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# Indirect Rule and Varieties of Governance

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*This article reexamines the venerable concept of indirect rule. We argue, drawing on evidence from colonial and postcolonial South Asia, that indirect rule actually represented a diverse set of governance forms that need to be clearly distinguished. Using a new typology of varieties of governance, we show that colonial governments established suzerain, hybrid, and de jure governance, in addition to direct rule across territories, based on the incentives and constraints of the state. The repertoire of governance forms narrowed and changed but did not disappear during decolonization, showing that the postcolonial state had powerful reasons to maintain forms of heterodox governance. Dramatic shifts, alongside enduring continuity, challenge a simple narrative of path dependence and the adherence to tradition, instead showing that governments have made conscious choices about how to govern. We conclude by discussing the implications of these arguments for broader understandings of state power.*

## Introduction

Many key political and socioeconomic outcomes in the contemporary developing world—from social service provision to the quality of representation to political violence—have been traced to the limited capacity of Third World states to perform basic functions expected of them. The weakness of state institutions has been explicitly identified as a key factor in cross-national studies of economic underdevelopment (Evans and Rauch 1999; Kohli 2004) and insurgency (Collier, Hoeffler, and Rohner 2009; Fearon and Laitin 2003). The World Bank has implicitly recognized the capability of state institutions as a necessary element for successful development (World Bank 1997). Yet some of the most striking variation in the strength of state institutions is present *within* countries. Differences in state presence and activity across national territory challenge standard assumptions about the state's imperative to monopolize coercion and complicate national indicators of state policy.

Scholars of the postcolonial world persuasively trace weak state institutions to prior indirect rule arrangements, in which colonial powers controlled territories through intermediaries rather than imposing a monopoly of violence directly. Indirect rule is a powerful concept for describing uneven state formation and its contemporary legacies. Yet it suffers from two major shortcomings. First, indirect rule is normally treated as a homogenous category, in opposition to “direct rule” or Weberian sovereignty. This masks a diverse but discrete array of indirect rule types, each with different causes and consequences. Second, scholars usually treat indirect rule as an explicitly historical phenomenon. We argue that while some forms of indirect rule arrangements were eliminated by decolonization, others have persisted and continue to structure contemporary state–society relations.

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In this article, we challenge influential comparative-theoretical studies that deploy the dichotomy between colonial-era direct and indirect rule to explain variation in state capacity across countries. The existing literature analytically ignores crucial gradations in governance; we show the need for a sophisticated typology of relationships between state and society that were present during and after colonial rule. We locate the creation and modification of this variety in the dynamic processes of state formation: extracting resources, facilitating trade, responding to external threats, and countering internal resistance. After decolonization, new international norms and nationalist ideologies modified and restricted, but did not fully eliminate, important variation in state–society relations.

To this end, we disaggregate and reconceptualize indirect rule by offering a more nuanced and flexible typology of governance forms. *Suzerain*, *hybrid*, and *de jure* forms of governance are variants of indirect rule that can be distinguished from one another and from direct rule. Suzerain rule has disappeared in the postcolonial world, but hybrid and *de jure* governance continue to exist across the postcolonial world. We situate the causal origins of this variation in colonial state formation and the interests of state actors in deploying limited coercive resources. We examine both continuity and change in these interests following decolonization.

This explanation contrasts with arguments that highlight colonial philosophies of rule or simple path dependence in driving governance outcomes during and after the colonial era. We use theory-developing case studies from South Asia to explore the motivations of state actors in deploying different types of governance both during and following British colonial rule. This research design provides a comparative framework for identifying the political interests driving state behavior across space and over time.

## Indirect Rule and Uneven State Capacity

### Defining Direct and Indirect Rule

Indirect rule is understood as a form of political control in which agents of the state delegate day-to-day governance to local power-holders in areas considered beyond the reach of the state's direct authority (Furnivall 1956). Intermediaries—often those holding “traditional” or customary authority—represent and enforce political authority on behalf of titular rulers. Direct rule represents the opposite condition, in which the state maintains and administers a monopoly of law, policy, and administration to the population without intermediaries, through bureaucrats without independent means of coercion (Weber [1919] 1991). Mamdani (1996) characterizes this difference in terms of the relationship of individuals to the colonial state: Those under direct rule relate to the state as citizens, whereas those under indirect rule are subjects under hierarchies of power. Direct and indirect rule represent dichotomous ideal types of governance that frame the capacity of state actors to intervene in society.

### The Origins of Indirect Rule

Some scholars see the emergence of indirect rule as the consequence of particular philosophies of governance. They have explored tensions in colonial policy between conservative preservationists and liberal universalists over how empires are best governed, with the former emphasizing rule by intermediation through elites (Rudolph 2005; White 2005). Yet colonial historiographies represent the early victory of liberal

universalism over conservatives, even though variation in colonial governance persisted throughout the colonial period (Stokes 1959; Travers 2007).

Other scholars have located the emergence of indirect rule as a colonial governance mechanism in the cost-benefit calculus of colonial authorities. John Gerring and his collaborators, following the logic of “conservation of institutions,” argue that indirect rule arrangements arise when “stateness” already exists in newly conquered territories, because states are likely to exploit existing institutions of political order (Gerring et al. 2011, 377–433). Explanations based on the interests of agents of the state have greater purchase on the fine-grained variation of governance across colonial territories than cultural or philosophical explanations of indirect rule. Yet, with some exceptions, including Boone (2003), these arguments largely remain limited by a rigid focus on the direct/indirect rule dichotomy.

### The Decline of Indirect Rule

Most scholars view indirect rule as an extinct form of governance as part of a teleological progression toward monopolizing states. For Charles Tilly (1992), the decline of indirect rule was driven by the pressures of war and its threat, which demanded that states reach deep into their societies to extract men and resources. Michael Hechter (2000) points to state-building nationalism as a driving factor in the eventual end of indirect rule. For Joel Migdal (1988) and James Scott (2009), the postcolonial state by its very nature seeks to overcome resistance and impose direct rule over recalcitrant social groups. This monopolizing project might not fully succeed, but in this perspective, the driving goal of the state is to escape constraints on resource extraction and coercion imposed by indirect rule arrangements.

### The Legacies of Indirect Rule

The legacies of indirect rule have been used to explain underdevelopment and patterns of violence, largely because indirect rule precluded penetration into society, leading to postindependence states with delimited capacity over much of their territory. Horowitz (1985) highlights the ethnic implications of colonial strategies, linking the favoring of “backward,” often indirectly ruled, groups to ethnic mobilization and conflict, whereas Mamdani (1999, 877) argues that the persistent power of customary authority in postindependence polities had “explosive” effects in the politics of the countryside. Acemoglu, Robinson, and Johnson (2001) identify purely extractive indirect institutions as sources of underdevelopment. Banerjee and Iyer (2005) suggest that variation in the extent of British colonial rule helps to account for differences in public goods provision in modern India. Lange (2009) argues that regions under direct rule in the British Empire led to stronger states and more successful economic development than those under indirect rule. Essentially, the literature holds that the *legacies* of indirect rule through postcolonial state weakness have led to underdevelopment and social conflict.

The extant comparative-theoretical work on indirect rule outlined above, while often insightful, has made key assumptions that limit our understanding of the nature, causes, and consequences of variation in colonial and contemporary governance. First, most scholars tend to study the effects of colonial rule on *national* outcomes, often characterizing country cases as subject to direct or indirect rule (Acemoglu, Robinson, and Johnson 2001; Gerring et al. 2011; Horowitz 1985; Lange 2009; Mamdani 1999).<sup>1</sup> This bias toward national units of analysis inhibits our

capacities to think of variation *within* countries as an outcome of colonial state building, even though indirect rule is predicated on such variation.

Second and relatedly, indirect rule under colonialism is usually seen as a monolithic category.<sup>2</sup> Indirect rule is usually framed as simply a governance alternative to the centralizing power of direct rule. Lange (2009, 28–29), in his work on direct and indirect rule across British colonies, acknowledges the problems with this dichotomy but does not conceptually solve them. Gerring et al. (2011, 378), while admitting “a heterogeneous set of governance relationships,” still argue that cases of indirect rule exhibit “sufficient commonalities . . . to justify their inclusion under a common theoretical rubric” and rely heavily on Lange’s national-level empirical measures. This understanding of indirect rule misses important, discrete differences between types of indirect rule that arise from specific processes of state formation and may persist as specific governance forms in contemporary politics.

Third, indirect rule is too often seen as simply a relic of the colonial past. Scholars identify it as a historical source of current dynamics, often operating through the mechanism of weak state capacity, rather than as an extant form of governance. Throughout the postcolonial world, however, we see interactions between states and local elites, notables, and armed groups that reflect discrete indirect governance strategies (Staniland 2012). Furthermore, many recent studies throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America exhibit remarkable nuance, flexibility, and explicit variation in the ways that state actors relate to societies on national peripheries (Arias and Goldstein 2010; Boone 2003; Callahan 2007; Richani 2002; Young 1997). Broader comparative-historical frameworks, continuing to assert the dichotomy of explicitly colonial direct and indirect rule, have not incorporated such empirical variation into their analyses.

The final assumption is that modern states have fixed preferences toward expansion and monopolization. Throughout the developing world, we see postcolonial governments making careful calculations about where and when they invest limited resources in coercion, development, and state building. States are not always hegemonic monopolizers intent on absorbing people and territory; rather, they can be “standoff-ish” (Slater and Kim 2014). Linking the extent of governance to the interests and strategies of the actors and agents of the state opens up possibilities for research that are hitherto limited by the conceptual emphasis on colonial legacies and weak states.

### Types of Indirect Rule

A crucial first step for portraying a more diverse array of colonial and contemporary governance arrangements is to systematically disaggregate the indirect rule concept. Indirect rule is a conceptual category that contains a bewildering diversity of members: great and petty princely states, areas of tribal or customary administration, political agencies, entrepôts, and supposedly administered regions in reality dominated by local strongmen. These instances of governance exist along a spectrum of state authority between full direct rule on one end and independence from state sovereignty on the other.

To make better sense of these different types, we start by identifying the organizing principles under which colonial powers established and postcolonial states maintained, modified, or eliminated different forms of indirect rule. Legal frameworks represent the clearest signals of the state’s *intentions* of intervention and the *self-defined* extent of its authority. Categorical differences between distinct legal frameworks, operating in territories within the state’s jurisdiction but outside its full monopoly of force, represent distinct forms of governance that are still considered members of the

FIGURE 1  
**Typology of Indirect Rule**

Complete Independence	Suzerain Rule	Hybrid Rule	De Jure Rule	Weberian Rule
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*Note:* Shaded area indicates types of indirect governance

indirect rule category. We also consider the actual implementation of governance when legal frameworks alone are insufficient to capture, which actors have power on the ground. We define three legal-administrative frameworks and practices, and thus three types of indirect rule governance arrangements: *suzerain*, *hybrid*, and *de jure* rule (Figure 1).

### Suzerain Governance

Classic studies of indirect rule represent the titular power in such a relationship as a *suzerain*, defined by Merriam-Webster as either “a superior feudal lord to whom fealty is due” or “a dominant state controlling the foreign relations of a vassal state but allowing it sovereign authority in its internal affairs.” Suzerain rule represents a relationship in which princely or tribal states are nominally independent and constitutionally free to order their internal affairs, yet maintain allegiance to an overarching imperial power. Individuals under suzerain rule are subject to either the explicit laws or the customary norms of the subject state or social group, as well as the government or other political organization upholding them, without any recourse to the law of the imperial power.

### Hybrid Governance

For certain strategically important territories, titular rulers desire more structural capacity for day-to-day intervention, yet are unable or unwilling to fully deploy a monopoly of force. In these territories, *hybrid* governance was established, in which the state explicitly shares authority with social actors, in overlapping spheres of social control and coercion (Naseemullah 2014). Two features separate hybrid rule from suzerain rule. First, intervention is often codified in explicit and exceptional legal frameworks that differ both from the laws and customary practices of suzerain states and the orthodox civil and criminal codes of the state. Second, the state maintains exceptional instruments of coercive force—usually in the form of special levies, militias, and constabularies—*along with* those maintained by traditional elites.

### De Jure Governance

Much of what we consider indirect rule—governance through political intermediaries, social elites, and strongmen—can be draped in the juridical garb of direct rule, where the state theoretically takes responsibility for upholding the monopoly of coercion, and relationships between citizen and the state are theoretically regulated by a normalized system of laws and bureaucratic procedures. We define *de jure* governance as an arrangement where the state maintains *de jure* direct rule over a territory, but in reality coercion is enforced locally by intermediate political elites; the legal framework is the



same as Weberian governance, but its actual implementation does not resemble direct rule. The category boundary between *de jure* and direct rule is less sharp than between the other types because they share explicit legal frameworks. Yet, in measurement terms, the presence of political organizations under the state with sustained deployment of coercive capacity—private armies or police forces, private jails, and *de facto* authority over tax collection—differentiate *de jure* and direct rule.

Our typology of indirect rule arrangements is certainly not without its limits. We recognize the significant variation *within* the subcategories presented here, such as between suzerain territories of radically different sizes. However, we believe that a focus on governance through the lenses of administrative strategies and legal frameworks has key advantages. First, following Boone (2003) and Gerring et al. (2011), it can still incorporate the impact of social structures and actors beyond the state. States may adjust their incorporation and intervention strategies in part based on the benefits from social collaboration or the costs of social resistance; our typology is state focused but not solely state driven. Second, the types described above represent different categories defined by clear decision rules and thus can form the criteria for reliable measurement across not only British India and postcolonial South Asia, but also other regions. Third, it presents distinct categories of state–society relations that go beyond quantitative measures of state capacity, which tend to lack accuracy and reliability and are particularly weak within countries.

### Empirical Investigations and Case Selection

The rest of this article uses this new categorization of indirect rule types to examine the causes and consequences of diversity in governance arrangements. We use evidence from South Asia to explore how the objectives of the state led to various forms of rule under colonialism, to highlight shifting governance structures in the post-1945 world order, and to suggest theoretical mechanisms that have contributed to the persistence of variation since decolonization. We choose South Asia because it contains remarkable, explicit variation in governance while being controlled by one imperial power from the 1760s onward, and then across and within postcolonial states from the 1940s.

The variation we trace out below is not consistent with the most prominent existing explanatory approaches. First, philosophies of colonial rule cannot explain persistent variation *within* colonial India and are silent for variation after independence. Second, there has been no simple path dependence or historical inertia over time, though most research on indirect rule frames it as a distant historical cause with enduring effects. While historical legacies can obviously constrain, we see governments actively shifting forms of rule and local actors pushing back against new central initiatives, which suggests attempts at calculation, strategy, and adaptation. Third, a straightforward focus on revenue, following Banerjee and Iyer (2005), cannot help to account for cases in which no discernible revenue motivation can be found, such as in the management of unstable peripheries. Lastly, mere short-sightedness, exhaustion, and malaise from state-building efforts cannot account for the deployment of variable governance strategies—from the monopolization of violence to nonintervention—under the same administration and over time. The last major territorial expansion of the British Empire, Punjab (annexed in 1849), was governed variously under direct and *de jure* rule in the settled agricultural districts and hybrid rule in the tribal areas, even while being administered under the same Chief Commissioner until 1901. There is a clear need for a broader, multicausal approach that acknowledges the complex incentives facing rulers and social actors and that can better explain the dynamics that emerge from these interests and strategies.

Our own hypothesized causes for variation derive from traditions in state-building theory. Tilly (1985) identifies the existential interests of rulers as war making (often to expand and defend territory), state making (to eliminate internal rivals and resistance), the extraction of resources, and the protection of capitalist clients. These state-making activities are reflected in the interests of state actors in the Indian subcontinent. Christopher Bayly (1994) defines the colonial apparatus in India as developing, by the early nineteenth century, into a “fiscal-military state,” within which agents are guided by overriding imperatives to extract resources, defend territory from internal and external threat, even while limiting costs. Fiscal restraint logically follows in that the state has limited resources and is interested in preserving them, or what Bayly (1994, 327) calls a “rigorous tradition of administrative accountancy.” In a telling communiqué in 1920, Sir Hamilton Grant, the Governor of the North West Frontier Province, discusses increasing payments to a militia force in the tribal agencies: “I very carefully questioned the necessity of paying such a high price—for, as a good Scotchman, I am by nature averse to giving a penny more than is absolutely necessary for any scheme, political or other.”<sup>3</sup> State actors explicitly calculated costs and benefits when deploying coercion in colonial India.

These calculations did not end when India became independent. Nehru and Patel had numerous, explicit discussions of how and where to devote resources at the time of independence, which can be found in their voluminous correspondences. Their approach to India’s Northeast tried to balance the needs to create a kind of sovereignty and make borders meaningful with the costs of imposing direct rule, as Patel makes explicit in a letter to Nehru in November 1950 (cited in Das 1971, 335–340).

We do not argue that these and only these “core state interests” sufficiently explain this variation, in South Asia or elsewhere. Certain governance regimes may be the product of idiosyncratic interactions that stuck, from the “white rajahs” of the kingdom of Sarawak in present-day Borneo to *entrepôts* such as Aden and Hong Kong. As we will argue below, the interests of state actors do explain important—though by no means all—variation. Furthermore, we do not suggest that these interests can be universally transplanted in contexts beyond South Asia. Different colonial and post-colonial states may interpret the “interests of the state” differently. Nevertheless, by conducting theory development using South Asian cases, we offer guidelines for future research. Further comparative work can establish variation in the interests that have driven the creation of governance regimes.

### **Formation and Transformation of Governance in Colonial South Asia**

Though colonial state formation in South Asia was a contingent process of coercion and negotiation across many different regions at different time periods, the political and economic interests of state actors, as well as indigenous response and resistance, help us understand how different modes of governance were established and evolved; many of the same pressures are still driving differences in state–society relations today. This state-interest argument stands against other explanations in colonial state formation: those of the philosophical perspectives of conservatism and liberal universalism in colonial governance (Rudolph 2005; Stokes 1959; Travers 2007; White 2005) and those of simple models of path dependence (Collier and Collier 1991; Pierson 2004) or exhaustion over time. We argue that these perspectives cannot easily explain the changing but persistent *diversity* of discrete governance arrangements across the subcontinent.

We argue that, modifying Tilly (1985), four core state interests—taxation, enabling commercial exchange, strategic considerations, and responding to social resistance—



TABLE 1  
**Formation of Governance in the Colonial Period**

State Interests	Variables	Governance Outcomes
Extraction	Direct taxation of agricultural surplus	Direct rule
	Indirect taxation	De jure rule
	Negligible potential of taxation	Suzerain rule
Commerce	Commercial centers	Direct rule
	Commercial peripheries	Suzerain, hybrid, or de jure rule
Strategic concerns	Strategically important borders	Hybrid rule
	Hinterlands	Suzerain, de jure, or direct rule
Social resistance	High social resistance	Suzerain or hybrid rule
	Low social resistance	De jure or direct rule

helped to determine when and how the British pursued suzerain, hybrid, de jure, and direct rule. While these do not wholly determine governance forms, a focus on varying state interests helps to explain fine-grained variation in the deployment of state power. Table 1 summarizes the posited relationship between the interests of state actors and governance outcomes.

### Revenue and Resource Extraction

British rule in India was predicated on the extraction of agricultural surplus through taxation; the title District Collector, the titular bureaucratic agent within a district, reflected “the centrality of land revenue collection to government in India: it was the government’s primary function and it molded the institutions and patterns of administration” (Brown 1994, 56). Taxation from agriculture accounted for 60% of all government revenue in 1841. Yet, there were two different systems of coercion, taxation, and land administration that constituted differences between Weberian or de jure rule over agricultural areas. In Bengal and much of north India, the British solidified feudal land tenure relationships (*zamindari* or *jagirdari*); the state levied tax assessments on feudal intermediaries, who in turn taxed cultivators. In much of western and southern India, cultivator-focused or *ryotwari* forms of revenue were established, where the state taxed individual farmers directly. Differences between the two forms were largely driven by disruptions of land ownership from Britain’s wars against the Marathas in the West and Mysore in the South, whereas to the north and east, landlords were incorporated by the British Indian state without much disruption in land tenure (Banerjee and Iyer 2005, 1195–1196).

Differences in colonial land tenure and taxation systems brought about very different relationships between the state and the population. In the Madras Presidency and the United Provinces (UP) in 1910–1911, roughly the same amount of taxation (64.9 vs. 67 million rupees) from roughly equivalent areas under cultivation, we see 1.8 million “coercive processes” (a term for the state’s disciplinary actions to recoup revenue owed) in Madras, whereas just 216,000 in the UP.<sup>4</sup> Thus in Madras, the coercive state was much more directly involved in extraction activities and legal sanctions, whereas in UP, the state relied on landlords for extraction.

In regions where the agricultural resources were marginal, the British state was not as proactive in annexing territory and was content to maintain suzerain rule. The territory that would become the eastern Indian state of Orissa, for example, came under British rule after the Second Anglo-Maratha War in 1805, and roughly half of it was integrated into the Bengal Presidency, whereas the rest was divided into tributary

states under Odiya chieftains. Yet there were differences in the revenue capacities between these administrative districts and the princely states: In 1935, the land revenue demands in the former, accruing directly to the British raj, averaged Rs. 389 per square mile, whereas the territory ruled by princely states averaged Rs. 157 per square mile.<sup>5</sup> Thus in areas with marginal land revenue within territories under British control, the state was less interested in annexing territory outright, choosing instead to maintain suzerain rule given that the extra revenue would be unlikely to outweigh the administrative costs of incorporation.

Differences in agricultural taxation and surplus extraction influenced how much the state agencies themselves needed to intervene in everyday governance, creating stronger or weaker state infrastructures that have persisted over time. *De jure* governance empowered intermediaries that were incorporated as agents within the umbrella of state control, in ways that persist today: Raghuraj Pratap Singh, alias Raja Bhaiya, a hereditary landowner and independent member of the UP legislative assembly, was charged under antiterrorism legislation in the mid-2000s for maintaining a large stockpile of weapons-grade ammunition and seizing extra land for his estates with a militia-like force of over 200, which were regularly deployed against rebellious agricultural laborers and political rivals (Mate and Naseemullah 2010, 273–274).

### **Commerce and Property Rights**

The state in British India was committed not just revenue but also to the facilitation of trade, under the state-like monopoly of the East India Company, and then under private firms supported by the state. These trading concerns, first largely expatriate but later involving indigenous enterprise, were concentrated around centers of British authority, particularly the Presidency towns of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. In urban colonial India, the state established Weberian or direct rule in order both to protect white subjects and trade-enabling property rights and terms of exchange. As more towns and cities in India were integrated into colonial commerce and later industry, the British colonial state extended direct rule to these areas, building up the structures that allowed for the continual presence of the state in the form of municipal governments, city police forces, factory inspectors, and high courts.

As the expansion of commerce within the Indian hinterland followed road and rail networks, greater coercive capacity was established along these networks, linking Indian cities together under the frame of the state (Goswami 2004, 103–131). We thus see different types of rule depending on the nature of economic exchange and interaction: The realm of landed elites was very different than that of urban traders, though the two interacted in the broader colonial economy (Bayly 1983). The rural–urban divide remains salient today: Throughout the postindependence period, the assertion of rights is most successful in India's cities, where through industrialization in the Nehruvian era and market-based economic transformation today, we see more individuals making demands and accessing the state directly, without intermediaries.

### **Strategic Buffers**

By the 1860s, British India and allied princely states had consolidated most of the territory of the subcontinent and had defeated the last Mughal successor states that directly challenged British power. During the second half of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, however, the British raj felt increasingly threatened by first Russian imperial and then Soviet expansionism southward, threatening their hegemony in the Indian subcontinent. Thus, the northwestern frontier became the focus of

British Indian security policy. Instead of direct state building in areas under threat, however, the British found conventional power projection over the heavily armed and rebellious tribal groups along mountainous border with Afghanistan prohibitively costly.

The solution to this security concern, balancing the requirements of state actors for continual surveillance and engagement with tribal groups with the limited resources available for coercive activities, was to create a buffer zone in between the boundaries of conventional state power—the administrative border with British India's districts—and the international border, maintaining an intermediate category of governance between suzerain and *de jure* rule (Beattie 2002, 195–196). The buffer zone was operated and policed by agents of hybrid governance: political agents and constabularies who could act simultaneously as diplomats, administrators, and soldiers in concert with tribal leaders in the maintenance of political order (Khan 2005; Naseemullah 2014). Hybrid governance also was implemented in the rural areas of Balochistan, where political order was maintained by tribal levies collaborating with political agents, and the far northeastern borders of British India, where sensitive tribal territories on the borders between Assam and the encroaching states of Tibet and China were amalgamated into the North East Frontier Agency in the 1820s (Bose 1979). Peripheral frontier regions with exceptional security requirements were governed in a hybrid manner quite distinct from *de jure* or suzerain rule, and many of these arrangements have persisted not just in name, but also in fact.

### **Social Illegibility and Resistance**

Of course, resistance by social actors to the monopolizing activities of the state has long been part of studies of state–society relations in national peripheries (Scott 2009, 324–338). What has been more recently recognized is that social resistance or “nonlegibility” can drive state governance strategies (Slater and Kim 2014). If particular areas or social blocs are especially obdurate and the state has no overriding imperatives to deploy coercive machinery, then the latter may choose to simply delimit its involvement.

Successful resistance circumscribed the state's strategies, representing concrete costs that outweighed amorphous potential benefits of incorporation. In this way, Anglo-Afghan wars in the nineteenth century defined the initial British relationships with both the kingdom of Afghanistan and the Pakhtun tribes in the North West Frontier, forming the basis for hybrid and suzerain rule (Allen 2000). Similarly, Nepali Gurkha resistance against British encroachment resulted in a “nonregulated” autonomous district in the northern region of Darjeeling even after nominal British victory in the Anglo-Gurkha War of 1814–1816, given the enormous costs of prolonged warfare in mountainous terrain (Lamb 1986). While four Anglo-Mysore wars wrested much of the South and the eastern coast from the Kingdom of Mysore, prospects for further costly conflict led colonial authorities to maintain a smaller but still powerful princely state rather than fully annexing the kingdom. Other princely states used the practices of isomorphic European-style governance to forestall annexation by the colonial authorities (Desai 2005). Such successful resistance, though infrequent, formed the basis of suzerain and hybrid rule in a number of cases.

The distinct strategies of the British colonial state represented pressures from different sides. The various agents of the colonial state balanced the costs of coercive incorporation with the benefits from revenue and trade, and maintained the capacity to strategically balance against encroaching powers. While there was no unitary actor overseeing all of the actions of the colonial government, common mandates facing the different agents of the state led to a recurrent if heterogeneous set of governance

patterns across the subcontinent. Such governance outcomes vary along a spectrum of discrete categories from fully Weberian direct rule through de jure rule in areas of surplus extraction through intermediaries and hybrid rule in peripheral strategic realms to the suzerainty of the princely states.

### **Expansion of the State and the End of Colonial Rule**

The scope of the British Indian state expanded quite considerably by the 1930s and 1940s. The collapse of international trade and of agricultural prices led the state to institute tariffs and other mechanisms of economic policy to stabilize the economy, and wartime production requirements in the 1940s led the state to institute a system of economic controls that would develop, after Independence, into the apparatus of economic planning (Tomlinson 1993, 161–162). Furthermore, the rise of nationalist politics and the institutionalization of political representation through legislative assemblies after 1930 led to the fruition of popular demands for government intervention and the provision of goods (Tomlinson 1982). Even as the colonial state expanded, however, the extent of its activities varied quite considerably over space, following the patterns of governance established at the beginning of state formation.

As independence came and British India was partitioned into the new states of India and Pakistan, variation in governance modes narrowed, but they did not disappear. Suzerain rule was effectively taken off the table by both nationalist mobilization and the norms of the postwar international system. Recognition, aid, military alliances and linkages, and other forms of international interaction with newly decolonized states became contingent on projecting an image of a state in which central elites sit atop ostensibly hierarchical, violence-monopolizing state apparatuses that claim to rule over a defined area of territory (Jackson and Rosberg 1982; Philpott 2001). Nationalist ideologies also challenged colonial claims to the sanctity of princely states, with nationalist leaders accusing princely rulers of collaboration with colonial administration and of forestalling the coherence of a new united body politic (Weiner 1967).

This is not to claim that either nationalist ideology or postwar international norms have demanded real and existing Weberian sovereignty, however. They have instead privileged a Weberian window dressing without much content (Herbst 2000). Crucially, both hybrid and de jure rules can be incorporated within the international order and in nationalist politics in ways that suzerain rule cannot. As long as the state makes formal claims to control over bounded territory along recognized borders, the actual modalities of control within that territory can vary dramatically. In South Asia, the partition of colonial India largely followed this model; the princely states were incorporated into the new states of the subcontinent. Sikkim, the only princely state that retained suzerain status as a protectorate of the independent Indian government after 1950, was fully integrated into India after a popular referendum in 1975 (*International and Comparative Law Quarterly* 1975). Pakistan similarly absorbed the princely states of Dir, Chitral, and Swat first as Provincially Administered Tribal Areas at independence, and then as administrative districts in what is now Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in 1969. The suzerain rule of princely states was thus wholly absorbed into national states, leading many to consider indirect rule extinct. Yet scholars have discounted the hybrid and de jure forms of indirect rule, which continue to produce explicit variations in governance.

### **Continuity and Change in Governance in Modern South Asia**

With the end of suzerain rule, modern South Asian states did not simply maintain colonial governance forms following a logic of path dependence, but they did not

TABLE 2  
**Continuity and Change in Postcolonial Governance**

State Interests	Continuity or Change in Governance
International norms	Suzerain rule → de jure or direct rule
Nationalist ideologies	Suzerain rule → de jure or direct rule
Borders between South Asian states	Suzerain and de jure rule → direct rule
Strategically important peripheries	Continuity of hybrid rule
Agricultural nontaxation	Continuity of de jure rule
Presence social resistance	Suzerain and de jure rule → hybrid rule

immediately monopolize violence or social control at independence either. On Pakistan's northwest, India's Northeast, and Burma's Chinese and Thai borders, establishing robust state control was seen as neither easy nor appealing. In rural areas of northern and central India, Sindh, Punjab, and Baluchistan, and much of Burma, party politics linked local elites, party leaders, and upwardly mobile aspirants who exerted traditional control through patronage, violence, and influence within the aegis of the state. Yet in other areas, from Kashmir to Karachi, government forces swept in to enact rule from the center.

To use Boone's (2003) term, distinct "political topographies" of rule emerged in the decade after independence. Suzerain rule was largely removed from the political arena, but hybrid, de jure, and Weberian rule endured. This section discusses four state interests that shaped the existence and nature of rule after independence: geopolitical threats, social resistance, and resource needs represent continuities from the colonial state, whereas nationalist ideologies and international norms are more specific to postcolonial politics. While there were not perfectly unitary state apparatuses, a greater degree of centralization required local bureaucrats and military officers to be mindful of reactions to their decisions in Delhi, Karachi/Islamabad, or Rangoon. Table 2 summarizes these continuities and changes in governance forms.

### Geopolitical Threats

A catalyst to state building in areas of previous indirect rule are pressing geopolitical threats that postcolonial regimes see as posing a risk to government or even state survival. These geopolitical considerations can lead to state decisions on forms of governance in border areas. Where there are perceived to be direct conventional threats that could strike at the heart of a regime's survival, we see national states, national standing armies, and direct rule reinforcing one another (Tilly 1992). Strategies ranging from administrative centralization to military force deployment to ethnic displacement accompany these attempts to monopolize force, protect strategic borders, and destroy suspected fifth columns. One example of this is the strategy of the Burmese military on its border with China, as armed Chinese Nationalist exiles flowed into these regions in the 1950s: The military moved aggressively to try to impose control on these peripheries (Callahan 2004, 145–206). Similarly, India and Pakistan have acted to monopolize coercion along the respective parts of their mutual border, even where there had previously been princely states or other forms of order under colonialism.

Other kinds of international threats, however, opened space for de jure or hybrid rule. De jure rule can occur when only security forces are sent into border areas. We see a "hollow" state administration that is oriented toward containing peripheral threats,



staking out territorial claims, and exerting political-military influence without other forms of state infrastructure like effective taxation and services. The politically peripheral states of the Indian Northeast such as Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, and Mizoram have these *de jure* rule characteristics. Others—notably districts of Manipur, Nagaland, and Tripura—see hybrid rule, with active military, police, and border security officers appointed as governors, the area governed under the exceptional Armed Forces Special Powers Act of 1958, and various formal and informal ceasefire arrangements with armed nonstate groups (Baruah 2005). The international system and regional instability demand that borders be at least loosely patrolled, but imposing the full state apparatus is costly and unrewarding. Social and public services are weak or nonexistent, and the state instead seeks to manage rather than monopolize violence. Yet the flexibility and legal fluidity of state presence has also enabled negotiated settlements with some militant groups.

Geopolitical considerations are most likely to lead to hybrid rule when a state decides that local social structures and extant political institutions can be key components of a defense strategy and directly interfaces with local actors in hopes of bolstering semiautonomous fighting forces. In Pakistan's Tribal Agencies between 1947 until approximately 2004, state forces operated with a light footprint and shared coercive power with nonstate actors through hybrid rule arrangements (Naseemullah 2014; White 2005). The goal was to keep the frontier stable while maintaining political influence against Afghan irredentism. This strategy is a successor of patterns often seen in colonial warfare of reliance on tribes, clans, and other groupings to provide levies, guerrillas, and porters. Buffer zones and local allies are integral to hybrid rule and can provide valuable mechanisms for managing turbulent borders that do not require large conventional forces.

### **State Ideology and Organizational Underpinnings**

If geopolitics tend to be a “pull” factor that drives direct rule into some territories, the center can also push its power onto areas previously ruled through suzerain, hybrid, or *de jure* governance. Nationalism, modernization, and social revolutions are, at least ostensibly, key motivations behind many postcolonial regimes. These ideological worldviews can be intertwined with institutional forms of power, particularly parties, and patronage networks. We should not essentialize ideology or take it as a simple explanation of action, but it is clear that political goals and worldviews can play an important role in establishing the contours of rule (Gorski 2003).

In South Asia, new tides of nationalism shaped how power was deployed; they represented at least a partial break from colonial patterns. In India, nationalism directly targeted suzerain rule and limited the practice of hybrid rule. The ruling Indian National Congress stood for a unifying nationalist ideology opposed to divide-and-rule tactics or to the maintenance of princely rule in opposition to citizenship, and so the suzerain states were targeted. The Congress party and extensive patronage linkages made it possible to deploy and coordinate centralizing power from Delhi by mobilizing party cadres in princely states and creating a sense of inevitability both in demanding accession and then in implementing it. Yet Congress also incorporated local notables with interests in a status quo that included state nonintervention—and thus *de jure* rule—in agrarian society (Weiner 1967, 30–67).

Hybrid rule in contemporary India has usually occurred on the distant northeastern periphery, far from the political heartlands of the Union. Deals and bargains with insurgent groups and local elites in the Northeast—accompanied by a variety of formal and informal power-sharing arrangements—are far from the public eye and relevant to



only a tiny slice of India's population and few centers of political power (Baruah 2005; Staniland 2012). This makes sense given the marginality of the Northeast to the nationalist project's political-geographic core. De jure rule is far more common than hybrid rule, in part because it has been possible for local power brokers to cloak themselves in the language of nationalism and to ally with major national or regional parties. India's parties are not disciplined combat parties dedicated to crushing social resistance. Instead, bargaining, patronage, and local networks have been integral to political expansion and consolidation, creating opportunities for de jure rule.

Here, a comparison with Pakistan is revealing. Pakistan is widely viewed as having both weaker parties and a more ambiguous governing ideology, dominated for long stretches by military-bureaucratic authoritarianism (Jalal 1990). Consequently, there has been greater heterogeneity in modes of rule, including hybrid rule in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and Baluchistan, as well as the slower integration of princely states. In Punjab, the combination of economic development and social and political mobilization by parties such as the Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz), the Pakistan Muslim League, and the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf has seen a state much more integrated within society, particularly within cities. In parts of rural Sindh, de jure rule has been entirely compatible with the ideologies of national leaders, as families of religious nobility (*pirs* and *makhdooms*) dominate the political landscape through allegiance to the Pakistan People's Party. This has contributed to a variety of challenges to political stability in Pakistan, but also has opened space for heterogeneous forms of order. In Rural Balochistan and the Tribal Agencies, meanwhile, parties have hardly penetrated and state-society relations are still governed by hybrid governance, exceptional legal frameworks and federal levies, and paramilitary constabularies for everyday policing and other coercive activities.

### Social Resistance

The mechanisms specified so far are primarily imposed from the top down by elites trying to achieve their political goals and respond to international threats. Yet there are two sides to the process of state building. Social actors can create costs to shifting into a Weberian or de jure form of rule. Social resistance can hold state power at bay by raising the costs of direct rule: The game of repression and counterinsurgency may prove to be not worth the candle. De jure rule occurs when governments proclaim formal sovereignty but are unwilling to bear the costs of Weberian monopoly. Areas of interior India in which Maoist insurgents operated have been treated with a light footprint by central forces, particularly prior to 2009 (Shah 2010). Pushing state power into the jungles of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand has proven daunting: The mixture of challenging terrain and mobilization of local tribal peoples by these cadres have led to recurrent ambushes, difficulty in population control, and enduring instability. The central government does not want to directly bargain with the Maoists, but it also does not want to directly rule. The emergence of the Salwa Jadum, a government-sponsored contra force in Chhattisgarh, reflects strategies other than the direct imposition of force (Sundar 2006).

Hybrid rule emerges when there are available collaborators and the costs of direct rule are very high, even if the original state goal was intensive state building. Pakistan's Northwest since 2004 is a case of both of these dynamics playing out. The army under Musharraf abandoned the hybrid rule structures established to stabilize the region in order to satisfy American demands to crack down on militants in the region. Army offensives were subsequently met with substantial losses and demoralization (Hussain 2010). As a result, we have seen the Pakistani state re-embrace aspects of hybrid rule,

particularly deals with some local actors, even as others continue to be targeted. More settled areas are now closer to *de jure* rule—with the presence of security forces largely unaccompanied by effective social services—while borderlands see hybrid rule.

In Burma/Myanmar, the effective resistance of ethnic armed groups and the costs of direct rule have forced the military regime to cut both formal and tacit deals with these actors on the periphery that resemble hybrid rule, despite the ideological commitment of the military to a unitary state form (Callahan 2007). By contrast, in areas where the military has been able to crush armed resistance—especially in the Burmese heartland—direct rule has predominated.

### Revenue and Resource Extraction

Finally, revenue extraction remains a potential motivation for shifts in modalities of central state strategy. Yet the nature of the postcolonial state in South Asia has shifted *away* from revenue assessment and agricultural surplus, maintaining space for continuity in *de jure* rule. Populations, particularly in rural areas, were made illegible to the state through the nonexecution of agricultural taxation, allowing conditions of non-Weberian governance to persist.

As demands for energy-based resources increase, however, the state may need to find governance strategies that enable resource extraction in areas where it previously had a light footprint (Levien 2013). Needs for natural resource extraction can sometimes also push toward hybrid rule when it is possible to build arrangements with local actors that can stabilize peripheral areas and thus allow *rentier* extraction. In Baluchistan, tribal elites and the state forged crude and unstable, but workable, forms of governance in order to pursue the Pakistani state's goals of tapping into Baluchistan's gas fields; after the homogenizing reforms of the police and administration of the Musharraf regime, a coalition of bureaucrats and nationalist politicians came together to reinstitute hybrid rule through federal and provincial levies for Balochistan's vast hinterland (*Express Tribune* 2010; Titus and Swidler 2000).

While this empirical investigation into variations in governance mechanisms in South Asia can hardly be considered definitive, it arrives at two important findings. First, our concepts map onto reality in ways that the existing dichotomy cannot. The world makes more analytical sense, both under and after colonialism, when we disaggregate varieties of governance. Second, we see states acting to maintain indirect rule forms of governance, even in the postcolonial era. Our framework makes it possible to identify fine-grained variation in where and how changes in governance have occurred. It further points out the diversity of variables that can shape the political interests and perceived imperatives of the state in forms of rule, ranging from tax extraction to international security.

### Conclusion

The contemporary world order has truncated the conceptual vocabulary of governance such that we no longer have names and definitions for the distinct forms of rule beyond Weberian sovereignty, both before and after decolonization; we are left with the theoretically unsatisfying notion of state weakness. The hard dichotomy between direct and indirect rule, combined with the relegation of indirect rule to a distant colonial past, does not accurately capture the strategies and practices through which states interact with society, both in the past and today. We have taken a first step in clarifying these governance strategies by presenting an analytical typology of three forms of indirect rule: suzerain, hybrid, and *de jure*.

We then demonstrated, through case narratives, potential explanations for why each of these types were implemented over various territories, and how—contrary to many assumptions about the modern monopolizing state—two of these three types of indirect rule still persist today. Resources, strategy, and social resistance continue to matter in the present context as under colonialism, whereas new international norms, ideologies, and institutions have modified some strategies and taken others off the table. The creation, persistence, and change in discrete variations in governance are better explained by examining the interests of state actors in deploying limited governing resources, rather than by colonial philosophies or by simple claims of path dependence. These interests—both in continuity and change—have created fascinating diversity in the forms of political authority and institutions that characterize politics, both historically and in the present.

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### Notes

1. Exceptions include Banerjee and Iyer (2005) and especially Boone (2003).
2. Notable exceptions include Boone (2003) and Reno (1999).
3. Grant, memorandum to the Viceroy's Council. IOR L/PS/10/951.
4. Administration Report, United Provinces, 1911, IOR/V/10/173; Administration Report, Madras Presidency, 1911, IOR/V/10/233.
5. Land Revenue Administration Report, Bihar and Orissa, IOR/V/24/2616; twelve state administration reports at IOR/V/10/.

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