting water from the Amu Darya, the river that demarcates Afghanistan's border with Uzbekistan. In southern Uzbekistan, the agricultural sector, especially cotton production, relies on water from the river. By implementing the project, the Taliban risk severe tensions with Uzbekistan. But the benefits for Afghan farms and in terms of job creation promise to be both politically and economically substantial.

Drawing on their revenue base, the Taliban have also been investing in the security sector—especially the GDI and the PVPV. This has enabled the movement—especially the emir and his supporters in Kandahar—to expand their control by force, particularly in urban areas.

Meanwhile, through a series of decrees by the emir, the ideological stance of the movement has become more apparent. The list of discriminatory and exclusionary policies introduced by the Taliban continues to grow. For instance, in August 2021, they banned female students from attending secondary schools. In May 2022, the Taliban asked women on television to cover their faces. In December 2022, the Ministry of Economy announced a ban on women working for NGOs, citing allegations of immoral behavior. In the same month, they banned women from attending universities.

OPAQUE DECISIONS

Taliban decision-making is extremely opaque and difficult to decipher in real time. Part of the challenge is that within the Taliban movement a number of figures have considerable decision-making power, and they often hold different positions on policies. Among them are the emir, the prime minister, cabinet ministers, and provincial and district governors. The emir's decisions are often made unilaterally and are considered to be final, regardless of others' views. Those who are more pragmatic and perhaps more aware of the

A struggle for control of the Taliban movement is unfolding.

realities in the country, including the threat that exclusionary policies may pose to the legitimacy of the movement, are frequently too afraid to raise issues that could contradict the leadership. Dissent is seen as an act of disloyalty.

Decrees, orders, letters, and other policy announcements come from multiple sources, creating confusion and contradiction. The PVPV banned women from going to gyms and parks without any decree from the leadership. The ban on female NGO workers was announced in a letter from the economy minister, but it was thought to have been imposed on the orders of the emir. The vagueness of the order led to panic and confusion. So-called exemptions quickly emerged, covering a range of activities, such as health care provision, and local workarounds continue. But the overall lack of clarity more often leads to self-censorship, risk aversion, and fear.

The Taliban leadership has sought to strictly enforce its interpretation of sharia, yet enforcement has unfolded on an ad hoc basis. Although sharia has been translated into relatively clear legal frameworks in many Islamic countries, including the former Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, it has not been codified by the Taliban, leaving considerable scope for interpretation. Since the Taliban regained power, new rules have been developed ad hoc and without much oversight by individuals within PVPV, based on their own interpretations of sharia.

In Afghanistan's university dormitories, for instance, women and men had long been strictly separated. Within the Taliban, some argued for banning women from staying in dormitories without a close male relative (*Muharram*). This ultimately resulted in the closure of most women's dormitories across the country.

To what extent and how national-level policies are actually implemented varies, especially when the policies are unpopular. Local authorities, aware of the population's views, avoid enforcing new regulations in some cases. The new rules on female education have not been implemented consistently; in some parts of the country, female students are still able to attend secondary school. But the space for diverging local practices is at risk of shrinking due to the growing influence of the Taliban leadership.

FROZEN RELATIONS

Following the withdrawal of international troops and the takeover of the state by the Taliban in 2021, most Western countries closed their

embassies and limited their political engagement with the new de facto authorities. No country has officially recognized the Taliban government. This leaves the movement with even less international recognition than it received before 2001, when at least Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) acknowledged the Taliban as the official government of Afghanistan. Now the country's seat at the UN is still filled by a representative of the Republic.

Much of the development aid that sustained Afghanistan for 20 years was stopped after the Taliban's return to power. The focus shifted to humanitarian aid. On paper, this approach promised to maintain support for the Afghan population without allowing funds to pass through the Taliban-controlled state.

In addition, the assets of the Afghan central bank abroad were frozen—around \$9.1 billion held in the UAE, Europe, and, to a large extent, the United States. This action was driven by concern that the assets would fall into the hands of the Taliban rather than be used to support the Afghan economy. With the central bank unable to perform its regulatory functions and short of bank notes, the national currency rapidly lost value and the economy collapsed. Afghans have often been unable to withdraw money from their accounts. A foundation has been established in Switzerland to make disbursements and monitor whether the central bank can act independently, but it is not yet operational.

The freezing of assets and the end of development assistance drove the humanitarian crisis. With the economy in freefall, millions of Afghans, an estimated two-thirds of the population, require support to survive. The lack of funding for state institutions is bound to make it more difficult to distribute humanitarian assistance, which is already curtailed by the ever more restrictive policies of the Taliban. After being criticized for taxing development projects in the past, the Taliban have also found ways to benefit financially from humanitarian aid through taxes, levies, fees, and bribes.

Although Western governments have repeatedly criticized the Taliban for their policies, especially with regard to women's rights, they lack leverage to achieve any meaningful change. They cannot influence the practices of the key decision-makers within the movement. Meetings with ministers of the de facto government may help convey to domestic audiences that the international

community has not given up on issues such as women's rights, but they have not translated into any substantive improvement of the situation in Afghanistan.

Having lost hope of gaining international recognition, the Taliban reject foreign interference in what they deem domestic issues. They dismissed the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation's criticism of their ban on women's employment by NGOs. Even threats to reduce humanitarian aid have not resulted in any change in the Taliban's policies. Many within the movement appear to believe that they simply do not need the West.

Countries such as Russia and China have continued operating their embassies in Kabul. After the fall of the Republic, many observers had speculated that China would become a major economic partner of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Trade relations between the two countries have expanded, but slowly. In January 2023, the Taliban signed an agreement with a Chinese company to extract oil reserves in the north, following a similar deal that China had signed with the previous government. Talks on other mining concessions continue.

Neither China nor Russia have publicly raised human rights expectations or complaints with the Taliban. But so far they have also been reluctant to extensively support the de facto authorities or to substantially invest in the country, evidently concerned about regional and local stability and security. Attacks claimed by ISKP targeted the Russian embassy in September 2022 and a hotel frequented by Chinese guests in December.

NOTHING TO LOSE?

The international community has little chance of changing Taliban policies, regardless of what minister it talks to or what consequences it says it would impose. In its wariness about giving the Taliban external legitimacy, the West has further reduced its own leverage with the Taliban government. Those within the Taliban who argued that Western countries could be engaged have been proved wrong and consequently disempowered.

Many within the movement feel that they initially tried to conform with the West's demands and have nothing to show for it. Because the international community has refused to give the Taliban anything they have asked for, such as sanctions relief or official recognition, the Taliban have nothing to lose by offending it. There are few foreign diplomats left to be recalled should the Taliban do something egregious; they hold no seat at the UN. Afghanistan already is a pariah state.

Meanwhile, the United States and other Western donors have no coherent or realistic strategy for Afghanistan. They deal with the country as if it were a nightmare from which they can only hope, at some point, to wake up. Donor governments continue to use humanitarian action as a fig leaf for political indecision and incoherence.

Afghanistan's civil society and the media are being silenced. Demands for women's rights or an inclusive government are increasingly unrealistic. There is no real political or armed opposition within the country, beyond the growing threat of ISKP. Without a more strategic international approach, the situation for the Afghan population is likely to go from bad to worse. ■

“In this context of a resource-strapped economy and polarized politics, the Pakistani state must help its flood-affected population recover, resettle in homes, and regain their livelihoods.”

What Lies Beneath Pakistan’s Disastrous Floods

SHANDANA KHAN MOHMAND, MIGUEL LOUREIRO, AND LEWIS SIDA

The 2022 floods in Pakistan were a disaster of unimaginable proportions. Over 1,500 people died (including over 500 children), and 33 million people lost homes, assets, and livelihoods. The country suffered economic losses of more than \$30 billion, far more than the resources its own government or foreign aid agencies have committed for recovery and rehabilitation. It is predicted that the impact of the floods will be felt for a long time in the destroyed livelihoods, crops, and infrastructure, and in their implications for health, nutrition, and food prices.

The floods were the result of a disastrous confluence of factors. Pakistan experienced its heaviest monsoon in decades, unprecedented and continuous extreme heat, and glacier melting, which led to the inundation of vast swaths of land in almost all regions of the country, though the impact was greatest in the province of Sindh. Government estimates (produced in collaboration with international agencies) suggest that almost a third of the country—about the size of the United Kingdom—was underwater by August. In some parts of Sindh, floodwaters had yet to recede as of January 2023.

The 2022 floods were hardly the first that Pakistan has experienced. At the time, the floods of 2010 were likewise called the worst in living memory and were seen as a once-in-a-generation catastrophe, but they were not an isolated event. Pakistan subsequently experienced significant floods in 2011, 2012, 2015, 2019, and 2020. These floods are climate change disasters.

Pakistan is especially vulnerable to such events, but it is not a major contributor to climate change.

Estimates provided by the Global Carbon Project suggest that cumulatively, Pakistan has contributed 0.3 percent of global carbon emissions (compared with over 24 percent emitted by the United States and over 14 percent by China). Yet the latest report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change suggests that Pakistan can expect recurrences of intense and unpredictable climatic conditions, which are likely linked to global climate change.

In this article, we look at internal factors that have contributed to the disastrous floods of 2022: Pakistan’s geography and management of its natural resources, its history of development, and its governance and politics. However, it is important to establish at the outset that preventing similar future events cannot be restricted to national efforts alone. Discussions at the recently concluded 27th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change underscored the role that the international community and developed countries must play in cutting global carbon emissions, financing policies to address climate-induced loss and damage, and finding common cause in protecting climate-vulnerable regions by honoring international agreements.

The ability to mitigate the impact of climate-related disasters, to the extent that doing so is possible, depends on preparedness and resources. Pakistan is short on both. Though it must develop and fix internal systems for disaster risk reduction, resources for such efforts will need to be shared by those responsible for much higher levels of carbon emissions.

SOURCES OF VULNERABILITY

Pakistan’s climate vulnerability is defined by several geographical features. It is an agriculture-

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dependent country that is supported by a single river system. The Indus River and its tributaries constitute one of the largest irrigation systems in the world. Pakistan also has the most glacial ice outside the poles—over 7,000 known glaciers feed into the irrigation system—coupled with some of the highest observed temperatures in Asia. This heat tends to accelerate glacier melt, leading to some degree of flooding in most years.

On top of all this is the monsoon system. The El Niño Southern Oscillation climate cycle affects monsoon patterns, with droughts in El Niño years and heavier rainfall in La Niña years, such as 2022. Pakistan's floods are most often triggered by riverine floods, which are relatively slower and more predictable, allowing time to react. But the 2022 floods in Baluchistan and Sindh were triggered by torrential (rain-induced) floods, which are less frequent but much more intense and leave less time to react.

The impact of torrential floods is intensified by the mismanagement of the country's natural resources, from deforestation to land degradation and watershed deterioration. Decades of overlogging have exacerbated deforestation and extensive topsoil erosion, resulting in heavily silted riverbeds with reduced water-carrying capacities. Soil fertility has worsened over time due to inefficient use of water in flood irrigation and the excessive application of chemical fertilizers and pesticides, to the point where today, one-third of Pakistan's cropped areas is affected by salinity. The loss of vegetation cover has added to the degradation of soil and diminished its water retention capacity. Currently, a quarter of the country's land area suffers from waterlogging, flooding, salinity, soil erosion, and loss of organic matter.

Climate hazards such as these turn into disasters because of the increased vulnerability of large population groups. The pressures of overpopulation and wealth inequality contribute to the increased risk of extreme flooding. The growing need for housing has led many poor people to build precarious housing infrastructure in flood-prone areas close to riverbeds. The building of large dams also puts more people at risk: vast tracts of land that were previously part of floodplains have become dry land, encouraging new settlements in the strips flanking river courses.

Following the 2010 disaster, the flood inquiry commission appointed by the Supreme Court

noted that “the natural flow of water is being blocked due to massive encroachments in most waterways, private *zamindari* [landlord] bunds, and unplanned habitation by rising populations, etc.” Along with the encroachment of floodplains, an outdated river management system and poor flood control strategies were identified as key causes of the disaster.

The government and its international partners undertook a massive program to rebuild destroyed public infrastructure such as roads, bridges, schools, and health centers, as well as private housing. The government also started to invest in preparedness. Twelve years later, however, Pakistan seemed almost as unprepared as it was in 2010. In part, this is connected to structural and political power relations in the country's water management that date back to the colonial state.

COLONIALISM AND CANALS

At the turn of the twentieth century, the British colonial government set about creating the world's largest network of perennial irrigation canals in

Punjab, transforming the province from a dry wasteland into the breadbasket of Pakistan that it is today. The logic of this project was based on the extraction of resources for the colonial

state, the development of a loyal local elite, and the control of the local population by this elite. The implications of this pattern of development can be seen in the history of one village that is typical of how rural areas developed in this region in the colonial era.

Water scarcity was common in the districts that lay at a distance from Punjab's rivers. When the British colonial state granted over 4,500 acres in one such tract to a landlord from a neighboring district in 1860, it also made revenue concessions to encourage him to settle and cultivate the land as quickly as possible. He did so by attracting tenants from other regions, who came to occupy as much land as they could clear, prepare, and till with the oxen, tools, and dependent labor that they brought along. Their need for irrigation kept them tied to the landlord, who had built a private canal that brought water into the village; he collected fees from tenants for its use. Village residents were expected to contribute unpaid labor to maintain the canal, and anyone who displeased the landlord might lose access to water.

*Water is a political resource and
a source of power in Pakistan.*

It was not until 1956, after independence, that the state opened an all-season canal managed by the irrigation department. By that time, the landlord's expanded family had consolidated a considerable amount of economic, political, and social power, which allowed them to bypass land and irrigation reforms in the 1960s and 1970s. Tenants who attempted to take advantage of these state reforms found it hard to access irrigation water. The state canal ran through the lands of the village elite, who used their contacts in state departments to run it like a private asset. The landlords' managers maintained (and manipulated) records for the "orderly system of assigned turns" for the public canal.

Landlords have since preserved their immunity to state-enforced changes in both Punjab and Sindh. This is despite the fact that landlords' economic and social control over village residents has loosened over time with the creation of alternate employment opportunities in Punjab's growing small towns, the expansion of education, and the coming of elections and democracy (albeit in an unstable form), which drew new local leaders and competing politicians looking for rural votes.

Electoral politics brought its own forms of manipulation by a new political elite. In a nearby village that sits at the tail end of a canal, residents' support for an opposition party earned them the enmity of a ruling party legislator. He made sure that the provincial irrigation department (presided over by his son) remained unresponsive to repeated demands for a fairer distribution of water. Instead, he implicated the residents in fraudulent criminal cases as an intimidation tactic.

With their trust in the state low, residents became embroiled in water-use feuds with neighboring villages. They turned to private patrols to deter water theft by upstream villages and sought to redirect water flows. But the local legislator ultimately gained a small vote bank in the village as residents turned to him to restore their access to irrigation water.

These very local stories illustrate a key point: water is a political resource and a source of power in Pakistan. Extractive colonial structures and the construction of an elite that continued extractive practices in the postcolonial period ensured that control over land and water use was resistant to reforms designed to introduce more equitable and sustainable systems.

Geographer Daanish Mustafa's work in flood-affected villages in the 1990s underscored the

extent to which rural communities' vulnerability to floods is defined by their disempowerment and by the ability of the rural elite to alter government plans to suit their own interests. One interviewee told Mustafa about how, in the 1950s, a landlord family influenced the design of a spillway meant to reduce flooding. The new route protected the family's own lands, but aggravated flooding and endangered surrounding communities.

Yet anthropologist Maira Hayat's work on Pakistan's water resources points out that the "thoroughly engineered landscape" of the Indus basin has created a relationship with water that is conceived in technical terms rather than recognized as a political problem that requires political solutions. She implicates US Cold War politics and the World Bank's infrastructure-focused development aid in the pattern of Pakistan's post-independence expansion of its irrigation system, as well as in the nature of the water-use treaties and institutions it developed.

An important aspect of water politics involves relations among Pakistani provinces. Pakistan's dependence on the Indus has led to inter-provincial conflict, especially between Punjab and Sindh, necessitating water-use agreements. These political disputes are exemplified by regular debates that arise around dams.

Upriver Punjab argues that it has the right to gain greater control of the Indus and its floods by constructing more dams in northern Pakistan. But the northern regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan have concerns about losing precious land in the process, while downstream Sindh worries that it could face even more severe water shortages than it already experiences. The proposed dams have not been built, but the consequent interprovincial tensions have compromised cooperation on other measures, such as upgrading infrastructure and management practices, hindering disaster risk reduction.

LEARNING FROM THE PAST

Pakistan has learned some lessons from previous flooding, including the 2010 mega-flood. The ability of federal and provincial government agencies to quickly adapt to the 2022 shock was impressive. The initial response to the latest floods was focused on search and rescue, largely conducted by the army. This effort seems to have been fast and effective. The army has accumulated experience in immediate emergency response, and military planning, structure, equipment, and training

lend themselves to large-scale natural hazard life-saving efforts.

The government also worked with the World Bank to deliver rapid cash assistance via the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP), a widely respected social protection mechanism. Some \$300 million was delivered to 2.7 million people in one-off grants of 25,000 Pakistani rupees. This was the single largest aid intervention in the first few months following peak flooding.

BISP was in its beginning phases in 2010, but a series of cash relief payments were made in the aftermath of the floods via a specially introduced emergency scheme called the Watan card. This in turn was based on the experience of the 2005 Kashmir earthquake, when cash relief distributions had been favorably reviewed. The eventual design of BISP was in part inspired by these two emergency experiences.

Despite these positive results, there were several areas where crisis response fell short. The National Disaster Management Agency (NDMA), which implements emergency responses, is mirrored by similar agencies at the provincial (PDMAS) and district (DDMAS) levels. Following the 2010 floods, the government secured over \$1 billion in loans from the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank to strengthen these structures, as well as health support from an array of bilateral donors. Yet government coordination in the first three months of the 2022 response was run through a newly established National Flood Response and Coordination Centre, chaired by the minister of planning.

The creation of this center bypassed the pre-existing NDMA structure, and arguably contributed to loose governance by adding a new ad hoc layer of bureaucracy that led to competition within the government and a lack of clarity in the overall response. Although a recent analysis by Pakistani consulting firm Tabadlab found that government action reduced both loss of life and economic damage, surveys of affected populations suggest that the response has fallen well short of minimum standards in areas such as water, sanitation, shelter, and mobile health care.

PDMAS were more active, rapidly distributing emergency stocks of tents and basic household items in Baluchistan and Sindh. But the amount of aid was an order of magnitude short of what

was required, and it was quickly depleted. This was the case even though in Sindh, the floods took a month to reach the highest point (as they had in 2010), which should have been enough time to determine what was coming and to prepare and deliver more aid before the flood peaked. Worse, the DDMAS—the frontline face of government—were highly variable in their capacity and experience. Feedback from residents in the worst-affected areas was highly critical of the poor local government response. Aid agencies reported that local competence was dependent on individuals rather than systems.

The lack of real preparedness—of a strong, capable, well-resourced, and well-coordinated local response—was compounded by a significant erosion of international response capability. In 2010, there was a large UN and international NGO presence in Pakistan that had built up following the 2005 earthquake and the displacement of populations in the areas bordering Afghanistan. These organizations set up temporary displacement camps; provided health services, clean water, and temporary toilets; and eventually rebuilt private dwellings and developed a coordinated effort to fight malnutrition.

Over the past decade, however, growing distrust between the state and civil society actors has led to a clampdown on international agencies and local NGOs (as Shandana Khan Mohmand discussed in a 2020 *Current History* article). In 2022, the institutional memory and type of capacity deployed in 2010 no longer existed, despite attempts by national civil society organizations to fill the gap.

Finally, there is a need to learn from reconstruction after previous floods: what kinds of houses proved to be flood-resistant, and what type of infrastructure is required for the climate-induced “new normal.” Many private dwellings reconstructed in 2010 were washed away again in 2022, along with public infrastructure (roads, bridges, schools), but some survived. Though the majority of communities found themselves devastated for a second or even third time in a little over a decade, some did better, moving key assets to safety in time. Some buildings and embankments survived due to their design; others did not.

Understanding why is now imperative in order to ensure that investment in the fast-approaching

Pakistan seemed almost as unprepared in 2022 as it was in 2010.

reconstruction phase leads to better preparedness before the next disaster. But there are longer-term political and economic sources of Pakistan's current vulnerability that will also determine the extent of its recovery.

INSTABILITY AND POLARIZATION

Well before the floods hit, Pakistan was mired in an economic crisis grounded in mismanagement and longer-term structural issues. The latter include a very low tax-to-GDP ratio, a very high debt-to-GDP ratio, and a large trade deficit. Productivity and exports are low, and the country spends more than the revenue it generates. For decades, Pakistani governments have depended on the International Monetary Fund and other external sources for loans while avoiding economic reforms that have long been needed to increase internal revenue.

One of the most basic reasons for this dysfunction is the instability of the country's politics. Extensive economic reforms require governments to accept the inevitability of pain and hardship in the short term, but this is more than they can afford when their survival is at stake. Pakistan's politics is volatile, largely due to the impact of repeated rounds of military rule. This has made the army a political actor even when it is not in power, allegedly maneuvering behind the scenes to control the policies and tenure of democratically elected governments, and creating and disbanding political parties. The result is an insidious form of competition that keeps parties insecure, uncertain if they will complete their terms. This is not a political climate conducive to longer-term policymaking.

Such politics also result in populism and extreme polarization. Both have combined to create a form of accountability based on political witch hunts and corruption allegations, rather than a strengthening of the social contract between politicians and voters. There were signs as early as May 2022 of an impending flood disaster, but Prime Minister Imran Khan had been removed from office the month before through a vote of no confidence. In the months that followed, both the new coalition government headed by Shahbaz Sharif (previously chief minister of Punjab for more than a decade) and the opposition now led by Khan focused on undermining each other instead of mobilizing the state machinery to prepare for the floods.

Punjab remained embroiled in a leadership struggle until July 2022, even as floodwaters began to spread through its territory and provincial cooperation became imperative. Punjab and Sindh were

now ruled by opposing political camps. In a moment that exemplified pervasive polarization, the chief ministers of Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, both ruled by Khan's coalition partners, did not attend a national flood emergency meeting called by the government in Islamabad at the end of August. Polarization seeps through other channels, too—newspaper headlines, television networks, and social media feeds focused more on political battles, scandals, and allegations than the raging floods.

THE GOVERNANCE OF RECOVERY

In this context of a resource-strapped economy and polarized politics, the Pakistani state must help its flood-affected population recover, resettle in homes, and regain their livelihoods. Governance issues will determine both the state's ability to help citizens recover now and its preparedness for future impacts of climate change.

A top priority should be stronger data and social protection systems. Data collection and maintenance efforts have suffered from inadequate frequency, quality, and detail. Access to what data exists is often restricted for security reasons. Regular and frequent data is required in both relief and recovery efforts to identify, quantify, and monitor the scale of a disaster's impact and to mobilize, plan, and coordinate responses.

Adequate data is also needed for developing and maintaining effective social protection systems. This was evident during the lockdowns imposed in the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Pakistani state failed to meet the economic needs of a population hit by job losses and a recession. The importance of better data can also be seen in the limited number of flood victims who have been reached through BISP. The task of registering and rehabilitating the 33 million people who have been displaced by the floods is daunting. BISP is one of the most impressive social protection programs in the world, but its mechanisms must be leveraged more effectively to deal with health and nutrition needs, return millions of children to school, collect data on needs, and monitor results.

More coordination between the state and other sectors is necessary to identify where help is most needed, and in which form. There were examples of coordination among state actors, donor agencies, and civil society in the responses to the earthquake of 2005 and the floods of 2010. But multisectoral coordination is difficult to achieve in a devolved governance structure such as

Pakistan's, where many of the relevant ministries are based at the provincial level.

At a minimum, more consistent action is required across state institutions that work on disaster management, irrigation, agriculture, food security, health, water and sanitation, housing, education, and social protection. So is cooperation with donors and civil society actors that are still active in these areas. The central government should establish multi-stakeholder coordinating bodies, but it must also bring provincial governments on board to organize separate, contextualized implementation in each province.

Yet greater coordination and collaboration at the federal and provincial levels will have little effect in the absence of efficient delivery systems at the district level and below, as was evident in the 2022 floods. Two structural issues create complications.

First, any horizontal coordination achieved at the national level has to carry down the vertical chain to ensure similar coordination across subnational frontline departments. But this is often limited by the rigid hierarchical structure of the bureaucracy, steeped in colonial managerial incentives. Frontline staff often wait for directives from the top rather than take the initiative in the field. Coordination of interventions is further limited by a lack of capacity at the local level for joint planning, data collection, and monitoring of impact on the front line.

Second, Pakistan lacks an institutionalized system of local governments that could enable more decentralized decision-making and responsiveness at the level of village communities. The absence of local governments in Kashmir in 2005 and across Pakistan in 2010 led to much of the lack of access, information, and coordination witnessed in each crisis. In 2022, local authorities were either wholly missing because of election delays, as in Punjab, or struggled to deliver with very limited resources and capacity, as in Sindh.

Analyses of previous disasters have pointed out the centrality of capable local institutions to early warning systems, local information collection, disbursement of aid, and monitoring of impact. Well-resourced local governments that can maintain effective community-based early warning and evacuation systems, connected to coordinated national response mechanisms, may be Pakistan's best bet for disaster preparedness and for limiting the damage from future climate hazards.

The governance challenge before the Pakistani state is enormous. It needs to build effective and responsive institutions, bring polarized political actors together to coordinate efforts, and partner with local and international civil society to expand its capacity for working with vulnerable populations. Pakistan must also find resources within its borders to finance disaster preparedness, even while continuing to lead on the global front in pursuit of climate justice. ■

India's Heritage Conflicts Come to Varanasi

PRALAY KANUNGO

Religion, a beacon of peace and hope to humanity, has ignited acrimony and violent conflicts throughout history. Lately, heritage—both tangible and intangible, from monuments and cities to language and culture—has become a highly contentious terrain entangled with religion, history, and identity. Invaluable heritage faces threats of extinction from religious fundamentalists, ideological zealots, and predatory neoliberals.

Medieval tyrants and imperial expansionists destroyed precious heritage sites to assert their symbolic domination over conquered territories and peoples. Such actions took an ideological, religious, and identitarian turn in recent decades. Mao's Cultural Revolution smashed Chinese religious and cultural heritage in an ideological campaign against superstition. Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan destroyed the ancient Bamiyan Buddhas in their quest to make a pure Islamic land. Hindu nationalists demolished the medieval Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, asserting their right to the birthplace of Lord Ram, which was desecrated by the Mughals in medieval India. Neoliberal regimes across the world, driven by the profit motive, endanger heritage in the name of preservation, modernization, and beautification.

Today, India presents a classic case of how the mixing of religion, identity, and heritage polarizes communities and stirs intolerance and violence. Despite being overwhelmingly Hindu (approximately 80 percent of the population), postcolonial India consciously decided to be a secular state. Its first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, never compromised on this fundamental principle. But Hindu nationalism, known as Hindutva, has become hegemonic since Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party captured national power in the 2014 elections, subsequently gaining control of many key provinces.

Hindutva is an exclusionary ideology, claiming India as a Hindu nation (*Hindu Rashtra*). Viewing Muslims and Christians as enemy "others" of the nation, Hindutva would deny them equal entitlements and rights. Majoritarian governance has become a new normal in Modi's India. A Ram temple is being constructed on the site of the demolished Babri Mosque; the special constitutional status of the Muslim-majority province of Kashmir has been abrogated; the Citizenship Amendment Act denies Muslims equal citizenship rights; and a proposed Uniform Civil Code would deprive minorities of their right to "personal laws" governing matters such as marriage and inheritance according to their own faiths. Laws are arbitrarily used against Muslims in everyday life.

The majoritarian Indian state has also empowered radical Hindutva vigilante groups to unleash periodic violent campaigns against Muslims, creating a climate of fear among minorities. This violent vigilantism includes campaigns like *ghar wapsi* (reconversion) and *gau raksha* (cow protection), and another incited by the "Love Jihad" conspiracy theory alleging that Muslim men seek to seduce and convert Hindu women. Innocent Muslims have been victims of mob lynchings. Hindu radical groups often campaign for social and economic boycotts of Muslims; militant Hindu sadhus have openly called for genocide.

Hindutva's aggression is not confined to minorities. Any citizen who opposes arbitrary government fiat is dubbed "anti-national" and can be charged with sedition. The list of "others" has expanded to include secularists, liberals, and dissidents, irrespective of their religious identities.

Hindutva, under Modi's leadership, aims to construct a "new India," recasting the nation politically, culturally, and ideologically along the lines of majoritarian nationalism. Rewriting history and communalizing heritage have been key to this agenda. A plural, tolerant, and multireligious India, with its rich reservoir of diverse heritage, both tangible and intangible—natural, religious,

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cultural, and social—has been turned into a field of communal polarization.

Heritage discourses have acquired a new inflection as the history of cities and monuments is reinterpreted through the lens of religion and ideology. Questionable historical and archaeological evidence has been produced to support Hindu claims on Islamic heritage sites. The demarcating line between myth and history is conveniently erased. Islamic place-names are being replaced with Hindu ones: thus Faizabad becomes Ayodhya, and Allahabad becomes Prayagraj, as though to obliterate their Islamic heritage.

Islamic monuments like the Taj Mahal and the Qutub Minar are being claimed as Hindu temple sites. Hindu nationalists have long asserted that thousands of Hindu temples were demolished by medieval Islamic invaders and rulers. They believe now is the time to reclaim those sites on which mosques and monuments have been built, avenge Hindu subjugation in the past, and rewrite a glorious history of a Hindu nation.

Pursuing this mission, they have also rehabilitated Hindu icons who were allegedly marginalized in secular India. Huge monuments have been erected to create a spectacle of Hindu nationalist heritage. In the state of Gujarat, a statue of Sardar Patel, the country's first home minister and deputy prime minister, was inaugurated by Modi in 2018 and is now the world's tallest statue.

During the Ayodhya campaign in the late 1980s, Hindutva advocates coined a slogan: *Ayodhya to Jhanki Hai, Kashi-Mathura Baki Hai* (Ayodhya is just a teaser; Varanasi and Mathura are next in line). Having successfully reclaimed the "birthplace" of Lord Rama at Ayodhya, Hindutva forces now target Varanasi's Gyanvapi Mosque and Mathura's Shahi Idgah Masjid. They claim that the former was built by the Mughal ruler Aurangzeb after he razed the Vishwanath Temple dedicated to Lord Shiva on the same site; and that the latter was built where Krishna Janmabhoomi (Krishna's birthplace) had been demolished.

NEW SPECTACLES ON THE GANGES

Besides boasting natural heritage like the Ganges River and built heritage sites like temples and ghats, Varanasi is known for a form of living heritage embedded in the city's way of life. Though some have acclaimed the city as both ancient and

quintessentially Hindu, it may be ahistorical to conceive of Varanasi as eternal and unchangeable.

The city is multifaceted, multireligious, and multicultural, with a population that is 63 percent Hindu and 32 percent Muslim. If 3,000 Hindu shrines are a part of the city's imposing Hindu-scape, over a thousand mosques and mazars (Sufi shrines) constitute a powerful Islamoscape. For Hindutva, this Islamoscape is a violent imposition, a constant reminder of Islamic iconoclasm and Aurangzeb's destruction of Hindu heritage.

Yet Hindu heritage in Varanasi is multilayered. Hindu shrines represent different genres of material and cultural heritage: architecture, deities, symbols, rituals, and traditions. The hegemony of Brahminical heritage discourses and practices is contested by subaltern Hindus like *mallahs* (boatmen) and *doms* (untouchables) with alternate narratives, pantheons, and practices. Hindutva attempts to homogenize such divergent discourses and practices, appropriating the icons and symbols of subaltern Hindus. Demonization of Islamic history and heritage serves as glue for the construction of an ecumenical Hindutva.

Varanasi's heritage politics took a new turn when Modi, who had been the chief minister of Gujarat since 2001, chose to contest the city's parliamentary constituency in 2014. It was a strategic decision intended to send a signal to Hindus across the nation from the bastion of Hinduism. Modi used the Hindu religious symbolism of Varanasi in his campaign, claiming to have been summoned by the Ganges to serve the city. He performed the *Ganga aarti* (fire ritual) in spectacular fashion. His supporters chanted "*Har, Har Modi*" instead of "*Har, Har Mahadev*," substituting the name of their leader for one of the names of Shiva, Varanasi's resident deity, in a religious invocation.

After winning the parliamentary seat by a massive margin and becoming prime minister, Modi launched the *Swachh Bharat* (Clean India) Mission, in which the Ganges and Varanasi became principal focuses. Hindu heritage sites like the ghats were refurbished, and investments were made to render the Ganges pollution-free, though this campaign proved ineffective. Modi brought prominent world leaders to view the fire rituals, creating more hype and spectacle. Hindutva's heritage discourses were given new momentum.

*The demarcating line
between myth and history
is conveniently erased.*

For Hindutva, the nation represents one religion and one culture; thus, all forms of heritage in its sacred territory—natural, cultural, material, and built—should be Hindu. Any non-Hindu heritage is an aberration, an imposition. Modi promoted Hindutva's heritage agenda by making it a component of his neoliberal governing agenda.

Soon after taking office, Modi's government launched the Swadesh Darshan Scheme, developing circuits connecting religious sites to promote Hindu heritage tourism. These circuits strategically included some Jain, Sikh, Buddhist, and tribal sites as part of the canopy of Hindu heritage, though most non-Hindu attractions were excluded. Meanwhile, under Modi's "Adopt a Heritage" scheme, one of India's most prized monuments, the Red Fort (Lal Qila) in Old Delhi—a UNESCO World Heritage site that had been maintained by a credible state institution, the Archaeological Survey of India—was passed on to a corporate overseer for peanuts.

In Varanasi, Modi Hinduized, corporatized, and glamorized heritage on a grand scale. The Kashi Vishwanath corridor project became a signature Modi project, connecting the riverfront to the Vishwanath temple and imposing a modern Hindu heritage-scape. Varanasi's ancient material, religious, and cultural heritage—old houses and shops, neighborhoods, small temples and shrines, narrow lanes—was demolished to create a Bhavya (Grand) Corridor with an open square, flanked by a heritage library, a museum, rest houses, stores, and cafeterias, befitting Varanasi's claim to be a modern "smart city."

Hindutva's flaunting of modernity only intensified its identity politics. Launching the Varanasi project, Modi declared it a "liberation day" for Lord Shiva, alluding to Aurangzeb's demolition of the Vishwanath Temple. The implications of his words were ominous for Varanasi's Islamic heritage, particularly the Gyanvapi Mosque. Hindutva activists, aided by a pliant lower judiciary, won a court order for a survey of the mosque's structure in 2022. An alleged *shiv ling* (an aniconic symbol of Lord Shiva) was discovered during the survey. Muslims argued that the so-called *shiv ling* was a water fountain. But Hindutva

achieved its objective by creating a furor to publicize its message that the Gyanvapi Mosque is a Hindu space and Hindus have a legitimate claim over it. Thus, an Ayodhya-like campaign has been initiated.

SYNCRETIC ALTERNATIVE

As Varanasi (also known as Banaras) has emerged as an epicenter of Hindutva's identity and heritage politics, this campaign has not been confined to monuments alone. It has percolated downward, spreading communal tensions in common heritage and everyday life.

Hindutva activists forced scholar Feroze Khan out of the Sanskrit department of Banaras Hindu University and protested against actor Sara Ali Khan's performance of the fire ritual because of their Muslim identity. These activists disregard the basic principle that language and the river are a universal heritage that belongs to mankind, not the monopoly of any single community. Even as Hindutva campaigns for recognition of Varanasi as a World Heritage site, its worldview on heritage is sectarian and exclusive.

Yet Varanasi's history carries a powerful alternate heritage discourse. According to this tradition, Aurangzeb's brother, Dara Sikoh, was respectful toward Hinduism and collaborated with Banaras Pandits to translate the Upanishads from Sanskrit into the Persian version known as *Sirr-i-akbar* (Greatest Secret). The fifteenth-century mystic saint-poet Kabir, who lived and spread his message of humanism in Varanasi, challenging the tyranny of organized religions, was neither a Hindu nor a Muslim, or else belonged to both faiths simultaneously.

The Banarasi silk saree manifests a proud textile heritage of Hindu-Muslim *Tana-Bana* (warp and weft). Legendary shehnai player Bismillah Khan (1916–2006) used to perform at Sankat Mochan temple as a true icon of *Ganga-Jamula Tehzeeb* (Hindu-Muslim syncretism). Sufi saint Baba Bahadur Shahid's shrine is a common holy heritage of Hindus and Muslims. At present, however, Hindutva's intolerant and belligerent narrative has overpowered the syncretic history and heritage of Varanasi. ■

India's New Water Works

DEBJANI BHATTACHARYYA

In July 2019, India's sixth-largest city, which receives almost 55 inches of rainfall a year on average, ran out of water. Chennai was one of the first major cities in South Asia to be left parched during that summer. July 19 was named "Day Zero" to mark the moment when all four reservoirs supplying water to the city ran dry. But Chennai, on the coast of the Bay of Bengal, is not only plagued by water scarcity; it is also increasingly in the news for spectacular flooding, abetted by climate change and rampant unplanned urbanization.

Commenting on the broken relationship between the city and its waters, activist and writer Nityanand Jayaraman said that the city started to run out of water more than a century ago, during the colonial period. That was when the British began experimenting with centralizing the water infrastructure in the name of efficiency and public works.

Large-scale, profit-generating irrigation became the emblem of this transformation. It gradually displaced local systems of water holding and management, including the traditional *eris*—seasonal tanks that filled during the monsoons and regularly replenished groundwater. As with many of South Asia's hydro-projects, such public works often end up symbolizing the vast powers of the state rather than working for the public. These water infrastructures have influenced electoral politics throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. And a rising middle class both shaped and was shaped by the bureaucracy of governing these water works.

Leela Fernandes's *Governing Water in India* is a tour de force, analyzing the politics of reform and bureaucracy, and calibrating and deepening insights into India's unequal social fabric. In her previous book, *India's New Middle Class*,

Fernandes created an analytic agenda to investigate a subsection of society that had remained mostly invisible as far as representative politics was concerned, but nonetheless had become a major player in the shaping of policy. Similarly, this book displays Fernandes's skill in countering some basic assumptions about the Indian state and turning them on their heads through a fine-grained analysis of institutional governance, bureaucratic politics, and the negotiations and conflicts that form the state's relations to water.

Through five intricately researched chapters on water bureaucracy, moving from colonial India to the regulatory extraction practiced by the post-liberalized Indian state, this book offers a theory of neoliberal state formation that is grounded methodologically in the global South. The question that arises is why one should focus on water to understand the political economy of governance and bureaucracy in India. As historian Rohan D'Souza has pointed out, water is both a resource and an affliction—it may threaten the state apparatus by being either too much when there is flooding, or too little when the reservoirs run dry.

Taking this dilemma posed by water governance as a starting point, Fernandes shows how the multifarious nature of water allows us to gain a robust understanding of how federalism, institutional frameworks, and governance through reform operate in India. In the process, she seeks to counter the idea of Indian exceptionalism, characterized by bureaucratic corruption and politicized institutional dysfunction. Rather, she argues with nuance and caution that the story of institutional reform failures and post-independence dirigisme must be grounded in a study attuned to the constraints of bureaucratic work. It is only then, she contends, that we can understand how centralized state control and market liberalization are not antitheses of one another, but rather have operated together to reproduce existing hierarchies and create new inequalities.

Governing Water in India: Inequality, Reform, and the State

Leela Fernandes
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CAPILLARIES OF POWER

The southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu emerged from the colonial administrative unit of the Madras Presidency. With its vast agrarian economy, the state became the crucible for a centralized water bureaucracy and one of the major recipients of global developmental finance through the postcolonial period. By examining water governance in Tamil Nadu, especially following the liberalization of India's economy in the 1990s, Fernandes critically rethinks the two major lenses that dominate studies on Indian political economy: decentralization and the privatization of public works.

For many scholars, access to basic resources like water has been the locus for examining how neoliberal marketization of public services created a rentier class while mediating what citizenship means, especially among the working poor in Indian metropolises. Fernandes argues that there is a more complex relation between a neoliberal economy and the capillaries of state power that buttress India's unequal society. She argues that the seeds for the monetization of water as a public resource had already been sown at the turn of the nineteenth century. Keeping the focus firmly on the state, she shows that water in Tamil Nadu has received limited private-sector investment, yet it still has become emblematic of state-based patronage and rent-seeking.

Anthropologist Nikhil Anand's 2017 book *Hydraulic City: Water and the Infrastructures of Citizenship in Mumbai* offered a deep ethnographic understanding of the politics of citizenship as it is mediated through piped water for the city's residents. Fernandes, for her part, provides a robust analysis of the institutional politics that frame the interweaving of civil society with state bureaucracy. In post-independence India, though a planned economy became the face of the nation, it left behind a legacy of water-extractive heavy industry, large-scale dams, and something unique to India's social fabric, enmeshed in its planning agenda—the bureaucratic middle class. The story of governing water emerges within the space between a strong developmental state pursuing food security through massive water works and a bureaucracy rife with regulatory gaps.

Yet Fernandes's book is about more than water and its governance. One of the main conclusions

of this rigorously argued account is how we should approach the story of liberalization, the developmental state, and governmental reform when the appropriate analytic framing is neither decentralization nor its failure. Discarding the normative assumption that decentralization operates through the withdrawal of the state and the transfer of its functions to the private sector, Fernandes shows instead how liberalized market intervention ends up reproducing the very frameworks and configurations of concentrated state authority that it seeks to reform.

In the case of Chennai, privatization has left certain sectors of centralized authority over water intact, namely the Public Works Department and Metrowater. The process has merely achieved a restructuring of governmental operations through downsizing and subcontracting. Instead of weakening state authority, privatization redistributes institutional power. Within this disaggregation, a new relation between the state and private capital plays out.

That trend, Fernandes argues, cannot simply be

explained as a story of rentierism, bureaucratic corruption, and failures of reform endemic to independent India's institutions. Sometimes the emergence of private markets has little to do

with liberalization, but rather results from state incapacities, like those which allowed the spread of private water tankers and bottled water deliveries for residents with the wherewithal to afford such services.

This story of privatization is also part of the emergence of a securitized state. It does not refrain from using violence to quell civil society protests against private corporations that are creating new kinds of enclosure of water resources through either extraction or pollution. In Kerala, the wells started running dry soon after a Coca-Cola factory opened in early 2000; in Thoothukudi, the Vedanta Sterlite Copper plant polluted the waters, provoking a 23-year-long protest.

Fernandes's book will be of interest to anyone wishing to gain a granular understanding of the processes of the centralization and decentralization of the Indian state, and of what the emergence of private capital in governmental institutions looks like on the ground. It will also be of value to scholars interested in how Indian cities are managing water in the face of climate change.

*Water is both a resource
and an affliction.*

Yet the reader is left with the question of how to read Fernandes's argument about the constraints facing Indian bureaucrats who seek to operate in an ethical manner, or what she calls "bureaucratic ethical maneuvering." Her overarching narrative is that bureaucratic patronage, institutional reward structures, corruption, and neoliberal downsizing dominate the operation of water. Does this analysis ultimately remain somewhat beholden to the story of exceptionalism that

dominates studies of political institutions in India—precisely what Fernandes wants to push back against?

In any case, Fernandes has undertaken the challenging task of rethinking what constitutes bureaucratic agency and its ethical constraints in the context of India's water politics, going beyond simplistic narratives of corruption. She has opened a new area of research with a book that is nuanced, rigorous, and refreshingly original. ■