

Electoral Clientelism and Election violence in South and South-East Asia

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at examining the effect of electoral clientelism on election violence under a variety of conditions. Taking motivation from earlier research denoting increased risk of violence in elections in high clientelist context, this paper examines the effect of electoral clientelism in terms of vote buying on election violence. This study extends existing literature by arguing that the effect of electoral clientelism on election violence is dependent upon certain conditions and can vary across these conditions. The region of focus for this study is South and Southeast Asia since this is an understudied region with a high level of election violence as well as electoral clientelism. The results show significant evidence for the argument that the effect of electoral clientelism on election violence is dependent upon the conditions of competitiveness, media freedom and the general level of political violence prevailing in a country.

Keywords: *Election Violence, Clientelism, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Political Violence.*

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Introduction

What causes elections to be violent? Scholars have been addressing this question from various angles attempting to interpret the various factors that shape the condition for election violence in various countries. While some studies address this from a competitiveness viewpoint, asserting that the level of competitiveness will be associated with the risk of violence, some focus on the actors, institutions, and stakes of election. One of the other approaches of explanation is that clientelism increases the risk of election violence in a country by raising the stakes of winning or losing in the elections. This school argues that clientelism increases the risk of violence in an election by increasing the stakes of gains and losses associated with electoral outcome.

This paper aims at examining this view in the context of the high-clientelist and high-violence prone region of South and Southeast Asia. It extends the existing studies by arguing that the effect of electoral clientelism on election violence is dependent upon specific conditions. Three conditions are examined in this paper. First, since the level of competitiveness in election raises the stakes of winning in

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the election, it should be strongly relevant to the tools of manipulation the ruling party uses. Since electoral clientelism and election violence are both tools in the toolset of the party in power for manipulating elections, we can expect that the level of competitiveness is directly associated with the usage of these tools.

Secondly, the presence of a biased media is an alternative medium of electoral manipulation that can aid in covering the news of manipulation as well as violence in election. Therefore, this condition is also relevant to the effect of electoral clientelism on election violence, as it will change the condition of the interplay between the two. Finally, whether a country experiences political violence in general is a condition that can drive this effect of electoral manipulation on election violence, since the incentive for election violence in an already violence environment is supposed to be higher.

In this analysis, I use a set of relevant variables from the Varieties of Democracy: V-Dem (Coppedge et. al, 2021) dataset. I find evidence for the argument that the effect of electoral clientelism on election violence is indeed heavily dependent upon the conditions of competitiveness, media bias and political violence. Whereas higher level of competitiveness is associated with a higher effect of electoral clientelism on election violence because of the higher stakes of winning, the presence of biased media and higher degree of political violence in general makes the effect of electoral clientelism insignificant on election violence. This can be explained with the idea that both of these conditions offer a higher incentive for the deployment of election violence as tools of manipulation by decreasing the cost of violent measures in election.

In the following discussion, I first present my theory and hypotheses by situating them in the existing literature. In the next section, I present the data and the measurement strategy. Finally, I present the results of my models and analytically discuss the findings, followed by a conclusion.

Theory and Hypotheses

Election violence is a key impediment in the way to effective political participation. Prevalence of election violence has been generally higher in the countries known as democratizing countries (Ruiz-Rufino and Birch, 2020) where a level of competitive election mechanisms is at place but are not essentially fully democratized. The literature on election violence is quite extensive and multidimensional. Previous works have addressed the dynamics of such violence from a variety of angles. In many studies pre-election violence has been conceptualized as a strategic tool for election campaign aimed at influencing the candidate and voter behavior through threats and violence (Daxecker, 2020; Höglund, 2009).

The underlying reasons behind such violence have been investigated thoroughly in the literature. Some studies address this from the competitiveness angle by asserting that the level of competitiveness will be associated with the risk of violence (Daxecker, 2020) while some focus on the actors, institutions and stakes of election (Höglund, Jarstad, and Kovacs, 2009). Recent studies also suggest the association of pre-election violence with the urge to maintain the dominance of parties at the sub-national level (Wahman and Goldring, 2020). Such competition has also been found to be linked with communal riots centering election at the local level and the government's difference in response based on the competitiveness in particular constituencies in a particular case study on India (Wilkinson, 2006). Literature also

suggests that higher institutionalization of parties can reduce the risk of election violence (Fjelde, 2020).

A number of studies have focused on the role of clientelism i.e. patronage mechanisms in shaping the suitable environment for election violence (Bratton, 2008; Berenschot, 2019; Hoglund and Piyarathne, 2009; Forsberg, 2018; Abebiyi, 2021). It is argued that clientelism increases the risk of violence in an election by increasing the stakes of gains and losses associated with electoral outcome (Forsberg, 2018). In societies with highly pronounced cleavages, informal patronage networks have been found to shape patterns of election related violence between communities (Berenschot, 2019). In the African context, research has shown that vote buying increases partisan loyalty, whereas violence reduces turnout (Bratton, 2008). Therefore, political parties tend to enhance their in-group support through clientelism and ensues violence to minimize the turnout of the supporters of other candidates.

Clientelism refers to a system of exchange between patrons and clients where the patron provides patronage of various forms for gaining the support of the client. Kitschelt (2000) defines it as linkage created with direct, personal and typically material side payments, often in the form of material favors in exchange of money (in the resource-rich but vote-poor constituencies) and material incentives in exchange for votes (in the vote-rich but resource-poor constituencies). Patrons are usually pro-government bodies using informal networks for distributing state resources. In less consolidated democracies, clientelist incentives reach a peak in order to gain easy support from the voters (Farid & Ashraf, 2025).

Clientelist incentives present in an electoral environment can have direct effect on the level of political violence seen in that election (Forsberg, 2018; Berenschot, 2020, Bratton, 2008). The mechanism is simple: when there are patronage mechanisms of the ruling party tries to buy vote by offering incentives of benefit to the voters, the stakes of election become higher and therefore produce more violence. Voters stand to gain in the short term with the election-time incentives and in the long term with the favor from the candidate remaining in power. On the other hand, the patron i.e. the ruling party invests a great amount of clientelist incentives for the voters so as to secure the seat and thereby access to state resources. Therefore, the stakes for winning and losing in election get a lot higher in a clientelist environment, setting the framework for a higher level of election violence.

This mechanism has been found to be effective in different contexts including Sub-Saharan Africa, individual countries in Asia, etc. However, to the best of my knowledge, there has not been any study in the context of the larger region of South and South-East Asia probing the relationship between electoral clientelism and election violence. These two regions, with some exceptions, have a high rate of clientelism as well as a frequency of election violence present. It is interesting to explore how and whether these two issues are related. I aim to contribute to this gap by examining the effect of clientelism in election on election violence for these two neighboring regions. Therefore, I build on this premise to re-examine the relationship between clientelism and election violence with a focus on the region of South and South-East Asia, with the following baseline hypothesis:

H1: Higher election violence will be more associated with higher clientelism in elections.

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Besides, I am interested in examining this effect by examining the effect of certain conditions and want to examine the changes in the effect that occur resulting from that. There has been a longstanding proposition in the conventional literature on election violence that competitive elections are more likely to experience violence. Previous research has suggested that with a higher level of competition, actors become more prone to resort to electoral manipulation strategies like election violence (Fjelde & Hoglund, 2016; Salehyan and Linebarger, 2015). But what happens to electoral clientelism and its interplay with election violence when the level of competitiveness fluctuates? More specifically, I want to see the effect of clientelism in elections on election violence, conditional on electoral competitiveness. I expect that this association will be stronger in the presence of higher competitive environment. Thus, my second hypothesis is formulated as:

H2: *Higher election violence will be more associated with higher clientelism in elections in the case of competitive elections.*

The role of media has been in elections has been explored from various perspectives. Kellner (2005) examines the corporate control of the mainstream media and argues that it undermines the US democracy in various ways. Rosenstiel (2005) argues that media often ‘shallows out’ the campaign information that voters receive, whereas Chen and Smith (2010) go into a deeper dive into the use of media in election campaigns by exploring the use of different communication channels as tools to target specific audiences, the adoption of a wide variety of technologies to ensure broad (‘mass’) reach, and the co-ordination of messages across different platforms. However, I aim to examine how media freedom, and the extent to which the media is independent from the ruling party, conditions the effect of electoral clientelism on election violence. On this premise, I develop the following hypothesis:

H3: *Higher election violence will be less associated with clientelism in elections where media is politically compromised.*

Finally, the general environment of political violence is very important in moderating the effect of clientelism on election violence. Thus, I also want to test the conditional effect of the general political violence scenario in a country for examining the effect of electoral clientelism on election violence with the following hypothesis:

H4: *Higher election violence will be less associated with clientelism in elections where political violence, in general, is higher.*

Data

This paper focuses on examining the effect of electoral clientelism on election violence. The key dependent variable here is election violence. Many measures of election violence are available for examination, with country data, event data, yearly reports, etc. For this project, I will focus on the V-dem (Coppedge et. al, 2021) dataset that presents an enormous aggregation of political data for 202 countries over the period of 1789-2020. I will be using the latest country-year version of the dataset (version 11.1 full). Data will be used only for the countries in the two regions of focus in the paper: South Asia and Southeast Asia.

South Asia is defined here by the membership of the regional organization South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC). It is comprised of eight countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Afghanistan and

Sri Lanka. Southeast Asia is defined in this project by the membership of the regional organization Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It has 10 countries as its members: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR (Laos), Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Unfortunately, the version 11.1 of the V-dem dataset provides no observation for Brunei. Therefore, data for Brunei was not possible to be used in this project, limiting the number of Southeast Asian countries examined to 9.

Measurement Strategy

For the dependent variable i.e. election violence, I will be using the “Election government intimidation” index of the dataset, coded as variable named *v2elintim*. This index investigates whether opposition candidates/parties/campaign workers were subjected to repression, intimidation, violence, or harassment by the government, the ruling party, or their agents. That is, violence is not only taken to be manifested in the form of physical violence but also in the form of intimidation and repression that tend to reduce voter response. This is measured on an ordinal scale that is converted to interval by measurement model. Lower values denote higher violence/intimidation and higher values denote lower violence/intimidation. For easier interpretation purposes, I inverted the scale of the election violence variable so that lower values denote lower violence/ intimidation and higher values refer to higher violence/ intimidation (Ahmed et al., 2021).

The main independent variable in this project is electoral clientelism. For the purpose of clarity and approaching the research problem, the focus is on clientelism *in election* rather than clientelism in general. This can be best represented by the level of vote buying present in a country during a particular election. For measuring this variable, I will use the *Election vote buying* index in the V-dem dataset, denoted by the variable *v2elvoibuy*. This variable refers to the distribution of money or gifts to individuals, families, or small groups in order to influence their decision to vote/not vote or whom to vote for. It is also measured in an ordinal scale and converted to interval by measurement model. Lower values denote higher electoral clientelism and higher values denote lower electoral clientelism. Similar to the election violence variable, I inverted the scale of the electoral clientelism variable so that interpretation is easier. In the models, lower values denote lower electoral clientelism and higher values refer to higher electoral clientelism.

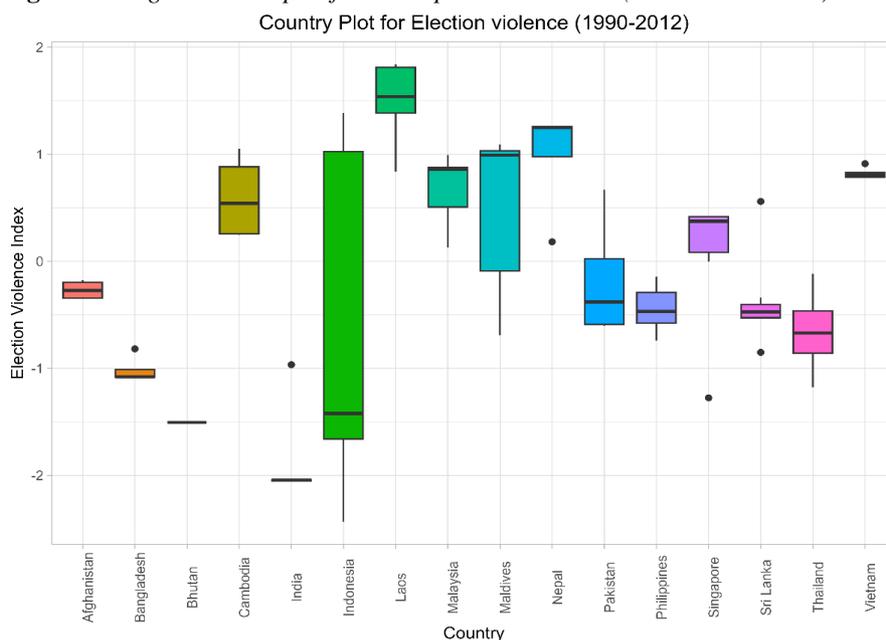
Below is an overview of the dependent and independent variables with summary statistics for the countries under examination.

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Table 1: Description of Dependent and Independent Variables

	South Asia (N=39)	Southeast Asia (N=44)	Overall (N=83)
Election Violence			
Mean (SD)	-0.346 (1.01)	0.154 (0.967)	-0.0809 (1.01)
Median [Min, Max]	-0.468 [-2.05, 1.26]	0.299 [-2.44, 1.84]	-0.167 [-2.44, 1.84]
Electoral Clientelism			
Mean (SD)	-0.480 (0.591)	-0.727 (1.45)	-0.611 (1.13)
Median [Min, Max]	-0.542 [-2.24, 0.967]	-0.254 [-2.96, 1.69]	-0.507 [-2.96, 1.69]

Figure 1: Single variable plot for the dependent variable (Election Violence)

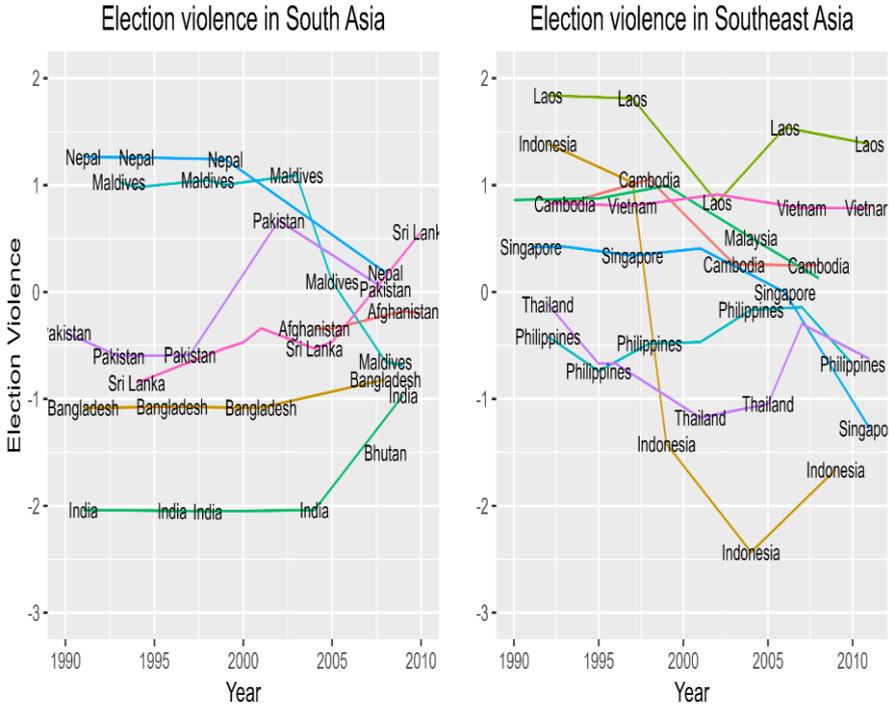


Here, we can see that a significant level of variation is present in the election violence index for the countries. Countries are scattered across the plot with varied levels of election violence. Country-specific variations can also be noted. Especially, Indonesia and Maldives have large variation in the level of violence present. Outliers can be noted for Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Vietnam (Sarwar & Farid, 2024).

We can also look at the yearly variation in the level of election violence by country and region. The following pair of plots give us a time series overview of election violence in different countries. The variation by country and year presented in the

above plot gives us a glimpse of trends in violence across time, country and region. We can see that in the 1990-2012 timeframe, most countries in this region had a sustained level of election violence present, with occasional rise (India, Sri Lanka) and fall (Nepal, Laos, Indonesia, Malaysia, etc.) in specific elections.

Figure 2: Time-series distribution of election violence in South and Southeast Asia



For examining the effect of the conditions in the last three hypotheses, I also use variables from the V-Dem data. In the second model, I control for competitiveness in elections by using the Elections Multiparty variable which measures whether there has been meaningful competition in the election using an ordinal scale converted to interval. I also include variables for measuring party linkage which refers to the sort of "good" that the party offers in exchange for political support and participation in party activities ranging from clientelist to programmatic. The scale of this variable is inverted in the model so that higher values mean a greater presence of clientelistic linkages. I also control for voter turnout in this competitiveness model.

Next, for the media control model, I use two key variables. The election free campaign media variable measures whether parties or candidates apart from the ruling party receive either free or publicly financed access to national broadcast media. The media bias variable measures the level of media bias against opposition parties or candidates to address year-to-year variation. Since in the original dataset, this variable is measured as lower values denoting higher media bias, I inverted the scale of this variable in the models for easier interpretation of the results. Finally, for the general political violence model, I use the political violence variable that

Electoral Clientelism and Election violence in South and South-East Asia measures the use of political violence by non-state actors. I also use the binary measure for civil war in this model to account for violence relevant to civil war in a given election year. In addition to the model specific controls, I control for the economic and demographic variables GDP growth and education in all of the models. As modelling strategy, to examine the relationship between electoral clientelism and election violence while accounting for the above-mentioned contextual factors, I employ a fixed-effects panel regression model with country fixed effects across all models presented. The results from the model are presented in the next section.

Results and Discussion

Table 2 presents the results of the regression models I have specified above. From the baseline model with controls (model 1), I find that there is a significant positive effect of electoral clientelism on election violence. It signals that electoral clientelism in the form of vote-buying leads to an increase in election violence in South and Southeast Asia. It ties in with the first hypothesis predicting higher electoral clientelism being associated with higher election violence. The baseline result supports the idea that the stakes of the election increase substantially when the political parties, especially the incumbent, rely on patronage networks and engage in vote buying by offering material benefits to voters, leading to increased levels of violence surrounding elections. Voters anticipate short-term gains from these incentives during elections and long-term advantages if the incumbent remains in power. At the same time, the ruling party invests significant resources in clientelist exchanges to secure electoral victory and maintain access to state resources. These mechanisms turn the contests in clientelist environments more competitive and hence more susceptible to violence.

Next, models 2 to 4 present the moderating effects of electoral competition, media freedom, and overall political violence on this effect of electoral clientelism on election violence. In model 2, controls for party linkage, multiparty election, and voter turnout are added, and the interaction effect of vote buying and multiparty election is examined. The coefficient for electoral clientelism remains positive and statistically significant in this model, indicating that in competitive multiparty elections, electoral clientelism through vote-buying tends to be associated with more election violence. Competition, measured by whether the election was a multiparty one, has a negative but not significant coefficient, signaling that competitiveness alone may reduce violence slightly but not decisively. Higher voter turnout, on the other hand, is found to be associated with more violence, reflecting higher-stakes contests which are possibly connected with both electoral clientelism (turnout buying) and election violence. However, the interaction between electoral clientelism and multiparty elections does not show a statistically significant effect, which signals no clear moderating effect of competition on the association between vote buying and election violence (Farid & Sarwar, 2024).

Table 2: Regression analysis results for the effect of electoral clientelism on election violence

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Electoral Clientelism	0.341*	0.706*	0.353	-0.025
	(0.165)	(0.271)	(0.250)	(0.340)
Party Linkage		-0.262	-0.668	0.468+
		(0.254)	(0.414)	(0.261)
Multiparty Election		-0.195		
		(0.170)		
Voter Turnout		0.017*		
		(0.007)		
Electoral Clientelism *Multiparty Election		0.039		
		(0.108)		
Free Media Campaign			-0.632*	
			(0.240)	
Media Bias			-0.109	
			(0.274)	
Electoral Clientelism *Free Media Campaign			0.172	
			(0.148)	
Political Violence				0.154
				(0.135)
Civil War				0.019
				(0.153)
Electoral Clientelism *Political Violence				-0.099
				(0.169)
GDP Growth	0.053	0.475	-0.287	-0.630
	(1.743)	(1.752)	(1.727)	(1.691)
Education	-0.120+	-0.123	-0.106	-0.036
	(0.071)	(0.074)	(0.078)	(0.080)
Num.Obs.	69	69	69	52
R2	0.138	0.256	0.255	0.257

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	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
AIC	55.3	53.2	53.3	5.5
BIC	64.2	71.1	71.2	21.1
RMSE	0.34	0.32	0.32	0.22

+ p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Model 3 examines the effect of media as controls and also as condition. In this model, controls are included for free media campaigns and media bias, and an interaction term is included between electoral clientelism and free media campaigns to examine whether the level of media freedom shapes the relationship between clientelism and election violence. Interestingly, the coefficient for the effect of electoral clientelism in this model still remains positive but loses statistical significance once media factors are included, suggesting that the previously observed association between clientelism and violence is somewhat mediated by media conditions. Result on the coefficient for free media campaign is negative and statistically significant, indicating that greater media freedom is associated with lower levels of election violence. This finding aligns with the preliminary theoretical expectation in hypothesis 3 that a free and independent media can constrain political actors' violent activities by increasing transparency and accountability during elections.

However, hypothesis 3 itself is not supported by the results of this model, since the interaction term between vote buying and free media campaign is not statistically significant. This model also signifies that the media controls are actually more influential in predicting election violence than electoral clientelism effect. This can be understood since the presence of a biased media is more influential in covering ruling party's usage of election violence. Therefore, the cost of election violence is lessened as the news of violence can be controlled by the ruling party. Hence, the incentive for electoral clientelism as tool of electoral manipulation gets lessened and incentive for election violence as a tool gets higher. This is reflected in the strongly negative effect of biased election free campaign media on election violence, and in the fact that the effect of electoral clientelism gets insignificant when this control is included. Finally, in the political violence model (model 4), no statistically significant result is obtained. Once the broader conflict-related variables of political violence, civil war, and their interaction with vote buying are included, the coefficient for electoral clientelism becomes slightly negative and statistically insignificant. It suggests that clientelistic practices in election alone do not explain election violence when underlying conflict dynamics are present. None of the other controls and the interactive term are statistically significant as well.

These regression results are evidence for the second argument of the paper that the effect of electoral clientelism on election violence is heavily dependent upon the conditions of competitiveness, media bias and political violence in general. It is a new addition to our understanding of election violence and electoral clientelism. These results give us a new dimension of thinking of them as situated in conditions and show that the effects of electoral clientelism on election violence are dependent upon the conditions under which the interplay is examined (Farid, 2023).

Conclusion

In this study, I examined the effect of electoral clientelism on election violence in the context of South and Southeast Asia, as well as controlling for certain sets of conditions to measure their independent and moderating effect. Previous literature on clientelism and election violence suggest a direct effect of clientelism on election violence. It argues that when there are patronage mechanisms at work trying to buy vote by offering incentives of benefit to the voters, the stakes of election become higher and therefore produce more violence. Taking theoretical ground on this premise, I hypothesized that higher *electoral* clientelism will be associated with higher election violence. However, I also argued that this effect is dependent upon the conditions under which it is measured and situated. I introduced three sets of controls for examining how the effect of electoral clientelism changes depending upon the conditions of competitiveness, media freedom and the general level of political violence in a given context.

The geographical region of this study is South and Southeast Asia, selected due to the lack of study in this regard on this context and the high degree of clientelism and election violence. I used data from the V-dem dataset on the variables of electoral intimidation and vote buying, as well as a set of controls variables. I used the OLS method in estimating a linear regression model with country fixed effects to examine the effect.

The results of the baseline model show evidence for rejecting the null denoting a significant positive effect of electoral clientelism on election violence. When competition is included in the model, we find that electoral clientelism is linked to higher violence in competitive multiparty elections, although competition itself has no significant moderating effect. The next model adds media factors and shows that the effect of electoral clientelism becomes insignificant once media conditions are controlled for, suggesting that media environments partly explain earlier findings. Free media is significantly associated with lower violence, supporting the view that media freedom constrains political actors by increasing accountability. However, biased media may enable ruling parties to conceal violence, reducing the utility of clientelism and making violence a more attractive strategy. Finally, the fourth model finds that in the context of a higher degree of political violence in general, the effect of electoral clientelism is mitigated and the degree of political violence appears as a more positive predictor of election violence. This is expected since an already prevailing violent context helps to blend in election violence. Therefore, the cost of election violence gets lower and becomes more lucrative for the ruling party to use it as a tool of electoral manipulation.

This study is limited in the fact that more robust checks on the results are needed to substantially support the argument. Nevertheless, this presents primary evidence for the argument that the effect of electoral manipulation on election violence, which has been found to be significant in some previous studies on various contexts, is highly dependent upon the conditions under which the effect is being measured. In the models examined in this paper, evidence was found for the conditioning effects of electoral competitiveness, media environment, and the broader level of political violence on the relationship between electoral clientelism and election violence. The findings suggest that while clientelist practices such as vote buying are associated with higher levels of violence in more competitive electoral settings, this effect

Electoral Clientelism and Election violence in South and South-East Asia diminishes when media conditions or underlying political instability are taken into account. In future research, further development of this paper will aim to refine these arguments by integrating additional theoretical insights and presenting more robust empirical analyses, potentially across a wider range of cases and time periods, to clarify how institutional and contextual factors shape the dynamics of electoral clientelism and election violence.

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