

## Rival Claims

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In this study of struggles for ethnoterritorial autonomy, Bethany Lacina explains both regional elites' decision whether or not to fight for autonomy and the central government's response to this decision. In India, the prime minister's respective electoral ties to separate, rival regional interests determine whether ethnoterritorial demands occur and whether they are repressed or accommodated.

Using new data on ethnicity and subnational discrimination in India, national and state archives, parliamentary records, cross-national analysis, and her original fieldwork, Lacina explains ethnoterritorial politics as a three-sided interaction of the center and rival interests in the periphery. First, when the prime minister lacks clear electoral reasons to court one regional group over another, ethnic entrepreneurs use militancy to create national political pressure in favor of their goals. Second, ethnic groups rarely win autonomy or mobilize for violence in regions home to electorally influential anti-autonomy interests. Third, when a regional ethnic majority is politically important to the prime minister, its leaders can deter autonomy demands within their borders, while actively discriminating against minorities.

In sum, Lacina challenges the conventional beliefs that territorial autonomy demands are a reaction to centralized power and that governments resist autonomy to preserve central prerogatives. The center has allegiances in regional politics, and ethnoterritorial violence reflects the center's entanglement with rival interests in the periphery.

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RIVAL CLAIMS

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*Ethnic Violence and Territorial Autonomy  
under Indian Federalism*

Bethany Lacina

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*For Adam, Simon, and Gideon*



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## Foreword

International policymakers, activists, and scholars frequently advocate for territorial autonomy as the natural, just, and pragmatic solution to ethnic conflict. In India, quasi-ethnic federalism is credited with ensuring the country's survival, though numerous violent movements for ethnic self-rule have occurred there since 1947. What explains both the survival of India as a single, sovereign entity and the persistence of conflict over subnational autonomy? What does the history of ethnic territorial conflict in India suggest about subnational autonomy as a stability measure in diverse countries?

A neglected dimension of struggles over ethnoterritorial autonomy is the rivalry between pro-autonomy interests and their local opponents, which include those who fear becoming minorities within an ethnic fiefdom and existing regional governments that are reluctant to surrender territory. In India, the electoral relationship between these opponents of autonomy and the prime minister dictates whether the center represses or accommodates ethnoterritorial demands. Regional elites choose whether to mobilize for autonomy, what tactics to use, and what bargains to strike with the leaders of other communities, in light of the prime minister's political ties to competing interests in the periphery.

Original data on ethnicity in India and on state-level discrimination against minorities, conflict accounts from fieldwork, national and state archives, and parliamentary records reveal three insights. First, ethnic entrepreneurs use militancy to create national political pressure in favor of autonomy. This tactic can be effective if the prime minister's electoral

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incentives toward competing regional actors are indeterminate. Second, ethnic groups that are quite disadvantaged relative to anti-autonomy interests in their region tend to neither win autonomy nor mobilize for violence. They are deterred by anticipated central repression. Finally, states where the ethnic majority is politically important to the prime minister tend to be both immune to autonomy demands by minorities within their borders and more discriminatory toward minorities. Both the absence of minority demands and majoritarian discrimination reflect the center's unwillingness to intervene against the interests of the state majority.

This study challenges the common assumption that territorial autonomy is a tool to manage clashing interests between the periphery and the capital. Instead, political and social rivalry between groups in the periphery is both a cause and an outcome of regional ethnic autonomy. The triangular political relationship between the central government and rival regional interests determines when these institutions succeed or fail in preventing ethnic violence.