

Interview – Dipin Kaur

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.

Dipin Kaur is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Ashoka University. Her research interests focus on ethnicity and state strategy in the shadow of political violence in South Asia and the British Empire. Her ongoing book project seeks to explain why states collaborate with coethnics (i.e., individuals belonging to the same ethnic groups as insurgents) in response to some conflicts but rely on ethnic outgroups in others. Outside of state strategy, she is interested in the gender dynamics of war, public opinion-building in conflict, and the politics of post-conflict transitional justice. Her work has been published in the American Journal of Political Science, Social Text, and Contemporary South Asia. At Ashoka, she teaches thematic courses on political violence and post-conflict dynamics, as well as courses on Research Methodology and Qualitative Methods. She received her PhD in Political Science from Yale University in 2022.

What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

Interestingly (and somewhat ironically), I came to the study of counterinsurgency through an initial interest in human rights during conflict. During my undergraduate years at UC Berkeley, I was fortunate to have my interest in these topics facilitated by mentors who gave me incredible opportunities – ranging from internships with refugee asylum organizations to interviews with violence survivors and research assistantships on monographs on the gendered impact of conflict – to find my intellectual niche. My advisors at Yale encouraged me to see the other side of the story: the variation in outcomes of interest to me were often explained not just by the efforts of human rights groups, but also by the willingness and ability of individual states to block or encourage civil society efforts. As a result, my interests sharpened to consider the variation in state institutions in response to conflicts, and the impact that the religion of the insurgents has on the ethnic makeup of the counterinsurgent forces (army, police, militia) of the state. Specifically, I became interested in the question of why states sometimes employ coethnics – soldiers or militia members who share the ethnicity of the insurgents – as counterinsurgents in response to some conflicts but rely on ethnic outgroups in others.

How do weak and strong states differ in their recruitment strategies for security forces?

In my research, I find that when insurgencies break out in a country, weak and strong-capacity states perceive vastly different levels of threat. The perceived level of threat in turn depends on two factors: the state's own capacity (its security force ratio, its military expenditure, its infrastructural and administrative capabilities), and the insurgent movement's strength (its level of cohesion and the extent to which it presents an ideological challenge to the state). Accordingly, states make strategic calculations about the level of threat they perceive in deciding when to deploy which ethnicities.

States with weak capacity are likely to be suspicious of or acrimonious towards any insurgent groups (even if these insurgent groups are weak) and are unlikely to be able to incentivize ex-ethnic insurgents to defect. As a result,

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weaker states are likely to perceive comparatively higher threat levels from any insurgency (regardless of armed group strength) and are unlikely to recruit large number of coethnics into their security apparatus in response. Instead, faced with armed group threats, weak states seek alliances exclusively with ethnic outgroups in an effort to build on existing divisions within the civilian population, or at best deploy a mix of ethnicities with ethnic outgroups (i.e. those not part of the insurgent population) at their helm.

Strong states, on the other hand, possess adequate resources and sufficient coercive capacity to encourage individuals belonging to the ethnic support base of insurgent groups to join state ranks. As a result, when strong states perceive increasing levels of threat from insurgent challengers, they are likely to reduce the percentage of coethnic recruits in their security forces. Conversely, as states perceive more limited (or lower) levels of threat from insurgents, they are likely to intensify collaboration through the recruitment of coethnics as counterinsurgents at the official military, paramilitary and police level. Coethnics, on their part, are likely to become more willing to defect from insurgent groups throw in their lot with states to ensure survival.

How do you see these recruitment strategies playing out in the Russia-Ukraine context?

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine War differs slightly from the insurgency context that I theorize about for two reasons. First, the “coethnics of insurgents” does not exist since both groups in question are multi-ethnic sovereign states. Second, the Russian government have not disclosed information regarding the ethnic composition of its army or casualties in the war in Ukraine, and it is not feasible to distinguish between ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians based solely on names. However, if we were to extend the analogy, my theoretical framework would predict that Russia, a state with strong coercive capacity faced with a strong threat in the form of the Ukrainian Army, would use a combination – of Russian ethnic majorities and minorities – with ethnic majorities at the helm. Indeed, we can see from the coverage of the war that Russian ethnic minorities are being sent to fight and die in Ukraine at disproportionate rates, and allegations that peripheral ethnic groups have been used as “cannon fodder” have received coverage in foreign policy analyses of the war. We can see from statistical calculations about the ethnic breakup of casualties from the Russian side of the war that the ethnic minorities have been represented in considerably large numbers relative to their share of the population. All the same, there are two important findings of note here. First, that these ethnic minorities are no less likely to be violent: some religious leaders suggested that ethnic minorities are more cruel in the war. This finding is in line with my findings from other contexts, where I find that recruiting from the same constituencies as insurgents often comes at the cost of increased violence, corruption, indiscipline, and grievance in multi-ethnic contexts. Second, that the majority of those deployed (extrapolated from the number of casualties) by the Russian state are still ethnic Slavs, who represent between 70 and 80 percent of the war casualties while being 80.9% of the population.

How does the variation in state capacities worldwide shape the dynamics and outcomes of wars, insurgencies, and counterinsurgencies around the world?

My own research, when combined with recent research on political violence, provides new insight into the ways in which state capacity can constrain the dynamics and outcomes of insurgencies around the world. First, state capacity plays a role in shaping the strategic options that states have in response to insurgent (or international) armed challenges. In his 2021 book, Paul Staniland finds that, rather than limiting their concerns to solely the size or the organizational characteristics of armed groups, regimes assess how insurgent groups’ politics align with the government’s own ideological goals. This assessment in turn, drives state strategy (ranging from alliance to total war) towards armed groups and their willingness to use force against some insurgent groups but not others. I find that this perceived level of threat is a function of interactions between state capacity and insurgent threat, which in turn determines the type and ethnicity of the counterinsurgent forces it fields in response.

Second, recruiting individuals belonging to the same ethnicities as warring ethnic groups may give states an upper hand in winning counterinsurgency campaigns. Recent research from Lyall (2020) shows that countries that build inclusive armies perform better on the battlefield (and experience lower desertions) than those plagued by military inequality across ethnic, racial, class, and other identity-based lines. My analysis of cross-national evidence at the militia level bears out both, that is the literature’s ‘coethnicity advantage’ trend. Specifically, in line with current

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scholarship, my cross-national analysis finds that, compared to conflicts where state militia groups are recruited from ethnic out-groups, conflicts with militia groups recruited from the same bases as insurgents are more likely (on average) to end in state victory, even when controlling for a variety of state and insurgent-level characteristics.

Finally, even though the above ethnic recruiting decisions are likely to bring favourable counterinsurgent outcomes, state capacity decides whether states are going to bring such coethnics on board. For instance, in his 2016 book, Philip Roessler argues that in weak democracies in sub-Saharan Africa, uncertainty about rival ethnic groups' intentions to usurp power through a future coup d'état prevents rulers from sharing power with ethnic groups other than their own. While such exclusion reduces the risk of coups, it simultaneously undermines governmental legitimacy and fuels internal dissatisfaction among other social groups, thereby increasing the risk of civil war. Overall, I find that stronger states that face weak insurgencies are much more likely to be *able* to hire coethnics compared to situations where weak states face strong insurgencies.

What are you currently working on?

Aside from teaching courses on political violence, gender in conflict, and research methods to an exciting set of students at Ashoka University, I am working on developing my doctoral dissertation about ethnicity and counterinsurgency into an academic book project. To this end, I am currently conducting archival work in the UK on the ethnic recruiting policies of the British Empire in Burma. Concurrently, I am collaborating with other scholars on projects in South Asia, public attitudes in conflict zones, the impact of conflict on gendered constructions, and the impact of perceptions on attitudes towards ethnic outgroups.

What is the most important advice you could give to other early career or young scholars?

Young scholars looking to make a career in the discipline should not be swayed by the methodological trends that they think lead to better outcomes on the job or publication market. Instead, pick a question (or even a general issue area) that interests you, and in parallel, learn all the possible methods you can. Think of them as tools in your intellectual kit, to be used as the right question comes along, so that you can let your question decide your method, instead of your methodological predilections constraining what you can study.

More generally, even outside the methodological sphere, try everything before you get comfortable in your niche. While the pandemic has taken a lot away from the exposure that young scholars could have had, it has also opened up new opportunities to engage with other colleagues across the world using hybrid or remote formats. So apply to that conference, attempt that application, cold-email the mentor you have been admiring from afar, and discover your passions in the process.