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Dissecting Political Fragilities in Human Societies

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Dr Ashani Amarasinghe is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Economics at the University of Sydney, where she has been teaching since 2022. Her research focuses on political economy, network empirics, institutions, conflict, and development. She is passionate about leveraging innovative data and analytical tools to gain deeper insights into the world around us.

Growing up in Colombo during the height of Sri Lanka's civil conflict, my childhood was amply exposed to war-related news and experiences. Consequences of war and misgovernance, from the immediately obvious metrics such as fatalities, injuries and refugees, to the more nuanced aspects such as poverty, hunger, homelessness and lack of access to basic facilities, were the norm during these times. I remember long chats with my father, who is, to date, the most socially grounded individual I have met in my life, about the how's and the why's and, importantly, the why not's of these.

Perhaps because of such exposure, from a young age I was curious about the fragilities of human societies, and I knew that someday I wanted to study

these deeper. Economics, however, was an unlikely ally. Economics was supposed to be boring, and I could not see it being my life's passion. In fact, I actively rejected the study of economics in high school. Surely, economics can't satisfy my curiosity about "why people fight"?

It was during the first year of my undergraduate studies at the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, that I was exposed to economics. Fair to say I was "mind-blown".

"I was fascinated by the concept of markets and saw its application to many aspects of human behaviour."

Could I think of conflict through the lens of a "market"? Could I examine citizen-government relationships through a model of bargaining? Can historical economic performance explain why some countries are poor while others are not? So many questions to which I could finally begin to find solutions – and I was hooked.

Fast forward many years – and today I find myself working on the political fragilities in human societies, where the existing theoretical and empirical guidance in the political economy literature helps me in finding answers to questions that have always fascinated me. In simple terms, I study the political behaviours of economic agents. While this may sound straightforward, the subtle nuances associated with "political behaviours"

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and “economic agents” mean that I am consistently answering complex questions that explain the obvious, as well as the more innocuous, societal behaviours. And interestingly, these questions often draw from multiple disciplines, whether it be economics, political science, international relations, philosophy or sociology – the full package.

Let me give you an example. Did you know that the US’ 1998 airstrikes against suspected terrorist sites in Sudan and Afghanistan occurred, almost unexpectedly, at the height of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, with Bill Clinton at high risk of impeachment? Or that Donald Trump’s surprising tweet mulling the purchase of the autonomous Danish territory of Greenland came merely days after the US bond market yield curve inverted amid significant concerns of economic slowdown? Often when the domestic population is unhappy, governments manipulate the popular discourse to divert their attention, and to rally them ‘round the flag. My recent work “Diverting Domestic Turmoil” (*Journal of Public Economics*, 2022) documents this phenomenon, and shows how, when governments are facing domestic discontent, they choose to divert public attention by engaging aggressively with other countries. I find that governments don’t go to all-out war, which is arguably costly if the purpose is only to divert domestic attention. Rather, they engage in verbal aggression, just sufficient to make it to

the news, such that people start supporting the government against a perceived foreign enemy!

Another project close to my heart was triggered by Sri Lanka’s infamous Easter Sunday terror attacks in 2019. The attacks killed 269 people, injuring many more, and the consequent public anger against the government was enormous. As someone who was personally affected, I wanted to document this behaviour. Interestingly, the literature was almost silent on the short-term dynamics of public discontent towards governments following terror attacks. My paper “Public Sentiment in Times of Terror” (*Journal of Development Economics*, 2023) took an immensely granular approach to show that the public make informed decisions about government’s policies on public safety, and display high levels of discontent towards the government, in the 11 months afterwards, for failing to keep them safe.

Arguably, data on public sentiments towards the government is not readily available in the traditional data domain. The closest alternative is data on voting outcomes, but these are only available periodically, making it difficult to capture sentiments in the very short term. Public surveys, available for a select set of countries, also suffer from this dilemma. The questions I study require disaggregated data on human behaviour, in both spatial and temporal dimensions, which are intrinsically

smoothed out at aggregate levels. How then, do I quantify these behaviours?

This is where an additional layer of novelty enters my research. My work departs from conventional approaches and simplified assumptions, constrained by the aggregate nature of quintessential voting/survey data, which mask the complex underlying reality. In contrast, I leverage new, massive datasets with fine temporal and spatial granularity, quantifying concepts so far thought “intangible”, to provide fresh insights on the dynamics of these interactions. For example, I use global data on millions of media-reported events, extracted using machine learning and natural language processing tools, to quantify “public sentiments” towards governments at the day/week/month level. I use finely geo-coded data on conflicts, protests, riots or mass mobilisations, which enable me to pinpoint the exact locations of public unrest within a country. Combining such granular data with the latest econometrics toolkit, I am able to study the citizen-state relationship with a microscopic lens. Importantly, this allows me to identify the true causes and consequences of such behaviours, which then feed into meaningful, practical recommendations for well-informed policy interventions on governance.

The social behaviours that I observe day-to-day, along with the depths and breadths to which I can explain these

with the massive, granular datasets I work with, keep me continuously excited and motivated. My current, many, works-in-progress draw from a variety of social aspects. One line of work seeks to quantify the domestic roots of international relations. For example, along with my co-author Kathryn Baragwanath at the University of Melbourne, I document that when domestic economic conditions improve, governments engage in status-seeking behaviours internationally. These behaviours are strategically employed, taking the form of verbal rhetoric, to enhance geopolitical influence without jeopardising significant economic

relationships. This project also draws on millions of media reported news articles and quantifies inter-governmental relations at the country-dyad and year-month level, delving in to a level of spatio temporal granularity not yet explored in the literature. Yet another line of work documents the politics of climate change, examining how local natural disasters trigger public evaluation of the government, taking into account governments’ preventive and palliative actions to mitigate losses from natural catastrophes. The multidimensionality of the economics of foreign aid for natural disasters, which is arguably of interest to Australia as a major

international donor, is also a component of this line of work that I currently pursue.

By searching for answers to these, and a multitude of other exciting questions, I seek to improve our understanding of the short-term, largely intangible political behaviours of economic agents, while making meaningful policy recommendations to improve the efficiency and equity of political relations. I am hopeful that, someday, the little girl who grew up amidst the violence in Sri Lanka will find answers to her questions on the how’s and the why’s and the why not’s of human behaviour.



R: Crowd protest during civil unrest