



**COMBATING TERRORISM CENTER**

*at West Point*



# ***The Rationale of Political Assassinations***

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*Arie Perliger*

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## **Executive Summary**

The current study aims to improve our understanding of the causes and implications of political assassinations by utilizing a comprehensive data set and by employing quantitative analyses. The findings illustrate the trends that characterize the phenomenon and challenge some of the existing conventions about political assassinations and their impact.

This study is guided by the rationale that the logic of political assassinations is different from that of other manifestations of political violence. Hence, it is important to understand the unique factors that may encourage or discourage violent groups or individuals from engaging in political assassinations. Moreover, it seems reasonable to assume that these factors vary among different types of assassinations, because in most cases the characteristics of the targeted individual shape the nature and objectives of the assassination. Indeed, this study establishes that different processes trigger different types of assassinations, and that different types of assassinations generate distinct effects on the political and social arenas.

### General Observations

Although the first two decades after World War II were characterized by a limited number of political assassinations, the number of such attacks has risen dramatically since the early 1970s, reflecting the emergence of new waves of terrorist groups, radical and universal ideologies operating on a global scale, and a growing willingness by oppressive regimes to use assassinations as a tool in their treatment of political opposition. Indeed, while most assassinations against government officials were perpetrated by sub-state violent groups, most assassinations of opposition leaders were initiated by ruling political elites or their proxies. This important observation supports the notion that a growing number of terrorist groups see assassinations as a legitimate and effective tool, and that one of the major obstacles for democratization is the vulnerability of political opposition. The study also finds that in many cases the perpetrators of political assassinations are the most experienced members of their groups, are government proxies, individuals with military training, or those with past service in law enforcement agencies or the military. Finally, this study establishes that, in contrast to some expectations, processes of democratization can sometimes facilitate

assassinations under specific conditions rather than impede them.

### Causes of Assassinations

The research findings indicate that, in general, political assassinations are more probable in countries that suffer from a combination of restrictions on political competition and strong polarization and fragmentation. More specifically, states that lack consensual political ethos and homogeneous populations (in terms of the national and ethnic landscape) and include politically deprived groups, will face a decline in the legitimacy of the political leadership and the political system, and an increasing likelihood of direct attacks against political leaders. And since these issues tend to be present mainly in times of electoral processes or of actual violent strife, one should not be surprised that our findings indicate that election periods or periods characterized by a general increase in domestic violence are moments when a country is more susceptible to political assassinations. Another interesting finding is that the territorial fragmentation of a country is correlated with an increase in the number of assassinations. When a government loses control over some parts of a country to opposition groups, both sides are more willing to use assassinations to enhance their influence and to consolidate their status as the sole legitimate rulers of the polity.

When looking specifically at the facilitators of assassinations of heads of state, we can identify some unique trends. To begin with, the polities in which the head of state is most susceptible to assassination are authoritarian polities in which a leader enjoys significant political power but lacks regulated succession processes. This is true even more so in polities that also include oppressed minorities and high levels of political polarization. Therefore, non-democratic political environments that include leaders who are able to garner significant power, but in which the state lacks efficient mechanisms for leadership change following an assassination, provide more prospects for success in advancing political changes via political assassination as compared with democratic systems, in which it is clear that the elimination of the head of state will have a limited long-term impact on the sociopolitical order.

Although heads of state represent what could be considered the crown jewel of political assassinations, lower-ranking political figures also face this threat. In this

study, I specifically looked into cases of attacks against legislators and vice heads of state. Attacks against the latter are fairly rare and are usually intended to promote highly specific policy changes (related to areas under the responsibility of the vice head of state) or to prevent the vice head of state from inheriting the head of state position. In addition, we find that assassinated vice heads of state are often victims of new political elites who have tried to eliminate possible challengers from the remains of a previous regime. Legislators, on the other hand, are most often victims of civil wars or similar violent domestic clashes in developing countries; in democracies they are almost never targeted. Hence, assassinations of legislators are almost always a result of national-level conflicts rather than local ones, contrary to what some may suspect. Lastly, legislators' assassinations are rarely perpetrated to promote specific policies or to gain access to the political process. In other words, the assassination of legislators should be considered more as acts of protest against an existing political order than political actions that are intended to promote specific political goals.

One of the unique features of this study, among others, is its focus on assassinations of political figures who are not part of governing platforms. Unlike other types of assassinations, the state is typically a major actor in the assassination in these cases. Consequently, it should not surprise us that opposition leaders are more likely to be targeted in authoritarian systems or in weak democracies, as in these types of regimes the political environment provides a space for the emergence of an opposition while also providing the ruling elites tools and legitimacy for oppressive measures against a "successful" opposition. It is also clear that opposition leaders are more vulnerable during violent domestic conflicts, when the number of opportunities, and maybe also the legitimacy, to act against them are on the rise.

Overall, this study provides a nuanced and multilevel understanding of the factors that contribute to the probability of political assassinations. It also further confirms that distinct dynamics are in process in different types of assassinations.

#### Impact of Political Assassinations

The current study provides several important insights regarding the impact of political assassinations. In general, political assassinations seem to intensify prospects of a state's fragmentation and undermine its democratic nature. The latter is usually

manifested in a decline in political participation and a disproportional increase in the strength of the executive branch.

When I looked specifically at different types of assassinations, I was able to find significant variations among them. For example, assassinations of heads of state tend to generate a decline in the democratic nature of a polity and an increase in domestic violence and instability. They also increase economic prosperity, which sounds counterintuitive but may reflect the rise of a more open economic system after the elimination of authoritarian ruler. The assassination of opposition leaders has a limited impact on the nature of a political system but has the potential to lead to an increase in overall unrest and domestic violence. And assassinations of legislators are often followed by a decline in the legitimacy of the government and by public unrest (illustrated by growing anti-government demonstrations).

### Policy Implications

This study illustrates that political assassinations are a constant feature in most polities. Thus, our ability to improve our understanding of political processes must also include a deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of political assassinations. But how can the findings presented in this study help us to understand the potential role of policymakers in the occurrence or prevention of political assassinations?

To begin with, it is evident that governments can promote political and social conditions that may decrease the prospects of political assassinations. For example, while governments in polarized societies sometimes have the tendency to restrict political participation in order to prevent further escalation in intrastate communal relations, our findings indicate that this action will actually increase the probability of political assassinations. Moreover, in order for electoral processes to become a viable tool for promoting a productive and peaceful political environment, it is clear that they need to come after ensuring political grievances have been dealt with. Otherwise, electoral competition has the potential to instigate further violence, including the assassinations of political figures. The shaping of stable and regulated succession mechanisms is also highly important, especially in countries that are struggling to construct stable democratic institutions. Interestingly, it seems that while theories of



democratization have for a long time prescribed the creation of institutions as a first step to ensure wide representation, followed by stable routines and protocols, the opposite order may be more effective for the promotion of stability and eventually a liberal-democratic environment.

The findings in this study also indicate that more attention needs to be given to the safety of the political leaders during instances of violent domestic clashes or transitions to democracy. Opposition leaders are most vulnerable in the early stages of democratization, so the effort to facilitate a democratic environment must also include the creation of mechanisms to ensure the safety of opposition leaders. This in turn will enhance the legitimacy of political participation, reduce polarization and enhance political stability. Moreover, although civilian victims naturally attract most of the public attention during a civil war, this study highlights the need to evaluate how harm to political figures may be prevented, as this has significant potential to lead to further escalation of a conflict, especially when the assassinated figures are heads of state or opposition leaders.

This study's findings also provide several practical insights for law enforcement. For example, legislators are almost never targeted in democratic countries, and in democratic environments sub-state groups are usually responsible for assassinations, rather than other actors such as lone wolves, for example. In addition, basic firearms are almost always the preferred weapons of assassins. The few cases in which more sophisticated weapons were used (such as car bombs) were mostly in developing countries rather than in established democracies (the Irish Republican Army's operations in the United Kingdom being a known exception).

## Preface

The evening of 4 November 1995 seemed no different from any other Saturday at my family's home in Carmiel, Israel. As was usual on Saturday evenings, my dad and I were watching *Saturday's Match*, a TV sports program that summarized the results of the weekend's Israeli soccer league matches. My mother was reading in bed and listening to radio coverage of a mass political rally organized by the Israeli Labor Party and several Israeli left-wing groups in support of the Oslo peace process.

Shortly after 9:30 p.m., my mom appeared in the living room. She was visibly agitated and shaken. There were reports of gunshots after the rally, and the Israeli public television channel quickly ended the sports program and shifted its coverage to Kings of Israel Plaza in Tel Aviv to report what was apparently an assassination attempt against Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. As the minutes tensely progressed, more and more media outlets hinted at the severity of the event, until eventually the Israeli public television network confirmed that Prime Minister Rabin had been pronounced dead at Ichilov hospital in Tel Aviv as a result of two gunshot wounds.

I can still vividly recall the rush of emotions as this dramatic news sank in. Beyond feelings of astonishment, sorrow and anger toward the perpetrator, my strongest feeling was that Israeli democracy had suffered a genuine blow that might affect its long-term stability and legitimacy. This was not because the Israeli political system lacked the mechanisms to overcome such a crisis in the immediate term. Instead, I was concerned that the assassination was a reflection of deeper and more sinister processes within Israeli society: of an ongoing decline in the legitimacy of the democratic process, and a weakening of a commitment to the idea that the elected government, subject to the appropriate checks and balances, is the ultimate source of authority. That night, shortly after the assassination, Shimon Sheves, Prime Minister Rabin's chief of staff, echoed these sentiments when he stated, "My country is gone."<sup>1</sup>

I also remember my surprise at the magnitude of the effect of this event on many Israelis; most of them previously had had limited interest in politics. Hundreds of

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<sup>1</sup> Shimon Sheves, "Missing Rabin," News1, 5 November 2003, [www.news1.co.il/Archive/003-D-3908-00.html?tag=05-18-04](http://www.news1.co.il/Archive/003-D-3908-00.html?tag=05-18-04) [Hebrew].

thousands of people participated in various memorial ceremonies, and thousands of youth camped out in public spaces across Tel Aviv, including at the site of the assassination, to jointly mourn the loss of the Israeli leader. For weeks, the television channels continued special programming, and a monumental memorial initiative followed. In short order, it became almost impossible to find a town in Israel in which one of the major streets, schools or public facilities was not named after the late prime minister.

As the years have gone by, and with the collapse of the peace process and the outbreak of another round of violence between Israelis and Palestinians, the discourse in Israel surrounding Rabin's assassination has become increasingly polarized. On the right, a growing opposition has emerged against the idealization of Rabin's personality; this opposition includes a demand to focus the national memorial ceremonies on the immoral nature of political assassination rather than on Rabin's legacy. Surprisingly, there has also been a growing criticism of the focus of the memorial ceremonies on Rabin's personality from the left; however, in contrast with the political right, the left's demand has been to shift the focus to Rabin's legacy as a peacemaker. Against this backdrop, discussions that were taboo in the aftermath of the assassination have become increasingly prevalent in the public discourse. Some have even gone so far as to claim that Rabin's assassin was single-handedly responsible for the collapse of the peace process.<sup>2</sup> In retrospect, the assassination of Rabin clearly altered the course of the peace process and perhaps even affected the results of the 1996 elections. Almost twenty years later, the impact of this event is also clearly still felt in the political and social dynamics in Israel.

The case of Rabin's assassination reflects the immense potential effect of a single assassination on the political and social environment within a polity, as well as on bilateral processes. Thus it is not surprising that Appleton<sup>3</sup> argues, "The impact of assassinations on America and the World is incalculable" and that Americans cite the assassination of John F. Kennedy as the crime that has had the greatest impact on

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<sup>2</sup> President Bill Clinton, the main sponsor of the Oslo peace process, speculated that if Rabin had not been assassinated, peace would have been achieved in three years. See Atilla Shumfalbi, "Bill Clinton: If Rabin Would Have Not Been Assassinated There Would Be Peace Today," YNET News, 14 September 2009, [www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3805013,00.html](http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3805013,00.html) [Hebrew].

<sup>3</sup> Sheldon Appleton, "Trends: Assassinations," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 495-522.

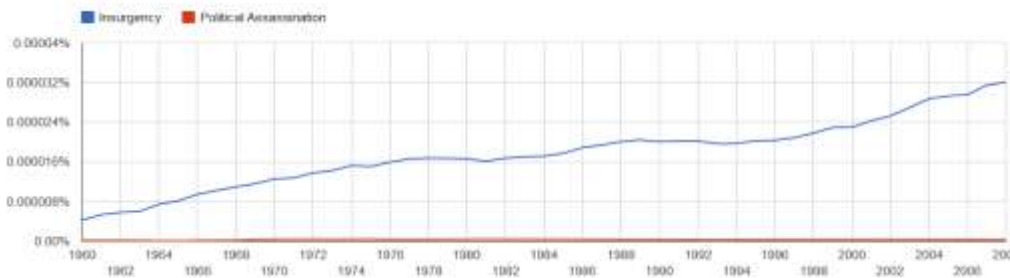
American society in the last hundred years.<sup>4</sup> However, despite the apparently significant influence of political assassinations on political and social realities, this particular manifestation of political action is understudied and, as a result, poorly understood.

Figures 0.1 and 0.2, for example, present a comparison of the relative number of times that the term “political assassination” is mentioned in English-language books that were written between the years 1960 and 2008 in comparison with the word “terrorism” (fig. 0.1) and “insurgency” (fig. 0.2).<sup>5</sup> As can be seen, despite the increasing attention to terrorism and insurgency in recent decades, political assassination as a subject of study remains almost totally neglected by practitioners and academics.

Figure 0.1: Studies on “Political Assassination” and “Terrorism” in the English-Language Corpus



Figure 0.2: Studies on “Political Assassination” and “Insurgency” in the English-Language Corpus

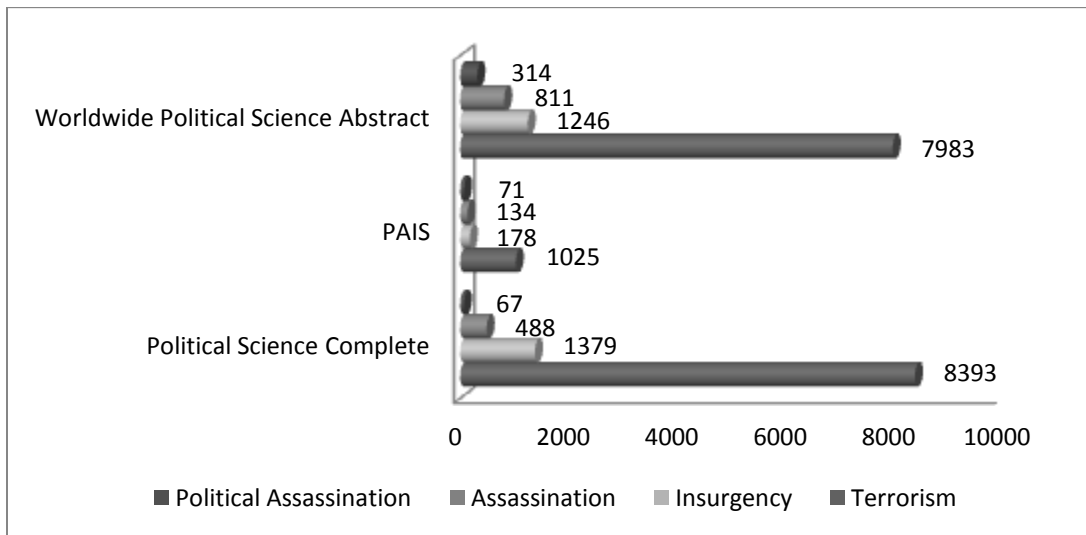


<sup>4</sup> Zaryab Iqbal, and Christopher Zorn, “The Political Consequences of Assassination,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 52, no. 3 (June 2008): 385–400.

<sup>5</sup> The graphs were created using Google Ngram software, which covers a sample of around 10 percent of the English-language corpus.

The picture remains the same when looking at academic studies specifically. As figure 0.3 shows, most academic articles focusing on political violence prefer to study insurgency and terrorism, whereas “political assassination” remains at the margins of academic study of political violence.

Figure 0.3: Popularity of the Terms “Terrorism,” “Insurgency,” “Assassination” and “Political Assassination” in Academic Articles (Based on Three Different Databases), 1960–2008



This marginality represents a crucial oversight, especially since political assassinations may be no less effective in advancing or producing political change than acts of terrorism or insurgency.

The current study aims to improve our understanding of political assassination by looking at its logic, its facilitators and its impact. The study begins with a short historical review of political assassinations and then provides a theoretical conceptualization of the phenomenon that examines the tactic’s logic, definitions and relevant classifications. A special focus is placed on the rationale of political assassinations in comparison with that of terrorism and insurgency. The second part of the study looks into the factors that facilitate political assassinations. By utilizing a typology of targets of assassinations, distinct theoretical frameworks are developed in order to uncover the factors that facilitate assassination against different types of targets as well as the characteristics that make specific political systems more vulnerable to political assassinations than others. This is followed with a section that focuses on the

post-assassination phase; this section examines the impact of political assassinations on a state's political, social and economic mechanisms and stability. The concluding chapter highlights the major theoretical and policy lessons of the study, as well as identifies some promising directions for further research.

## Chapter 1: The Context and Logic of Political Assassinations

### Historical Context

As far as we know, political assassinations have been part of human social reality since the emergence of communal social frameworks, as the leaders of tribes, villages and other types of communities constantly needed to defend their privileged status. Thus it is not surprising that religious texts are strewn with references to political assassination. For example, according to the biblical narrative, after Eglon, the king of Moab, occupied areas belonging to the Hebrew tribe of Benjamin, one of the tribe's leaders, Ehud Ben-Gera, infiltrated the king's palace and assassinated him. The ensuing confusion and chaos helped the tribe of Benjamin to defeat Eglon's army.<sup>6</sup> In another famous biblical story, the ongoing clashes between the tribes of Israel and the kingdom of Hazor eventually ended with the assassination of Sisera (the military leader of Hazor). Sisera escaped from the Israeli forces following his defeat on the battlefield, and found what he thought was a refugee in Yael's (a common Hebrew female name) tent. Although Yael invited Sisera to nap in her tent, her intentions were lethal. As he slept, she hammered one of the tent pegs into his temple.<sup>7</sup>

Assassinations were part of the political reality in the ancient world as well, and they feature prominently in the rise and fall of some of the greatest empires. While many people are familiar with the military victories of Alexander the Great, few today recall that his ascendance to power was facilitated by the assassination of his father (an innovative and talented politician in his own right), who was struck down by a bodyguard as he was entering a theater to attend his daughter's marriage celebrations.<sup>8</sup> In a somewhat more famous incident, Gaius Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 BCE by Roman senators who increasingly feared that Caesar would revoke their privileges. In the previous years, Caesar had been able to use the support and loyalty of the army in order to become the sole consul and dictator for life (according to the Roman constitution, dictators were allowed to rule for no more than six months), as well as to nominate himself as imperator and pontifex maximus (the head of the state religion). The assassination eventually led to the formal end of the republic, as Caesar's adopted

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<sup>6</sup> Bible (Old Testament), Book of Judges, chapter 3.

<sup>7</sup> Bible (Old Testament), Book of Judges, chapters 4–5.

<sup>8</sup> David M. Lewis, "The Fourth Century BC," in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 6 (1994), 374.

son (and grandnephew) Gaius Octavius nominated himself emperor.<sup>9</sup>

In some instances, political assassinations were used not just to eliminate specific leaders or policies, but also in an attempt to instigate revolutionary dynamics. For example, the Sicari were a group of Jewish zealots active at the time of Roman rule of Palestine (66 to 73 CE) who called for violent struggle against the Roman Empire in order to regain Jewish political independence. One of their main tactics was political assassination, which aimed to deter the moderate Jewish leadership from cooperating with the Roman rulers. The Sicari usually attacked their targets in broad daylight, in crowded places, and during festivals, when the masses gathered in Jerusalem. The assassins would mingle with the crowd, approach their target, and stab him with a short dagger kept concealed in their clothing. They would then disappear into the crowd. The group was finally eliminated after the Romans were able to suppress the Jewish rebellion around 73 CE.<sup>10</sup>

In many of these cases of political assassination, which occurred in a variety of locations and cultures, the elimination of the head of a polity seems to have had a substantial effect on the political course of the polity or empire. The impressive impact of such assassinations seems to be a result of both the unique structure of the international system at the time and also of the absolute power held by most rulers. Thus, the lack of mechanisms that could permit an effective political adjustment to such events led, in many cases, to fairly chaotic situations that demanded substantial time until stability was restored. Some types of assassinations however, seem to have had a lesser effect. The assassination campaign of the Sicari against Jewish leaders (but not heads of state), for example, generated a limited impact. This illustrates not just the broad character of political assassinations but also the variation that may exist in their effects on political processes.

The feudal political order that emerged in Europe during the Middle Ages seems to have made political assassinations less attractive. This seems to be because the potential of any single assassination to lead to a significant political change was limited

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<sup>9</sup> Lucius Annaeus Florus, *Epitome de T. Livio Bellorum omnium annorum DCC Libri duo* [*Epitome of Roman History*], date unknown, section 2.9.

<sup>10</sup> Ami Pedahzur and Arie Perliger, *Jewish Terrorism in Israel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 4–8.



under the feudal structure. Consequently, while short-term personal benefits may have been yielded as the result of an assassination, rarely did the result come in the form of structural changes of the political or social system, or of changes to the prevailing norms and policies. Indeed, scholars tend to agree that political assassinations in medieval Europe were relatively rare, and those that occurred were triggered mainly by political schisms within the ruling echelons.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, due to limited documentation, some of the most famous events lack definitive proof of being true cases of assassination. For example, William II, the king of England, died in 1100 while hunting after being shot with an arrow by one of his own men, the nobleman Walter Tirel. It remains unclear, however, if this was a deliberate killing. The fact that the injured king was left to die in the forest while his brother Henry rushed to Winchester (to secure the royal treasury) and then to London, where he was crowned within days, before an archbishop could arrive, has convinced some historians that this was a deliberate assassination.<sup>12</sup> But it is still unclear if Henry exploited an opportunity or if he was involved in the “accident.” In a similarly vague case, Pope Benedict XI died suddenly only several months after he had assumed the role of pope, in what many assumed was an assassination by poison. Upon his death, the papacy was moved from Rome to Avignon, which greatly enhanced French influence on the affairs of the Roman Catholic Church and caused the church to experience significant internal divisions.<sup>13</sup>

Information about political assassinations outside Europe before the modern era is fairly scarce. Nonetheless, several events and groups are worth mentioning. Among them are the Assassins, a group that could be described as a more modern Islamic version of the Sicari. They were a collective of Shi'i Ismailis active from the 11th to the 13th centuries who engaged in campaigns of assassinations against political and religious leaders of rival groups and communities, mostly those who sought to extract influence on or oppress the Ismaili community of believers.<sup>14</sup> Many of their assassinations involved infiltrating hostile territory, assimilating and waiting for an opportunity to kill the targeted political or religious leader. The group's influence

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<sup>11</sup> Bruno S. Frey, “Why Kill Politicians? A Rational Choice Analysis of Political Assassinations,” (working paper, Institute for Empirical Research in Economics, University of Zurich, 2007), <http://ssrn.com/abstract=990275>.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Barlow, *William Rufus* (UK: Methuen London, 1983), 421.

<sup>13</sup> Alban Butler, *The Lives of the Fathers, Martyrs, and Other Principal Saints*, vol. 7 (Dublin, 1866). See excerpt at [www.bartleby.com/210/7/076.html](http://www.bartleby.com/210/7/076.html).

<sup>14</sup> James Wasserman, *The Templars and the Assassins* (Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 2001).

eventually declined, and it disappeared following the Mongol invasion of the Middle East in the mid-13th century. Other assassinations worth mentioning outside the European context in the pre-modern era are the assassination of the Grand Khan Sidibala in 1323 (the only Chinese head of state to be assassinated during that country's long history) and that of the Persian head of state Shah Nader in 1747 by his bodyguards as a part of a wider conspiracy plotted by his nephew Adil Shah, who opposed Nader's tendency to engage in military campaigns that put a significant financial burden on the Persian Empire.<sup>15</sup>

However, instead of seeing a continued decline in the usage and importance of assassinations, the last two centuries have in many ways seen the return of political assassinations to the main stage. It is not just that very few countries have been immune to assassinations, but a growing number of state and sub-state actors have attempted to use this tactic. A basic survey of the data collected for this study shows that more than 130 countries have experienced at least one political assassination in the last sixty years. Some of these attacks were perpetrated by common actors in the terrorism landscape such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Hezbollah and Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), while other were carried out by less familiar organizations or by individuals, such as John F. Kennedy's assassination by Lee Harvey Oswald. It seems also that no small number of assassinations have been sponsored or facilitated by state actors. Syria's involvement in the assassination of Rafic Hariri, Lebanon's prime minister, on 14 February 2005, is a case in point. Hence, it seems evident that understanding modern politics demands a better understanding of the causes and implications of political assassinations. But before that, the logic of political assassination and its uniqueness in comparison with other types of sub-state political violence needs to be clarified.

### The Logic of Political Assassination

As with other spheres of literature on political violence, two important consequential characteristics are noticeable in the literature on political assassinations. The first is the lack of consensus regarding its definition; the second is the limited number of attempts to distinguish its rationale and impact from those of other types of

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<sup>15</sup> Gerhard Falk, *Assassinations, Anarchy and Terrorism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2012), 69.

political violence. In this study, I would like to adopt an alternative, reverse approach. Thus I will try to uncover the logic of the phenomenon first, and then use that logic to devise a clear conceptualization.

In the most basic sense, political assassination is about promoting or preventing political, social or economic changes related to the collective. Although some may claim that assassinations during coups d'état or assassinations initiated by figures in a polity's elite are actually manifestations of personal struggles, I argue that these kinds of assassinations are ultimately about the nature of the government or regime and as a result affect the collective. Why are these changes promoted via the killing of specific individuals and not by other means? Several options may be suggested: The perpetrators may believe that assassination is the fastest and most effective way to promote their desired changes, in comparison with other viable alternatives (whether violent or not). Second, the perpetrators may believe that other alternatives are not viable. Thus, even if they prefer other methods of political activism, those methods may not be available for operational or logistical reasons, and hence the perpetrators may be forced to consider the option of assassination. Finally, the perpetrator may assume the targeted individual has direct responsibility for his inability to promote or prevent changes in the collective's political and social sphere. Thus, the perpetrator sees the elimination of the specific targeted person as crucial stage in carrying out his or her agenda. (Ben-Yehuda sees this kind of act more as a "revenge and warning signal").<sup>16</sup> Regardless of the exact reason, in all cases the perpetrator assumes the existence of a causal relationship between the act of assassination and the ability, or the potential, to advance or prevent particular policies.<sup>17</sup>

With this background in mind, the conceptual gaps between political assassinations and other types of political violence can be addressed more clearly. Terrorism is as an act of psychological warfare in which a group utilizes violence to manipulate the way the public perceives specific political issues or political conflicts, in the hope that a population will pressure its government to concede to the terrorists' demands. In more rare cases, the terrorists' violence is aimed directly at the political

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<sup>16</sup> Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Political Assassinations by Jews* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993), xxi.

<sup>17</sup> Of course, some assassins of political figures are mentally ill, or are motivated by feelings of revenge or other personal sentiments. Their acts are not political assassinations in the context of this study, since they lack the political context.

echelon, again to exert pressure for the promotion of their political goals. In both cases, terrorist violence is a medium that allows groups to communicate a political message to the public and to policymakers in an effort to hopefully create mass (or elite) support for political change. Part of this message includes an exemplification of what the costs are of not conceding to the terrorists' demands.<sup>18</sup> As Rapoport emphasizes: "At most assassination involves a conspiracy, terrorism requires a movement."<sup>19</sup> The movement Rapoport mentions is to be formed (indoctrinated and recruited) via messages produced by a violent terrorist campaign.

The rationale for insurgency is based on the gradual formation of an alternative political mechanism that will eventually replace an existing government. Hence, insurgent groups try to monopolize their control of specific peripheral territory, create a state-like framework (that will engage in tax collection, civilian services, etc.) and then gradually expand it and enhance their military capabilities until they are able to topple and replace the existing regime.<sup>20</sup>

Political assassination is a different breed of political violence than terrorism and insurgency. But two important clarifications are necessary before presenting its rationale. First, it should be noted that in most cases assassination is more costly (in terms of preparations, training, planning, etc.) than conventional insurgent or terrorist attacks against random targets.<sup>21</sup> This is mainly a result of assassinations' natural complexity (the need to locate and gain access to a secured target). Therefore, the decision to perpetrate an assassination could not be considered a result driven merely by tactical decisions of the group or individual. There are inherent characteristics, and an internal logic, involved in assassinations that convince a group to employ it instead of other potential tactics of political violence. Second, in many cases groups will engage both in conventional terrorism or insurgency *and* assassinations. This doesn't mean that

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<sup>18</sup> For further discussion on the rationale of terrorism see, for example, Gordon H. McCormick, "Terrorist Decision Making," *Annual Review of Political Science* 6 (June 2003): 473–507; Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism," *International Security* 31, no. 1 (Summer 2006): 49–80.

<sup>19</sup> Ben-Yehuda, *Political Assassination by Jews*, 53.

<sup>20</sup> For further discussion on the rationale of terrorism see, for example, Bard O'Neill, *Insurgency and Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse*, (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2005), 15–38; Ian Beckett, *Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> It should be emphasized that this refers to the tactical level (when comparing assassination attacks to other types of violent attacks perpetrated by sub-state groups).

conceptually distinguishing among them is not important or that the logic of these phenomena is the same. This is similar to the manner in which a political group will sometimes be engaged in both terrorism and electoral politics, despite the clear distinction between these two types of political activity.

The logic of political assassination is based on the perception that by eliminating a particular individual who has political power, it is possible to achieve political changes (or shorten the path to these changes or to “victory”) without necessarily affecting the mind-set of the public or policymakers, controlling territory, or challenging the physical power of an existing regime directly (although all of these may accompany an assassination).<sup>22</sup> For that reason, terrorist or insurgent groups that feel as though other tactics have failed or are not effective enough in amassing mass support, and that are experiencing dwindling resources, may resort to political assassinations.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, regimes that are facing challenges controlling territories or garnering public support against a determined opposition may have a growing incentive to take the route of assassinations to counter the threat posed by their political rivals.

At least at first glance, political assassination provides several advantages over conventional campaigns of terrorism or insurgency. Since assassination tries to bypass the dimension of attrition that exists in other tactics, and instead tries to achieve immediate effects, it does not always demand a significant investment in garnering popular support, or the creation of extensive recruitment mechanisms to exploit that support. It also avoids (in most cases) the need to directly confront superior armed forces, and as a result demands fewer operational resources (in the long term). Finally, in terms of effectiveness, both practically and symbolically, the killing of an important political figure may be more effective than conventional attacks in promoting political instability and in exposing the vulnerability of an existing regime.

After clarifying the logic of political assassination, we can proceed to

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, the collapse of the peace process between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization after the assassination of Rabin, or the assassination of Anwar Saddat in 1981, after which Islamic Jihad in Egypt thought that the assassination would spark a popular rebellion that would then lead to the overthrow of the entire Egyptian regime.

<sup>23</sup> See, for example, the Stern Gang assassinations in Palestine, as well as ETA’s assassination of Miguel Ángel Blanco Garrido in 1997. In both cases, loss of support and dwindling resources led the organizations to experiment with assassinations.

conceptualize it. Based on the logic above, a definition of political assassination should include three elements. First, the target is an individual who is part of the leadership of a group that operates within the political sphere in order to promote a specific ideology or policies. She or he need not necessarily be an elected official or member of the three branches of government (executive, legislative and judicial), as leaders of opposition organizations or social movements may also try to promote political changes without formally being part of the government. Second, the perpetrator's goal is a political one; thus the assassination aims at promoting or preventing specific policies, values, practices or norms pertaining to the collective's way of life. Third, the act includes actual direct or indirect action that leads to the death of the targeted individual. Hence we can define a political assassination as "an action that directly or indirectly leads to the death of an intentionally targeted individual who is active in the political sphere, in order to promote or prevent specific policies, values, practices or norms pertaining to the collective."<sup>24</sup>

After establishing a definition, we can begin to identify different types of political assassinations, and develop a theoretical framework that can help explain the causes and implications of these events.

### Typologies of Political Assassinations

Most of the studies that provide a historical review of political assassinations also strive to introduce some classification of the phenomenon. Most of them seem to focus on the motivations of the perpetrators. Ben-Yehuda,<sup>25</sup> for example, differentiates among (a) acts that are revolutionary in nature, and aim at changing the existing sociopolitical order; (b) acts that aim at preserving the status quo and are usually perpetrated by elites or the existing government; and (c) assassinations perpetrated as part of an intrastate communal clash, usually when different ethnic or religious communities compete for power. Although useful for understanding the strategic context of an assassination, Ben-Yehuda's classification ignores the important distinction between motivation and desired results (categories A and B) and context (category C).

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<sup>24</sup> Even assassinations that some consider to be revenge attacks (such as Israel's assassinations of Abbas Musawi, Hezbollah's leader, and Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Hamas' leader) are included in this definition, since they are parts of ongoing political conflicts and were aimed to affect the political capabilities of a political actor.

<sup>25</sup> Ben-Yehuda, *Political Assassination by Jews*, chapter 2.

A more elaborate motivation-based classification was used by different scholars in a series of studies published mainly in the 1970s.<sup>26</sup> They differentiate among five types of political assassinations: (a) *elite substitution*, the assassination of a political leader in order to replace him or her, with a limited intention to change the sociopolitical order; (b) *tyrannicide*, the assassination of an absolute, oppressive ruler, in order to replace him or her with a less repressive and more rational leader; (c) *terrorist assassination*, the mass and indiscriminate killing of political figures, usually as part of a revolutionary dynamic; (d) *anomic assassination*, the assassination of a political figure for “private” reasons (including mentally ill assassins who use the political dimension of the killing to justify their act); and (e) *propaganda by deed*, an assassination that attempts to promote and attract public attention to specific policy issue. As with Ben-Yehuda’s classification, this classification scheme has some limitations. Not only are the various categories vague and not mutually exclusive, as there is a significant overlap between some of them (for example, categories A and C), something that may be acceptable when creating ideal types, but they also “confuse” motivation and other components of the assassination (for example, the operational characteristics and motivation, as shown in category C).

Similar problems exist in Falk’s classification,<sup>27</sup> in which he distinguishes among (a) *aristocratic assassination*, which affects only the elite; (b) assassinations based on *personal motives*, which are triggered by personal hostility resulting from past relations or grievances; (d) assassinations for *power*, which are tools in a political power struggle; (e) *religious assassinations*, which are justified by using interpretations of religious texts; (f) assassinations motivated by *nationalism* against those perceived to be unpatriotic; and, finally, (g) *diplomatic assassinations*, which target foreign political figures. Here again, the categories confuse motives, types of targets, and consequences. The difficulties in forming motivational-based typologies may reflect the fact that although the circumstances surrounding assassinations may be diverse, the primary goal of a political assassination remains constant, that is, to affect the political reality.

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<sup>26</sup> Flix Gross, “Political Violence and Terror in 19th and 20th Century Russia and Eastern Europe,” in *Assassination and Political Violence*, ed. James F. Kirkham, Sheldon G. Levy and William J. Crotty (New York: Praeger, 1970), 519–98; Joseph Bensman, “Social and Institutional Factors Determining the Level of Violence and Political Assassinations in the Operation of Society: A Theoretical Discussion,” in *Assassination and the Political Order*, ed. William J. Crotty (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 345–88.

<sup>27</sup> Falk, *Assassinations, Anarchy and Terrorism*.

Other typologies have focused more on the “how” than the “why.” Machiavelli, for example, differentiated between “preparations” and “executions.” Based on this framework, Ben-Yehuda provides four categories based on *modus operandi*:<sup>28</sup> (a) *preplanning*, deliberations about whether an assassination should be perpetrated or not; (b) *planning*, cases in which an assassination was halted before the actual perpetration of the killing, but after the decision was made to conduct the assassination; (c) *unsuccessful*, cases that, for operational or logistical reasons, did not end with the death of the target, and (d) *successful*, cases in which the act ended with the death of the targeted individual. It should be noted that the scopes of these categories are limited to the operational status of the act. Hence “success” is measured not by the ability of the perpetrator to promote his political goals via the assassination but by the actual successful completion of the killing act.

Finally, the prominence of psychological research in the field has also yielded some classifications based on the mental profile of the perpetrator. Falk, for example,<sup>29</sup> identifies four types of assassins: (a) those who view their act as a probable sacrifice for a political ideal, who are thus usually willing to accept the harsh personal costs involved; (b) those who are triggered by egocentric needs for acceptance, recognition and status, who are thus inclined “to project personal motives on public objects and rationalize them in terms of some larger public interest”; (c) psychopaths, sociopaths and other individuals “who believe that the conditions of their lives are so intolerably meaningless and without purpose that destruction of society and themselves is desirable for its own sake,” who thus have a limited regard for accepted social norms and practices; and finally, (d) those who suffer from emotional and cognitive distortion that is reflected in hallucinations and delusions of persecution or grandeur, whose acts are thus usually inspired by some divine or mystical visions. It is unclear how to verify these categories via conventional research, as a researcher usually has no access to most assassins (and definitely not the resources to conduct clinical evaluation of their mental health).

In conclusion, it seems that the existing typologies of political assassinations are

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<sup>28</sup> Ben-Yehuda, *Political Assassination by Jews*, 20–21.

<sup>29</sup> Falk, *Assassinations, Anarchy and Terrorism*.



suffering from some analytical deficiencies. As a result, and as will be shown later, most of the typologies utilized in the current study were developed with analytical clarity in mind and with the objective of identifying links among different categories of assassination.

## Chapter 2: The Landscape and General Trends of Political Assassinations

### Data Set Construction

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the causes and implications of political assassinations, a comprehensive data set was constructed specifically for this study. The data set, which documents political assassinations from the end of World War II to early 2013, was constructed using a variety of resources, including relevant academic books and articles, media data sets (especially LexisNexis and the *New York Times* archive) and online resources. Using the definition of political assassinations discussed in the previous chapter, 758 attacks by 920 perpetrators that resulted in the death of 954 individuals were identified (some attacks led to the death of multiple political leaders). We also created a control data set, which includes relevant information about all cases of country-year<sup>30</sup> in which a political assassination didn't occur. This allows us to measure more efficiently and accurately which causal factors and implications are the results of political assassinations.

The data set will be used in order to test different theoretical frameworks that explain different types of assassinations (see chapters 3 and 4), as well to assess the political, social and economic implications of assassinations (see chapter 5). However, before delving into these analyses, it is important to present some general trends related to political assassinations.

### Space and Time

Have processes such as globalization, modernization, the end of the Cold War, the proliferation of democratic practices and the growing emergence of transnational ideologies had any effect on the prevalence of political assassinations? Although it is difficult to provide a clear answer when looking at the yearly number of assassinations (see figure 2.1), it is clear that the phenomenon is not in decline.<sup>31</sup>

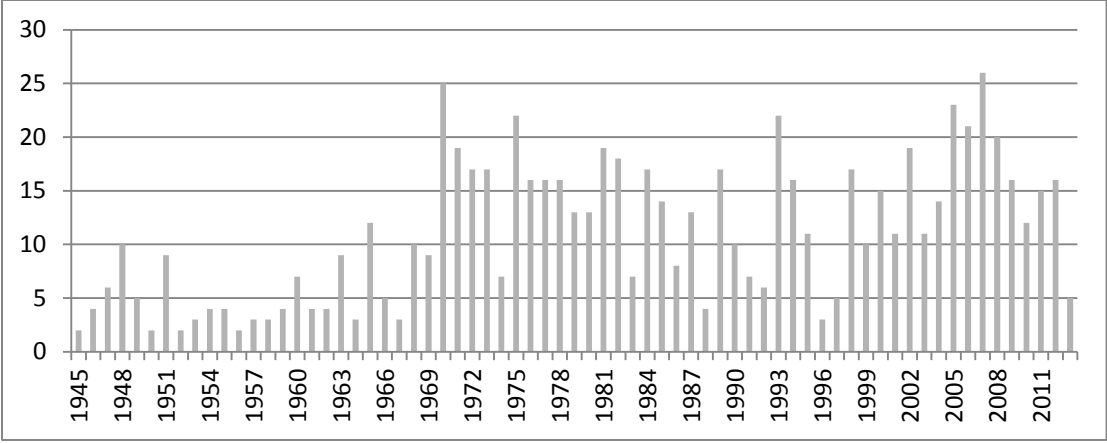
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<sup>30</sup> This concept describes a dataset in which a combination of a specific year and country is considered a single observation. For example, if zero assassinations occurred in the USA during the year 1990, the case or observation designated as USA-1990 will be coded 0 under the variable no. of assassinations.

<sup>31</sup> Although some may argue that another explanation is that reporting has become better over time, this seems not to be the case, for two reasons. First, there has been no significant growth since the 1970s in the yearly number of assassinations, which would be the case if the increase since the 1960s was a result of

Whereas from the late 1940s until the late 1960s the yearly number of assassinations rarely exceeded single-digit numbers, since 1970 the opposite trend can be identified, with the number of attacks rarely staying in the single-digit area. Indeed, while the average number of assassination attacks between 1945 and 1969 was 5, it was almost three times higher (14.48) between 1970 and 2013. That is not to say that since the early 1970s the number of assassinations has stayed consistent, as three major peaks may be identified during that period: the early 1970s, during 1993 to 1994, and the mid-2000s. These three time frames are characterized by dramatic political transitions in various regions, which were accompanied by violent clashes. More specifically, these regions are Southeast Asia, Latin America and the Middle East in the 1970s; the Balkans and Israel-Palestine in the early to mid-1990s; and of course the Middle East and the Afghanistan-Pakistan (Af-Pak) region in the mid-2000s. The possible relations between domestic and international conflicts and the volume of political assassinations will be examined further in the following chapters.

Figure 2.1: Number of Assassinations Per Year



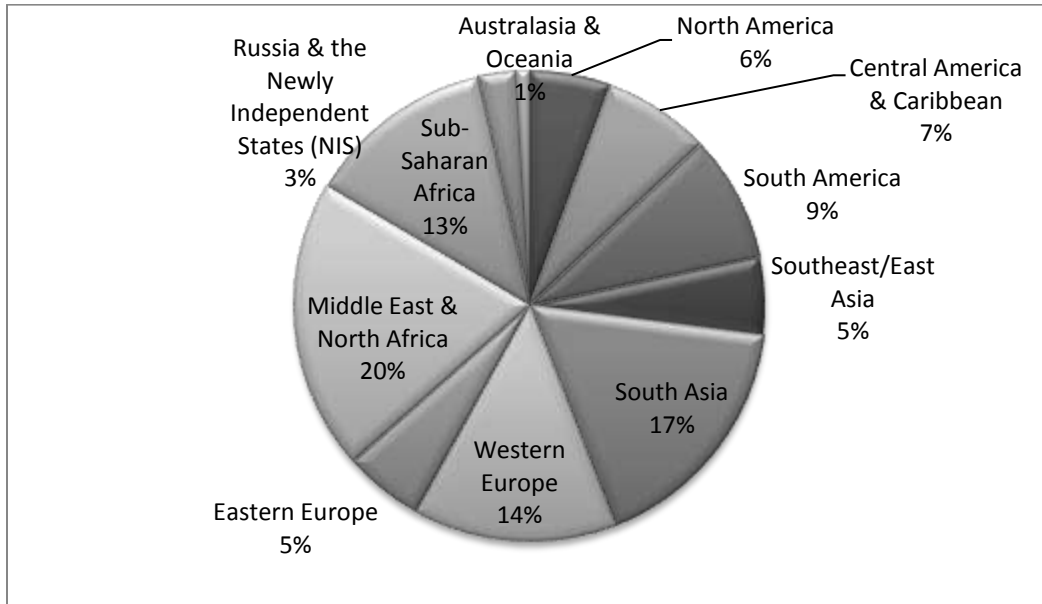
An examination of the geographic distribution of the attacks (figure 2.2) makes it evident that they are not restricted to any single region. Some regions that are considered politically stable and economically prospering, such as Western Europe, as well as regions that are considered politically unstable, more prone to political violence

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improved reporting. (Moreover, some years experience a decline in the number of assassinations, although the overall trend is stable). Second, not as with other types of manifestations of political violence, assassinations, by their nature, enjoy more reliable reporting. After all, it is more difficult to conceal an attack against a political figure than to conceal an attack against a random target.

and economically weak, such as sub-Saharan Africa, have experienced substantial levels of political assassinations.

Figure 2.2: Geographic Distribution of Assassinations

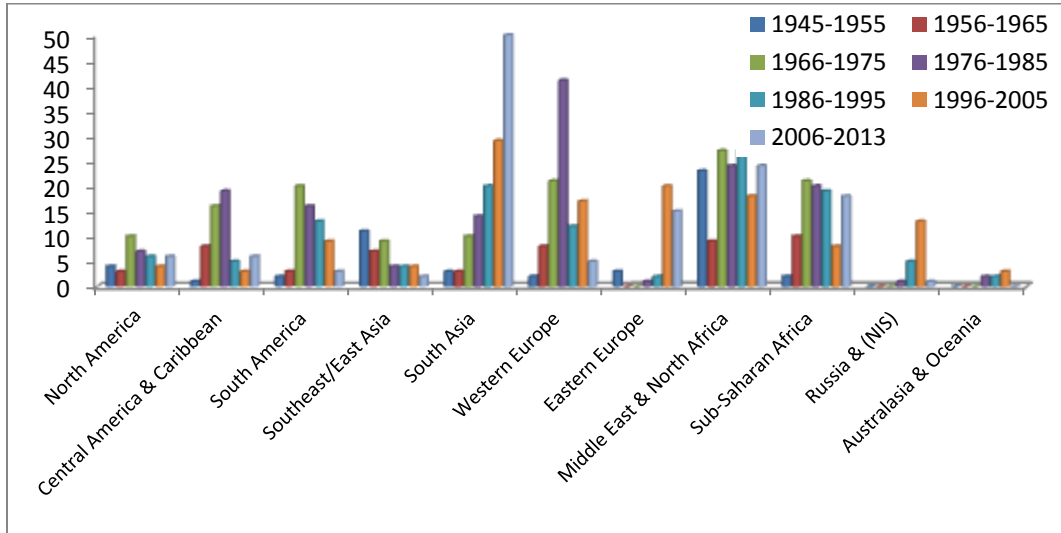


The only regions that seem to be relatively marginally affected are Oceania and, to lesser extents, North America, Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe. In the first two cases, this seems to be a result of the limited number of polities comprising these regions, which has affected the accumulated number of assassinations they have experienced. In the last two cases, this may be because they are mainly composed of highly oppressive regimes, with significant separations between the political echelons and the public. This separation may have resulted in limited opportunities for assassinations, as well as limited opportunities for the emergence of significant opposition actors that could initiate such attacks. The fact that most assassinations in Eastern Europe (85 percent) occurred after 1995 seems to support these assumptions (figure 2.3). This also illustrates the importance of identifying regional trends over time and determining whether some regions were more vulnerable to assassinations during specific time periods.

Figure 2.3 shows that there are regional trends in the data. Assassinations were most frequent in Central America and Western Europe between the 1960s and 1980s, a period in which both regions were immersed in political turbulence (for example, El

Salvador's civil war; Nicaragua's experience with the Contras and violent clashes between opposition movements and the government; Guatemala's civil war) and suffered from the proliferation of violent sub-state organizations (in some European countries, the level of left-wing terrorist violence presented a real threat to the political stability, such as in Italy, West-Germany and Spain).

**Figure 2.3: Regional and Periodical Distribution of Assassinations**



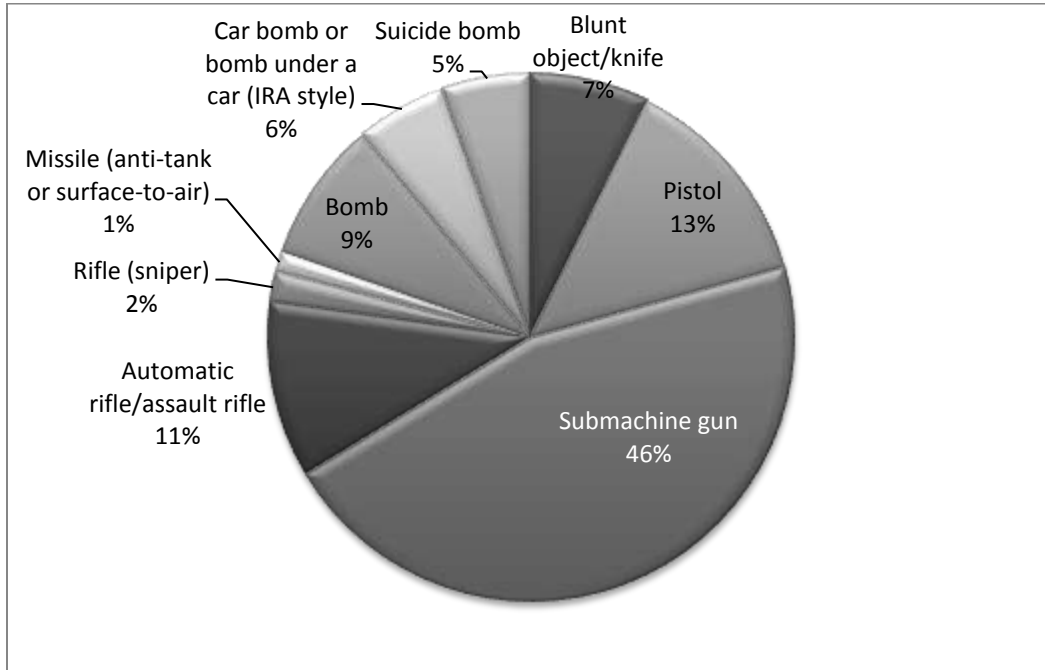
In other regions, however, political assassinations have become dominant only in the last couple of decades. In South Asia, 76 percent of assassinations have been perpetrated after 1985, possibly a consequence of the growing instability in the Af-Pak region during and after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. And as mentioned earlier, more than 85 percent of assassinations in Eastern Europe have been perpetrated after 1995, the start of the transition to democracy in most Eastern European countries, which in many cases was accompanied by growing ethnic tensions and political instability. In some regions, however, such as North America and Southeast Asia, the numbers have remained more or less consistent, which may be a result of the relative stability of some of the region's governments since 1945. The importance of these variables in determining the probability of political assassinations will be tested more rigorously later in this study.

Tactics and Targets

One of the enduring perceptions among students of terrorism is that the tactics utilized by violent sub-state groups have not changed dramatically in the last century.

In other words, the gun and the bomb are still the main weapons used by terrorist and insurgent groups engaging in hit-and-run attacks.<sup>32</sup> Is this also the case in the realm of political assassinations? Or does the need to kill fairly guarded and specific targets push assassins to use more sophisticated tactics? The answer seems to be negative, according to figure 2.4, which illustrates the distribution of attacks by weapon type.

Figure 2.4: Distribution of Assassinations by Weapons' Sophistication



As can be seen in figure 2.4, a pistol, a sniper rifle, a light automatic weapon (by far the most popular weapon) or an automatic rifle were used in 72 percent of the attacks; if we add the 15 percent of attacks that were perpetrated using bombs (including car bombs), we find that the bomb and the gun were used in 87 percent of assassinations.<sup>33</sup> The rest of the attacks were perpetrated using “cold” weapons, suicide bombs and missiles.

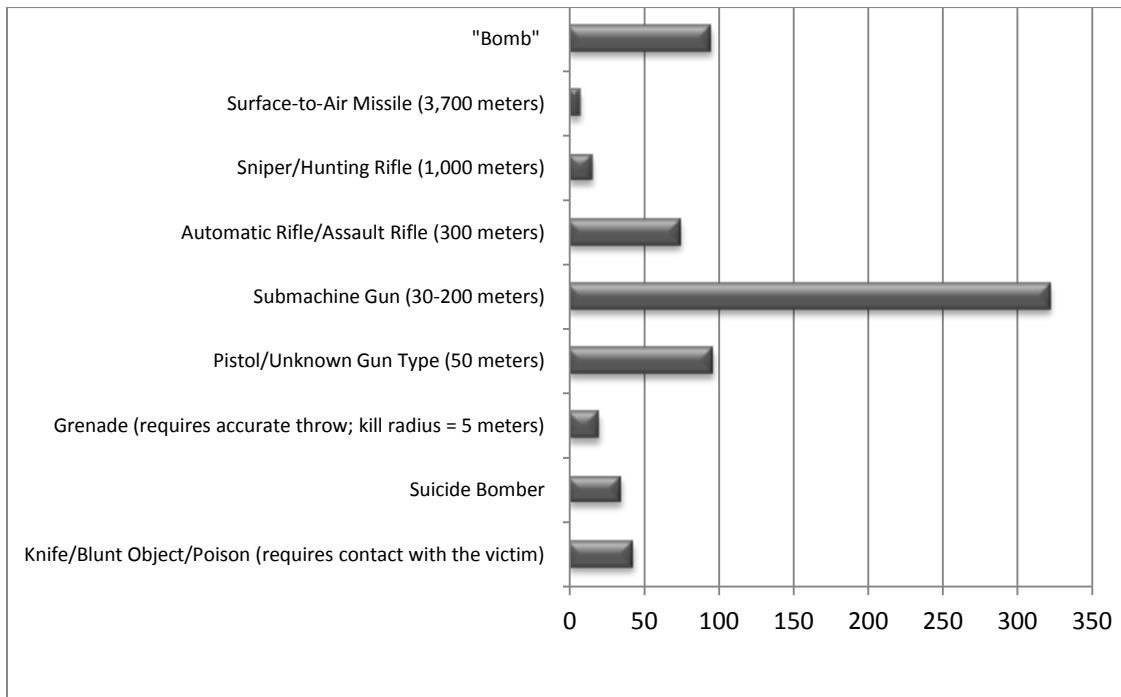
The distribution of weapons by their effective range shows similar patterns (see

<sup>32</sup> See Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 119.

<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that decisions regarding the choice of weapon and tactic may also be influenced by organizational resources. Although this analysis of weapons' costs takes that factor into consideration on some level, it should also be noted that since most of the weapons that are used for assassinations are not overly sophisticated or costly, this factor seems to have a limited impact.

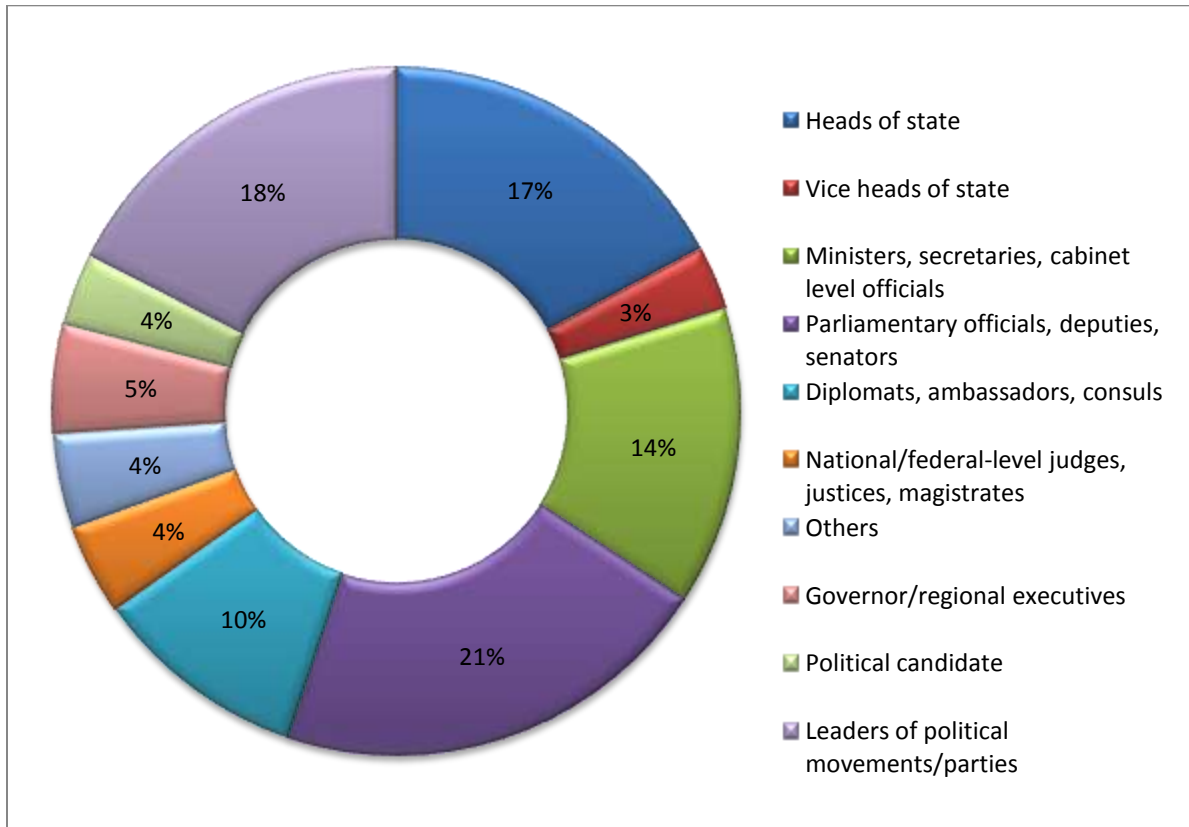
figure 2.5). But it is also possible to interpret figure 2.5 as an attempt by perpetrators to balance effectiveness and costs or risks. Although perpetrators would probably prefer to use weapons that make it possible to minimize risk and maximize success (such as long-range weapons; for instance, a sniper rifle), these weapons are also more expensive, both financially and in terms of the operational knowledge and experience required to use them. (To illustrate, although pistols and submachine guns cost between \$150 and \$500, a missile costs between \$5,000 for an SA7 and \$38,000 for a Stinger.) Hence, it is understandable that perpetrators often settle for cheaper weapons, which although less effective in terms of ensuring the death of a target (and demanding greater proximity to a target), still provide a reasonable chance of ensuring the perpetrators' survival and success.

Figure 2.5: Distribution of Assassinations by Weapons' Effective Range (in Meters)



A related question that may further clarify the rationale behind perpetrators' selection of tactics is whether the perpetrators fit the tactic to their target. In other words, are they willing to absorb more costly operations in the case of a particularly prestigious target? In order to answer this question, we must first examine the distribution of assassinations by type of targets (see figure 2.6).

Figure 2.6: Distribution of Assassinations by Targets



As can be seen, three major types of targets lead the list: heads of states; leaders of political movements/parties; and parliamentary officials, deputies and senators; these are followed by ministers, secretaries, and cabinet-level officials; national/federal-level judges; and diplomats, ambassadors and consuls. The high number of parliamentary members in comparison with the relatively low number of heads of state and leaders of political parties or movements makes it safe to say that the latter two types are in reality the main targets of political assassinations “per capita.” As will be elaborated on later, this can be explained by the incomparable symbolic and psychological effect that an assassination against a head of state can generate. Of all types of political assassination, the direct elimination of the head of a movement or a government can have the most significant impact. But is this understanding also manifested in the operational characteristics of these attacks? The answer is mostly negative, as no significant differences were found between the tactics and weapons used in attacks against heads of state and leaders of political movements and those used against other types of targets.



Somewhat surprisingly, political candidates (political figures who are actively running for office) constitute just 3 percent of the targets, despite the fact that, in many cases, they represent a potentially significant threat to the existing sociopolitical order. This may indicate that regimes and political actors have a tendency to underestimate the threat from rival leaders until those leaders have proved themselves in the electoral process (at least once) or are able to mobilize significant popular support. In other words, opposition leaders need to “prove” that the benefits involved in their assassination outweigh the costs. The ability to garner electoral support symbolizes these leaders’ transition from potential threats to actual ones, who in turn “deserve” to be targeted.

### Perpetrators

Political violence is a phenomenon of collective action, as most of the relevant studies tend to illustrate that lone wolves form a minority among the perpetrators of such violence.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, owing to some famous lone wolf assassins (Lee Harvey Oswald, James Earl Ray, Sirhan B. Sirhan) some people tend to assume that the portion of lone wolves among perpetrators of political assassinations is relatively higher than that which can be found among the perpetrators of other acts of politically motivated violence. The numbers do not tend to support that claim, as just 8.9 percent of the perpetrators of assassinations may be described as lone wolves. Moreover, at least 50 percent of the perpetrators were affiliated with a known terrorist group. The rest were members of military or security forces (15.1 percent), ruling political parties (14.4 percent), opposition political parties (7.6 percent) or criminal organizations (6 percent).

The data set also illustrates that more than half of the assassins (51.3 percent) had been involved in criminal activities prior to the assassination. This may indicate that a group usually prefers one of its veteran members to perform an assassination, probably because of the high stakes involved in these kinds of operations and the relatively high level of operational knowledge necessary to conduct them. In one extreme example, the leader of the Bangladeshi branch of Harkat Ul Jihad alIslami (HUJI), Mufti Abdul Anan, was revealed to have actively participated in assassination against Sheikh Hasina, the

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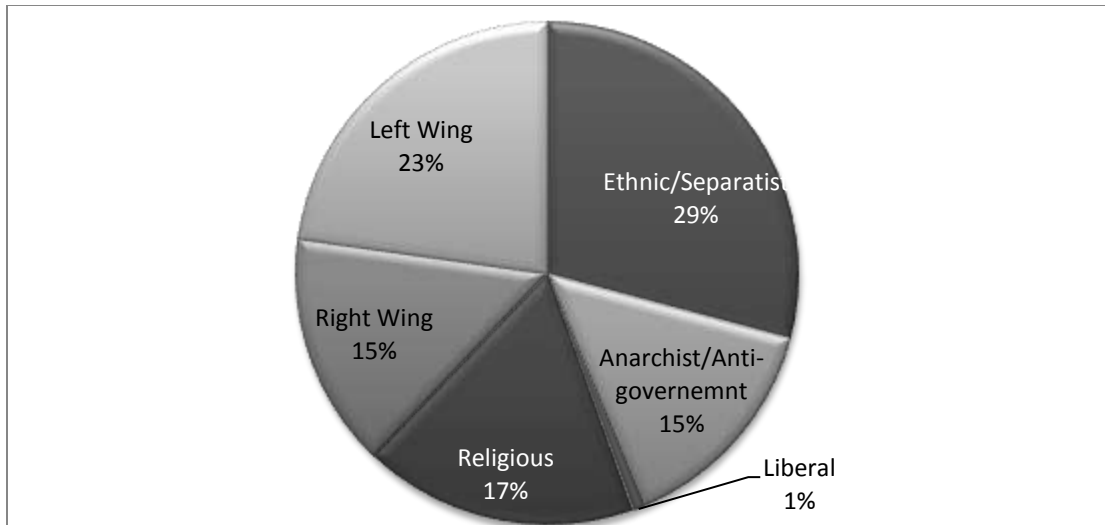
<sup>34</sup> Ami Pedahzur, Arie Perliger and Leonard Weinberg, “Altruism and Fatalism: The Characteristics of Palestinian Suicide Terrorists,” *Deviant Behavior* 24, no. 4 (2003): 405–23.

leader of an opposition party in Bangladesh and the former Bangladesh prime minister, in August 2004. Also, because of the particular risks involved in these kinds of operations, groups may prefer to expose members who are already known to law enforcement agencies, thus sending them to conduct an assassination, rather than exposing members who are still unknown to law enforcement bodies (although this may be problematic, since the veteran members are often at higher risk of being under surveillance).

Finally, the use of veterans may also indicate that assassination is a tactic that is utilized mostly in the last stages of a violent struggle, when most members of a group already have criminal records for their past involvement in violent operations. For example, the LTTE, which perpetrated at least twenty-two assassinations after 1981, initiated almost 40 percent of its assassinations from 2007 to 2009 (eight attacks), as the pressure on the organization started to mount. Future studies focusing on the individual and group level of the phenomenon may be able to test these various assumptions.

In terms of general demographic characteristics, the differences between assassins and “conventional” terrorists seem not to be substantial. As in most contemporary terrorist groups (and not as was seen in many of the European left-wing groups of the 1970s) a decisive majority (96.9 percent) of assassins are men and have been exposed to military or operational training before their involvement in an assassination. Although the exact identities of perpetrators are often unknown, we were able to establish that at least 27 percent of them were employed in the security industry and that at least 26 percent of them went through some kind of military training. We can assume that the real numbers are probably higher, considering the difficulty in gathering this data. This further confirms the earlier assumption that groups prefer to make use of veteran or better-trained members for these high-stakes operations.

Figure 2.7: Distribution of Assassinations by Perpetrators’ Ideology



Finally, it is very clear when looking at the stated or implied ideology of the perpetrators that there are no ideological streams that preclude themselves from engaging in political assassinations. Nonetheless, as can be seen in figure 2.7, ethnic separatist groups, such as LTTE, ETA, Abu Nidal Organization and Armenian Secret Army of the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), are responsible for almost one-third of the attacks. This seems to correspond with the tendency of many of the anti-colonial groups active after World War II, and contemporary anti-occupation groups, to engage in direct attacks against representatives of the occupying regimes. Other ideological streams are distributed less equally along the years, which correspond with terrorism's general historical trends. For example, until the 1970s, the proportion of left-wing attacks was higher than its overall proportion (by almost one third), and just about 6 percent of assassinations before 1970 were perpetrated by groups with a religious ideology. Indeed, the words of some prominent leaders of religious groups emphasize that the growth of religious terrorism was accompanied with a growing understanding by the leaders of these organizations of the potentially immense utility of political assassinations.<sup>35</sup> For example, in a famous al-Sahab propaganda video titled *Thou Art Held Responsible Only for Thyself*, which was released on 3 June 3 2011, Adam Gadahn states:

“It is important that we weaken our cowardly enemy's will to fight by targeting influential public figures in the Crusader and Zionist government... we must remember that these are people who have no problem with thousands of their citizens

<sup>35</sup> While the data in this regards is not complete, around three-quarters of Muslim assassins are Sunni and the rest Shi'i.

and soldiers dying in the wars they start and profit from, so long as it is not they themselves who are in harm's way. But when they start to feel the heat you will find them losing their zeal for the continuation of the war. And getting to these criminals isn't as hard as you might think. I mean, we've seen how a woman knocked the Pope to the floor at Christmas mass and how Italian leader Berlusconi's face was smashed during a public appearance. So it's just a matter of entrusting the matter to Allah, then choosing the right time, the right place and the right method."<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, Usama bin Ladin understood the potential benefits of assassinations. In a message entitled "A Message to the Umma in General and to our Muslim Brothers in Iraq in Particular," which he released on 6 May 2004, he promised the future assassins financial prizes:

"You know that the United States offered great prizes for whoever would kill those engaged in jihad in God's cause. God willing, we in the al-Qa'ida Organization are committed to offering a prize amounting to 10,000 grams of gold to whoever will kill the occupier Bremer, his deputy, the commander of the US troops, or his deputy in Iraq . . . It is today continuing its [word replaced with asterisks] role against the ummah. Therefore, whoever kills Kofi Annan, the head of his mission to Iraq, or his representatives, like Lakhdar Brahimi, will have the same prize, which is 10,000 grams of gold. There will be a prize of 1,000 grams of gold for whoever kills a military figure or civilian from the veto masters, such as the Americans or British, and 500 grams of gold for whoever kills a military figure or civilian from the slaves of the General Assembly in Iraq, such as Japan and Italy . . ."<sup>37</sup>

These two examples confirm not just the growing understanding of the operational and symbolic benefits of assassinations among groups operating in the contemporary militant-religious landscape but also the growing "globalization" of assassination attacks, as UN leaders as well as foreign diplomats, contractors and military leadership based in foreign territories become no less legitimate targets than local political figures.

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<sup>36</sup> The video is accessible at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=qenLwnaUSs8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qenLwnaUSs8) (see minute 21:08).

<sup>37</sup> See IntelCenter Words of Osama Bin Laden, Volume 1, 99, pp. 38-43.

## Chapter 3: Causes of Political Assassinations

### Past and Current Explorations of Political Assassinations

As noted in the preface, the literature on political assassinations is dated, scarce and lacking a systematic examination of the causes and implications of such events. In general, the existing literature can be divided into three major groups. The first includes historical studies that attempt to uncover the circumstances of one or a selected group of assassinations.<sup>38</sup> In some cases, the historical review is accompanied by an effort to provide theoretical and analytical insights via specific disciplinary lenses. Falk and Ben-Yehuda, for example, complement their historical reviews of assassinations with an analytical framework that is based largely on existing sociological literature,<sup>39</sup> while Clarke provides a psychological-mental classification of the assassins.<sup>40</sup>

The second group looks into the effect of political assassinations on various societal processes. Berkowitz and Macauley, for example, examined the effect of Kennedy's assassination on crime rates in the United States;<sup>41</sup> Orren and Peterson also tried to assess the impact of Kennedy's assassination, but they examined how the assassination shaped political socialization (more specifically, how parents explain political events such as an assassination to their children).<sup>42</sup> In more recent study, Yuchtman-Yaar and Hermann tried to evaluate how the assassination of Israeli prime minister Rabin affected Israelis' perceptions and attitudes toward acts of political participation.<sup>43</sup> As these examples illustrate, most of these studies have adopted a narrow approach focusing on a specific assassination or a related social issue. Even Iqbal and Zorn, who used a more systematic approach and a data set of political

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<sup>38</sup> Franklin L. Ford, *Political Murder from Tyrannicide to Terrorism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); James W. Clarke, *American Assassins: The Darker Side of Politics* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1982); Ludo De Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba* (London: Verso Books, 2001); Mohamed Heikal, *Autumn of Fury: The Assassination of Sadat* (New York: Random House, 1983); Gerald L. Posner, *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and The Assassination of JFK* (New York: Anchor, 1993); Prakash A. Raj, *Kay Gardeko? The Royal Massacre in Nepal* (Calcutta: Rupa, 2001).

<sup>39</sup> Ben-Yehuda, *Political Assassinations by Jews*; Falk, *Assassinations, Anarchy and Terrorism*.

<sup>40</sup> Clarke, *American Assassins: The Darker Side of Politics*.

<sup>41</sup> Leonard Berkowitz and Jacqueline Macauley, "The Contagion of Criminal Violence," *Sociometry* 34, no. 2 (1971): 238-60.

<sup>42</sup> Karen Oren and Paul Peterson, "Presidential Assassination: A Case in the Dynamics of Political Socialization," *Journal of Politics*, 29, No.2, (1967): 388-404.

<sup>43</sup> Ephraim Yuchtman-Yaar, and Tamar Hermann, "The Latitude of Acceptance: Israeli Attitudes Toward Political Protest Before and After the Assassination of Yitzhak Rabin," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no. 6 (December 1998): 721-43.

assassinations, focused on just one type of assassination (that of heads of state) and a limited set of indicators of political stability.<sup>44</sup>

The third and last group focuses on the causes of political assassinations. Although individual-level explanations put significant emphasis on the proposed psychological pathologies of past perpetrators,<sup>45</sup> macro-level explanations mostly examine the social and political conditions that facilitate political assassinations, emphasizing the variables related to political oppression, the existence or lack of alternatives (for violent means) to change state leadership and the level of strength of state powers to prevent or punish potential assassinations.<sup>46</sup>

Most of the studies mentioned earlier, although providing important insights and representing important progress toward a more systematic examination of political assassinations, seem to overlook the nuances existing in political assassinations. Namely, these studies overlook the fact that different types of assassinations are probably triggered by different sets of structural and motivational factors and cannot be presumed a priori to generate a similar impact. For example, we can assume that the considerations that lead an individual to assassinate a member of parliament are probably different from the motivations that trigger the assassination of a head of state. After all, we know from other political realms that people shape their political behavior based on the political sphere they want to influence (in the same manner that most individuals' voting preferences in local elections are shaped by different considerations than the ones that shape their voting preferences in national elections).<sup>47</sup> Applying a similar logic, we should not expect all assassinations to have the same impact on polity and society. The current study, then, strives to provide a more nuanced approach to the examination of the causes and effects of political assassinations, one in which the type of target plays an important role. In the following chapters, several theoretical frameworks for assessing the causes and implications of political assassination, both in general and of specific targets, will be presented and examined. It should be noted that since lone wolves consist of a small fraction of perpetrators (as noted in the previous

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<sup>44</sup> Zaryab Iqbal and Christopher Zorn, "Sic Semper Tyrannis? Power, Repression, and Assassination since the Second World War," *The Journal of Politics* 68, no. 3 (August 2006): 489–501.

<sup>45</sup> Lawrence Z. Freedman, "Assassination: Psychopathology and Social Pathology," *Postgraduate Medicine* 37 (1965): 650–58; Sidney J. Slomich, and Robert E. Kantor, "Social Psychopathology of Political Assassination," *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* 30 (1969): 9–12.

<sup>46</sup> Iqbal and Zorn, "Sic Semper Tyrannis?"; Bruno S. Frey, and Benno Torgler, "Politicians: Be Killed or Survive," *Public Choice* 156, no. 1–2 (July 2013): 357–86.

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Robert Morlan, "Municipal vs. National Election Voter Turnout: Europe and the United States," *Political Science Quarterly* 99, no. 3 (Fall 1984): 457–70.

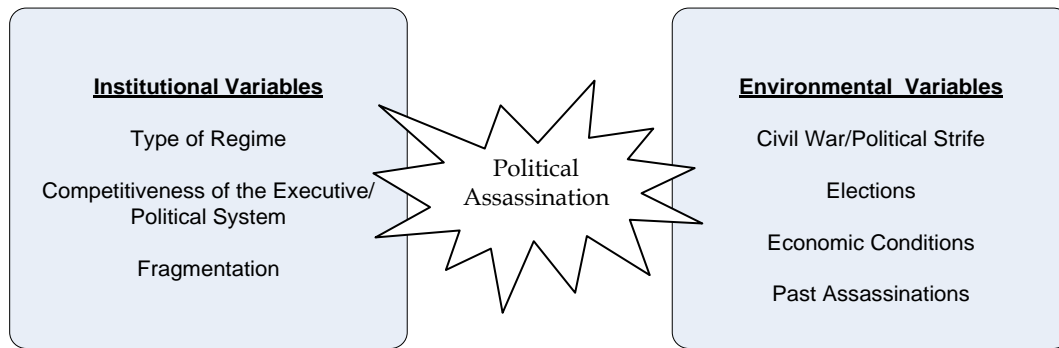
chapter), the majority of the theoretical frameworks here focus on group-level motivations and dynamics.

### Facilitators of Political Assassinations: General Framework

Following the death of Juan Perón in July 1974, various Argentine militant groups (such as People's Revolutionary Army, Montoneros and Argentinean Liberation Front) intensified their operations against the Argentine government as well as against each other. The growing political chaos was eventually exploited by the military in order to execute a coup and to appoint General Jorge Rafael Videla as the new president. The new junta government became infamous, owing it to its extensive use of oppressive measures against opposing political actors as well as for its aggressive foreign policy (such as the Falklands War). These turbulent times also included no less than eleven assassination attacks (including unsuccessful attempts). This staggering number is even more impressive considering the lack of assassinations in Argentina's history before or after this period. The case of Argentina, as well as other similar cases, reflect the importance of contextual political and social processes such as regime change, political strife and political polarization, as well as economic factors, in facilitating a "friendly" environment for political assassinations. The rest of the chapter will try to provide more clarity regarding the facilitators of political assassinations.

In order to identify the factors that facilitate political assassinations, there is a need to distinguish between factors that are related to the stability and resiliency of a political system (institutional variables) and factors that are related to the characteristics of a society or to particular circumstances (environmental variables). The first set of factors are those based on the rationale that some features of a political system make political assassination an effective or attractive tool in order to promote political changes or to topple an existing regime. The second set of factors is based on the assumption that, under particular social circumstances, political assassinations are a more attractive mechanism to promote political changes than other means. Figure 3.1 details the two sets of variables.

Figure 3.1: Facilitators of Political Assassinations (General Framework)



### Regime Type

It seems almost intuitive to assume that regimes that are less effective in mitigating the potential impact of political assassinations would be more prone to suffer from these kind of attacks than regimes with better coping mechanisms. Strong democracies, for example, have mechanisms to prevent an assassination from causing significant political turbulence.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, they may be an unattractive environment for potential assassins. However, not all democracies are created equal. Presidential democracies would seem to be more vulnerable than parliamentary democracies to a perpetrator interested in affecting specific policy issue rather than promoting significant changes in the political system. There are several reasons for this. In the context of the assassination of a head of state, in most presidential systems the president has almost absolute power to shape the executive's policies, which in turn reflect his administration's goals and ideological views. Hence, removing him from office may have a direct effect on the policies promoted by the executive branch. Prime ministers, on the other hand, are subject not just to their party's ideology and bureaucracy but also to constraints related to the demands and ideologies of other parties in their coalition. Thus, removing a prime minister may not necessarily change the overall policies advanced by a government as compared with a similar event in a presidential system. Moreover, the symbolic and psychological impact that the assassination of a state's president generates is likely to differ from that of the assassination of a prime minister, as the latter is not directly elected by the people but instead usually by party members, and he or she usually has less direct executive power. (In a parliamentary coalition government, a prime minister may even have limited control over specific policy issues).

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<sup>48</sup> Iqbal and Zorn, "The Political Consequences of Assassination."



To conclude, although some prime ministers may be so politically strong and influential that they have personified policies or a political ideology (Margaret Thatcher is one example), prime ministers in general enjoy less individual power and influence than executives in presidential systems.<sup>49</sup>

Similar logic may apply to other types of assassinations. Opposition leaders may be perceived as less threatening in parliamentary systems; even if they can gain political dominance in such systems, they will be limited by the inherent constraints that characterize coalition governments and by the fact that one party rarely gains full control of the political institutions. Assassinations of ministers also seem to be less attractive in parliamentary democracies, in which the ministers' power is more limited than those in presidential systems. Ministers in parliamentary systems are usually party members, and their appointment is approved by the legislative and not just the executive branch of government. Moreover, their office's policies are usually a reflection of negotiations between coalition parties and party leaders.

We may also assume that assassinations will be more prevalent in authoritarian regimes than in totalitarian ones.<sup>50</sup> Although in both cases there is a lot of potential for political benefits if a ruler is eliminated (and limited alternative means for promoting policy changes), leaders in strong totalitarian regimes tend to be more isolated and well guarded, and therefore usually more difficult to target, as well as probably more effective in solidifying a succession mechanism (a separate variable that will be discussed later).<sup>51</sup>

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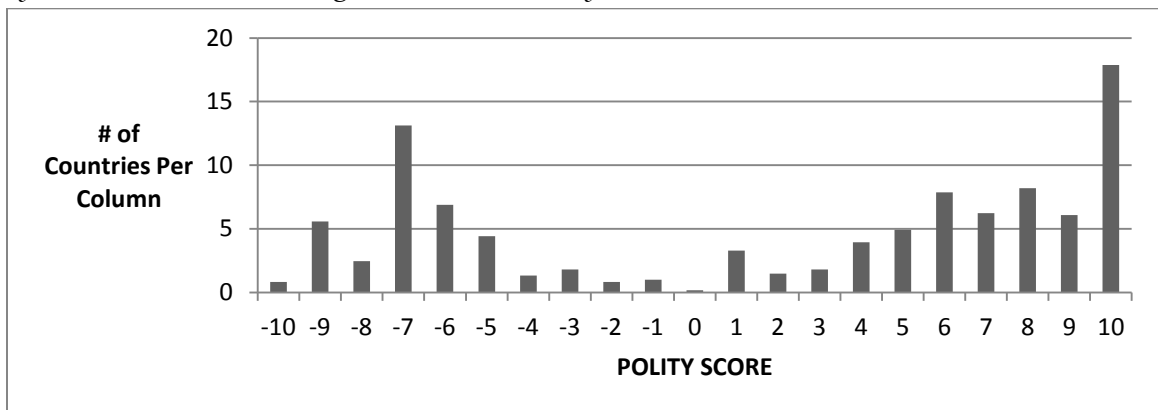
<sup>49</sup> Richard Heffernan, "Why the Prime Minister Cannot Be a President: Comparing Institutional Imperatives in Britain and America," *Parliamentary Affairs* 58, no. 1 (January 2005): 53–70.

<sup>50</sup> Linz characterizes authoritarian regimes as systems with limited mobilization, with significant constraints on political institutions and groups while the basis for legitimacy is focused on emotion, especially the identification of the regime as a necessary evil to combat social problems. Totalitarian systems are characterized by full control of the state over all aspects of public and private life, hence they are more extreme versions of authoritarianism in the sense that the power of the state is intensified and further intrusive. See Juan J. Linz, "An Authoritarian Regime: The Case of Spain," in *Cleavages, Ideologies and Party Systems*, eds. Eric Allard and Yrjo Littunen (Helsinki: Academic, 1964); John A. Armstrong, *The Politics of Totalitarianism*. (New York: Random House, 1961); Karl D. Bracher, "The Disputed Concept of Totalitarianism," in *Totalitarianism Reconsidered*, ed. Ernest A. Menze (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1981) 11–33.

<sup>51</sup> Gary W. Cox, "Authoritarian Elections and Leadership Succession, 1975–2004" (paper presented at APSA, Toronto: September 2009).

Empirical analyses provide support for the above assumptions. I used both the aggregate POLITY score and the separate democracy score from the POLITY IV data set<sup>52</sup> in order to identify the types of regimes that experienced political assassinations in the years 1970 to 2014. As can be seen from figure 3.2, two types of regimes are particularly vulnerable to assassinations. The first are authoritarian regimes that are not totalitarian in nature, and the second could be described as non-liberal or procedural democracies (the high column above the category of “10” may be deceiving, as in terms of total numbers, most assassinations occur in regimes categorized between 4 and 8). In these types of political settings (non-liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes), the relative openness of the political environment seems to provide a space for the emergence of an effective opposition. Nonetheless, the limited commitment of the political elites of these systems to democratic-liberal values, and the existence of procedural mechanisms that prevent opposition forces from gaining significant political influence, create a gap between opposition actors’ expectations and their actual ability to affect the political processes, a situation that, as relative deprivation theory predicts, may incentivize political violence.<sup>53</sup>

Figure 3.2: Number of Political Assassinations by Type of Regime (POLITY Score -10=Fully Totalitarian; 10=Strong Liberal Democracy)

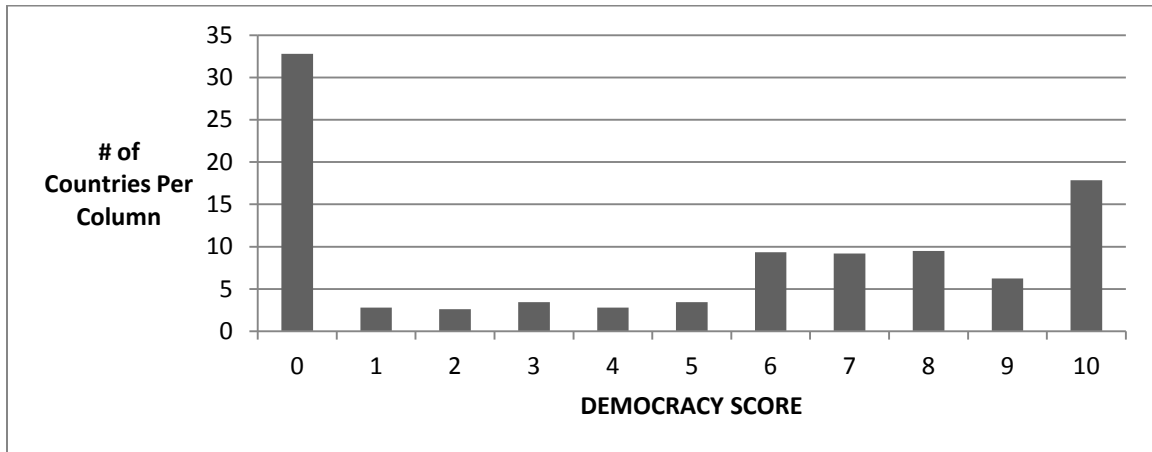


<sup>52</sup> The Polity IV Project is coding authority characteristics of states in the world system for purposes of comparative or quantitative analysis. The Polity IV data set covers all major independent states in the global system from the period 1800 to 2013 (i.e., states with a total population of 500,000 or more in the most recent year; there are currently 167 countries). For more information, see [www.systemicpeace.org/polityproject.html](http://www.systemicpeace.org/polityproject.html).

<sup>53</sup> For an introduction to relative deprivation theory, see, Ted R. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970).

The distribution based on the level of democracy (figure 3.3) seems to support these assumptions, as the majority of attacks have occurred in a variety of procedural democracies.

Figure 3.3: Number of Political Assassinations by Type of Regime (Democracy Score: 0=Non-Democratic; 10 = Strong Liberal Democracy)



In order to further validate these observations, a negative binomial model was utilized. The model confirmed that the distribution of POLITY scores among country-years not suffering from assassinations is significantly different from the distribution presented in figure 3.2 (country-years experiencing assassinations). It also reflected that, in the first group, the level of democracy was higher (Wald=67.326\*\*\*).

The findings also show that almost two-thirds of the assassinations that were perpetrated in democratic countries occurred in presidential or semi-presidential systems (64.7 percent) and the rest in parliamentary democracies. This finding, combined with the fact that almost two-thirds of the existing democracies in the international system use a parliamentary or semi-parliamentary system, seems to support the assertion that the symbolism and the unique powers of the executive branch in presidential systems makes such systems more attractive for political assassinations.

Competitiveness and Fragmentation

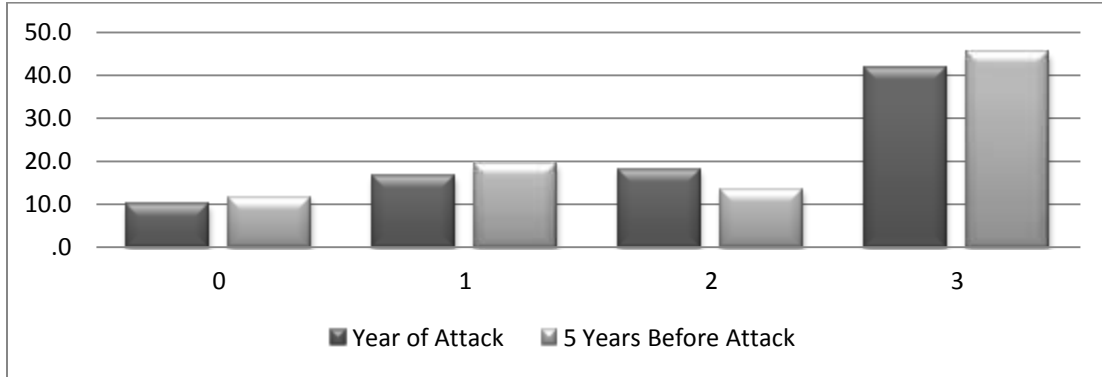
Beyond regime type, two additional specific features of a political system may

affect the tendency of groups or individuals to engage in political assassinations. The first is the level of competitiveness of the political system (and especially of the executive branch), and the second is its level of fragmentation. The current study assumes a negative correlation between the level of competitiveness and actors' tendency to use political violence, including assassinations, mainly because in competitive systems less costly alternatives exist to influence the political processes, such as competing in the legitimate political arena or acting via civil society platforms. However, one caveat may be presented: it is possible to argue that the assassination of an opposition leader makes more sense when a system is actually competitive; after all, why assassinate a political actor who has no real chance to become part of, or replace, the government? Nevertheless, I will argue that the negative correlation still holds. The more competitive a political system is, the more it is accustomed to leadership changes via nonviolent practices; thus, regime change via assassination will enjoy less legitimacy, and probably be less acceptable by political elites. Furthermore, if a system really is competitive, ideologies that challenge the existing sociopolitical order will not disappear with the elimination of one figure. Empirical examination will help to clarify the impact of this variable in general, and its effect on the assassination of opposition leaders specifically.

Regarding the level of political fragmentation, highly fragmented political systems (those with a relatively high number of active political actors) face more inherent difficulties in forming consensual policies and are more susceptible to an escalation in the relations between internal political groups than less fragmented systems are. This naturally also increases the probability that some of the groups in such a fragmented system will resort to different types of political violence, including political assassinations. Countries such as Lebanon, Israel and India are examples of the potential linkage between high levels of political fragmentation and high levels of political violence.

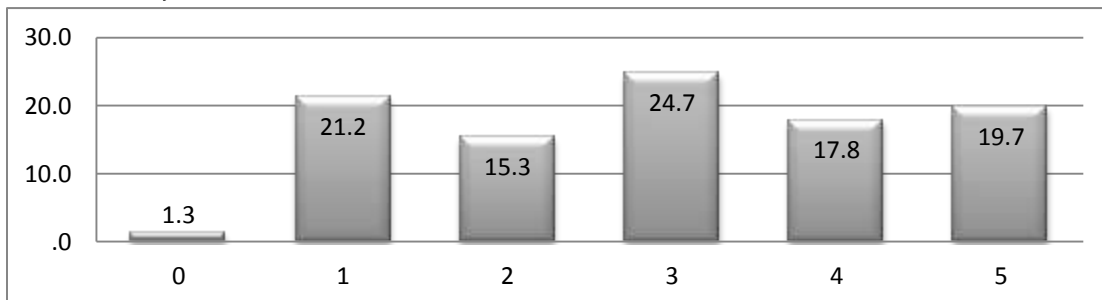
In order to test the association between assassinations and the level of competition within a political system, I utilized two variables from the POLITY IV data set. The first focuses on competition within the executive branch and the second focuses on the competitiveness of the entire political system.

Figure 3.4: Political Assassinations by Level of Competitiveness of the Executive Branch (Based on XRCOMP Index from the POLITY IV Data Set: 0=Noncompetitive; 3=Strongly Competitive)



The findings in figure 3.4 illustrate that countries with limited competition in the executive branch are less prone to political assassinations. Even when excluding attacks against opposition leaders or political candidates, the numbers remain similar. However, the picture is somewhat clearer when examining how assassinations are divided based on the extent to which alternative preferences for policy and leadership can be pursued in the political arena in general and not just within the executive branch. As figure 3.5 illustrates, more than 80 percent of assassinations were perpetrated in countries in which there is limited political competition (categories 0–2) or those in which the political competition is based on the balance of power among ethnic groups (categories 3–4). Less than one-fifth of the attacks occurred in countries that Polity’s coders judged the country as enjoying effective and free electoral competition (category 5).

Figure 3.5: Political Assassinations by Level of Competitiveness within the Political System (Based on PARACOMP Index from the Polity IV Data Set: 0=Non-competitive; 5=Competitive)



This may suggest that although the internal mechanisms that are responsible for nominations within an executive branch are lesser concerns for groups perpetrating assassinations, the inability to compete effectively in the political arena does indeed provide a strong incentive for political assassinations. In other words, political assassinations are about political power, and less about occupying particular offices (at least when assassinations are analyzed as a monolithic phenomenon, without distinguishing among types of targets).

A negative binomial model was used in the case of the competition variables in order to examine if indeed the occurrence of assassinations can be predicted by level of competitiveness. While the model was statistically significant, competition within the political system was marginally significant (Wald=2.975\*), and competition within the executive branch was not significant. These results support the conclusions presented earlier in this section, that competition within the executive branch is less important in instigating assassinations, and that even the level of competitiveness in the entire political system, while it may have some effect on the likelihood of assassinations, does not exhibit a strong effect overall.

Finally, we also expected that fragmented political systems would be more vulnerable to political assassinations. In order to measure the level of fragmentation, I utilized two different metrics. The first pertains to the extent of factionalism within a legislative branch and the second to the tendency of groups to operate outside a political system and to directly challenge state authority (i.e., creating a territorial split or a territorial enclave where the “legitimate” government has limited control or influence). In order to measure the first variable, I used an updated version of Golder’s Democratic Electoral Systems (DES) data set,<sup>54</sup> and specifically the variables that measure the effective number of parties in the legislative branch (in the case that one exists) as a portion of the size of the legislative branch. In order to measure the second type of fragmentation, I used the Fragment index from POLITY IV data set.

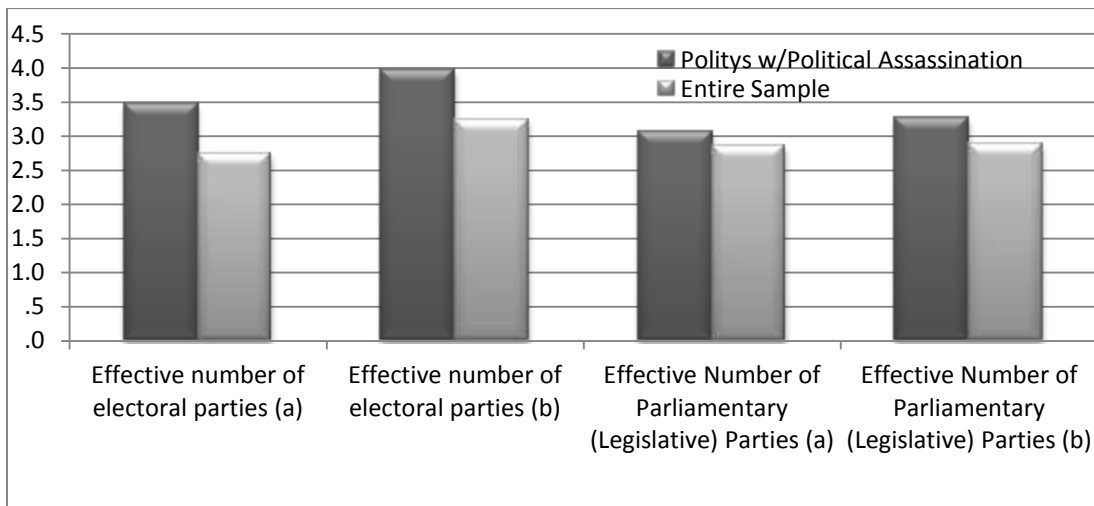
The findings provide some interesting insights and generally confirm the initial assumptions presented earlier in this section. To begin with, political fragmentation

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<sup>54</sup> see <https://files.nyu.edu/mrg217/public/elections.html>

within a political system seems to be positively associated with the occurrence of political assassinations. Figure 3.6 illustrates that the average level of political fragmentation (as manifested in the results of the last elections that were conducted before the assassination) in countries that experienced a political assassination is higher in comparison with the average level of fragmentation in the entire sample of democratic countries. ANOVA analysis confirmed that these gaps are also statistically significant.

Figure 3.6: Political Assassinations by Level of Fragmentation (Based on the Following Variables from the Democratic Electoral Systems Data Set: *enep*, *enep1*, *enpp* and *enpp1*)<sup>55</sup>

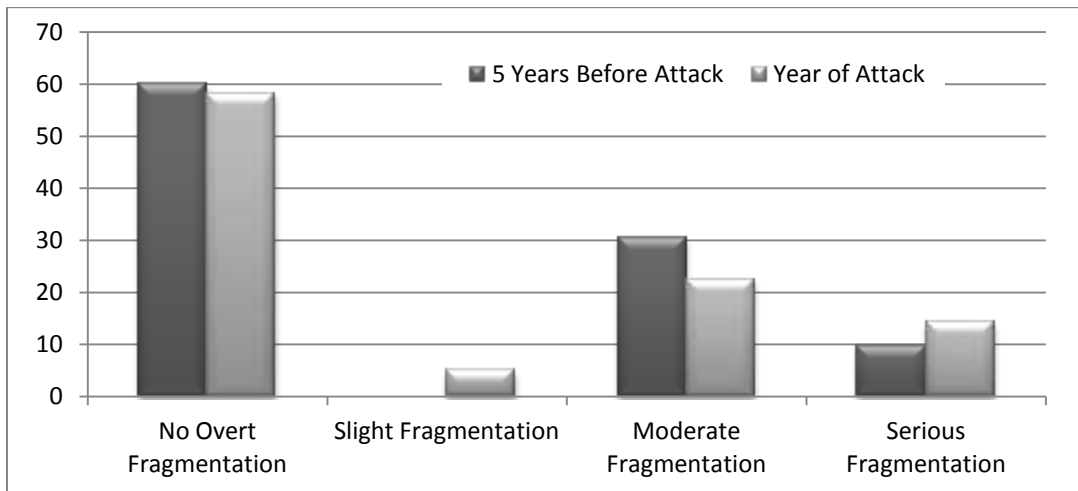


Furthermore, a polity's territorial fragmentation seems to be associated with assassinations as well (see figure 3.7). While just 12.4 percent of existing polities suffer from any level of territorial fragmentation, more than 40 percent of the countries that experienced assassinations suffered from some level of fragmentation (i.e., some loss of sovereignty over some parts of the polity's territory). Furthermore, although just 5 percent of existing polities suffered from "serious fragmentation" (i.e., more than 25 percent and up to 50 percent of a country's territory effectively ruled by local authority and actively separated from the central authority), close to 15 percent of the countries that suffered from assassinations also suffered from "serious fragmentation." Lastly, as

<sup>55</sup> The designations of (a) (b) in the figure represent two different ways that these variables were calculated. For more information, see the data set accompanying Nils-Christian Bormann and Matt Golder, "Democratic Electoral Systems around the World, 1946-2011," *Electoral Studies* 32, no. 2 (June 2013), 360-69; the data set is available at [https://files.nyu.edu/mrg217/public/es3\\_codebook.pdf](https://files.nyu.edu/mrg217/public/es3_codebook.pdf).

can be seen from examining the level of fragmentation over time, an increase in fragmentation and especially an escalation to “serious fragmentation” seem to increase the chances for the occurrence of political assassinations. Hence, a decrease in the level of influence or control of a government on parts of a polity’s territory increases the probability for the occurrence of political assassination.

Figure 3.7: Political Assassinations by Level of Fragmentation (Based on the Fragment variable from the POLITY IV Data Set)<sup>56</sup>



These findings were further confirmed when a negative binomial model was conducted, showing that serious fragmentation in particular is indeed linked to the occurrence of assassinations (Wald=117.742\*\*\* for the entire variable and Wald=10.302\*\* for the category of “series fragmentation”).

### Civil Wars and Political Strife

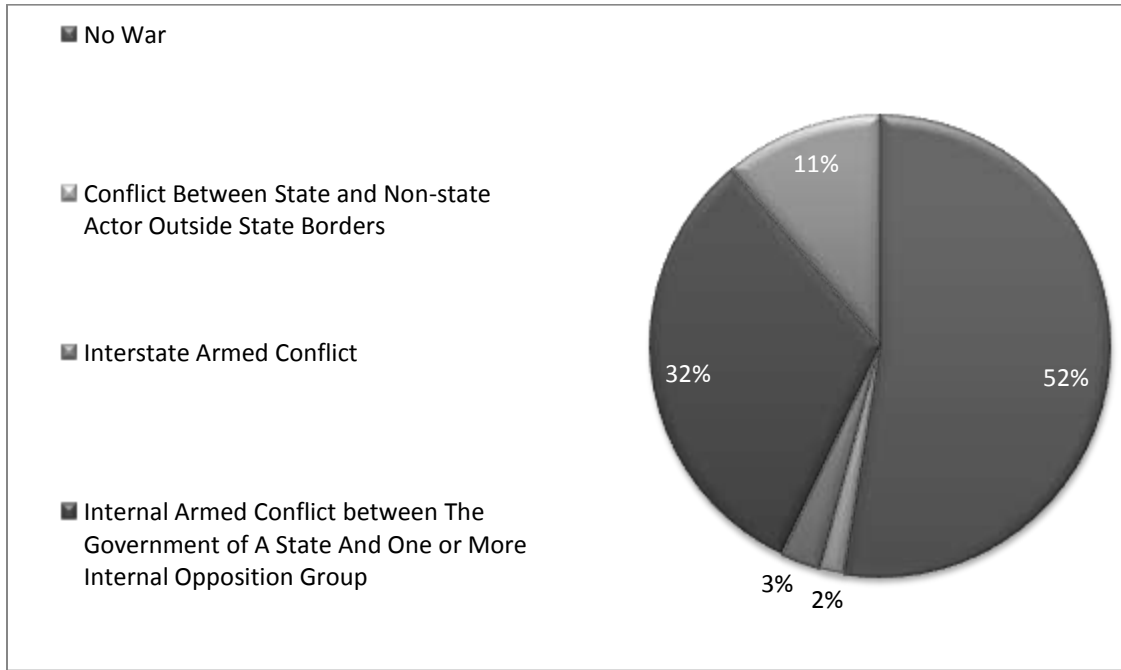
As the model in figure 3.1 indicates, the second set of variables that may facilitate assassinations pertains to specific political and social circumstances. The first is the level of intrastate political violence; an increase in intrastate violence may lead some actors to include political assassinations as part of their arsenal of tactics. While civil wars usually represent the peak of intrastate political conflict, mass demonstrations, riots and mass disobedience may also serve as breeding grounds for attempts to target political figures, as these acts all represent a challenge to a government’s status as the ultimate

<sup>56</sup> The designations of (a) (b) in the figure represent two different ways in which these variables were calculated. For more information, see [https://files.nyu.edu/mrg217/public/es3\\_codebook.pdf](https://files.nyu.edu/mrg217/public/es3_codebook.pdf).



source of political authority.

Figure 3.8: Violent Conflicts and Political Assassinations (Based on PRIO's Armed Conflicts Data Set)



Empirical data, mainly from UCDP/PRIO's Armed Conflict data set,<sup>57</sup> seem to support the notion that civil wars and governments' involvement in violence increase the frequency of political assassinations.

As figure 3.8 illustrates, almost half of all political assassinations occurred in the backdrop of a violent political conflict, and almost 43 percent of all political assassinations occurred against the backdrop of a violent struggle between a government and violent domestic sub-state groups. The state's involvement in indirect conflict with other countries or with external sub-state groups doesn't seem to increase the chances for the perpetration of political assassinations. Hence, political assassinations are rarely the result of bilateral conflicts and are instead almost

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<sup>57</sup> The Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) gathers information on various dimensions of armed conflicts that have taken place since 1946. The data is mostly perceived by the academic community as highly accurate and reliable, and its definition of armed conflict is becoming a standard in how conflicts are systematically defined and studied. For more information, see [www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/program\\_overview](http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/program_overview).

exclusively triggered by internal political struggle.

The facts that 39.5 percent of the conflicts that included assassinations could be considered full-out wars (mostly civil wars) and that more than 73 percent of those conflicts caused more than one thousand casualties seem to support the assertion that an increase in the intensity of violence increases the likelihood of political assassinations. The statistical significance of two separate negative binomial models, one with the occurrence of civil war as an explanatory variable (Wald=421.453\*\*\*), and one with conflict's intensity as an explanatory variable (based on the Intensity variable from PRIO's Armed Conflicts data set) (Wald=24.058\*\*\*), provide further support for these conclusions.

As indicated before, although civil wars usually represent the peak of intrastate political strife, other societal events may incentivize political assassinations. In order to understand the association between these societal events and political assassinations, a set of measurements from the Cross-National Time-Series Data Archive (CNTS) data set<sup>58</sup> were used.

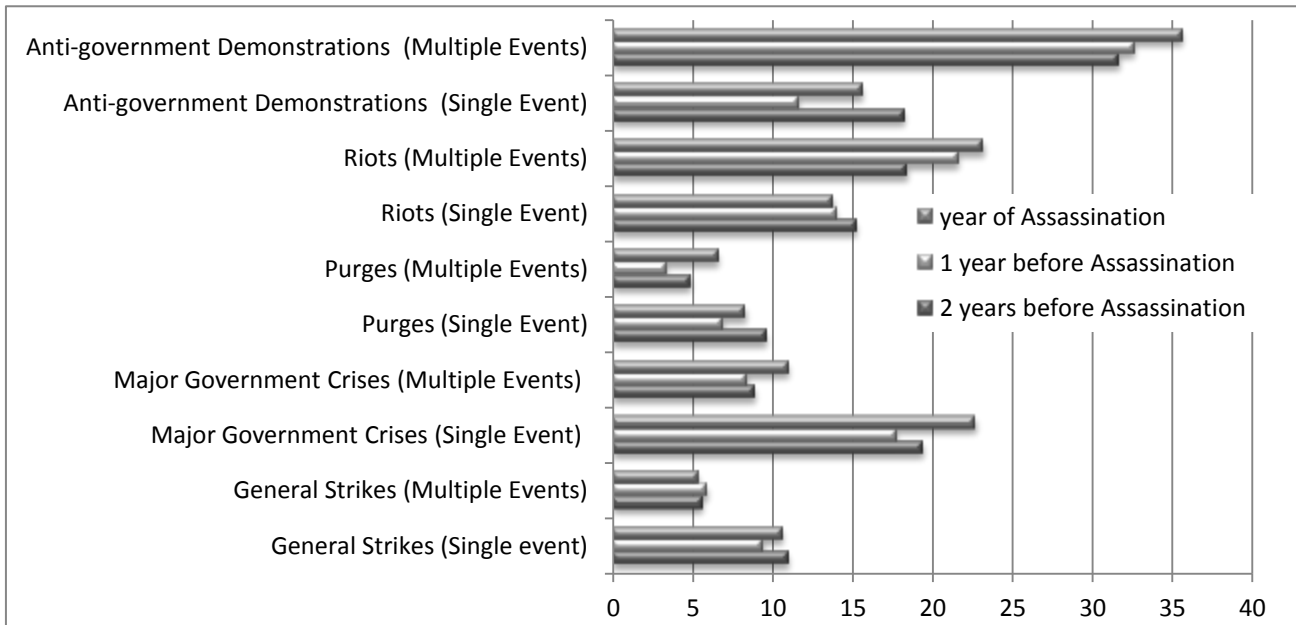
As can be seen from figure 3.9, which provides the portion of countries that prior to experiencing a political assassination suffered from some preceding societal events (once or multiple times), several social dynamics tend to precede political assassinations. The closer we are to the year of the assassination, the higher the probability for the occurrence of multiple antigovernment demonstrations and riots. More complicated dynamics are found when looking at purges (systematic elimination by jailing or executing political opposition within the ranks of a regime or from its opposition) and governmental crisis (a rapidly developing situation that threatens to bring the downfall of the present regime), when the growth is not consistent. In both cases the portion of polities that suffer from these occurrences two years before an assassination is higher than in the year prior to the assassination. Thus, it seems that direct protest is more indicative of forthcoming political assassination than

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<sup>58</sup> The Cross-National Time-Series (CNTS) Data Archive, initially constructed by Arthur S. Banks at New York University, provides various annual data for most countries. Currently the CNTS Data Archive is distributed by Databanks International in an Excel format. The archive continued to be updated with data supplied by Dr. Banks until he passed away in April 2011, and it continues to be updated using his sources. For more information, see [www.databanksinternational.com/53.html](http://www.databanksinternational.com/53.html).

governmental crisis or governmental violence directed against segments of the population.

Figure 3.9: Societal Dynamics and Political Assassinations (Based on PRIO's Armed Conflicts Data Set)



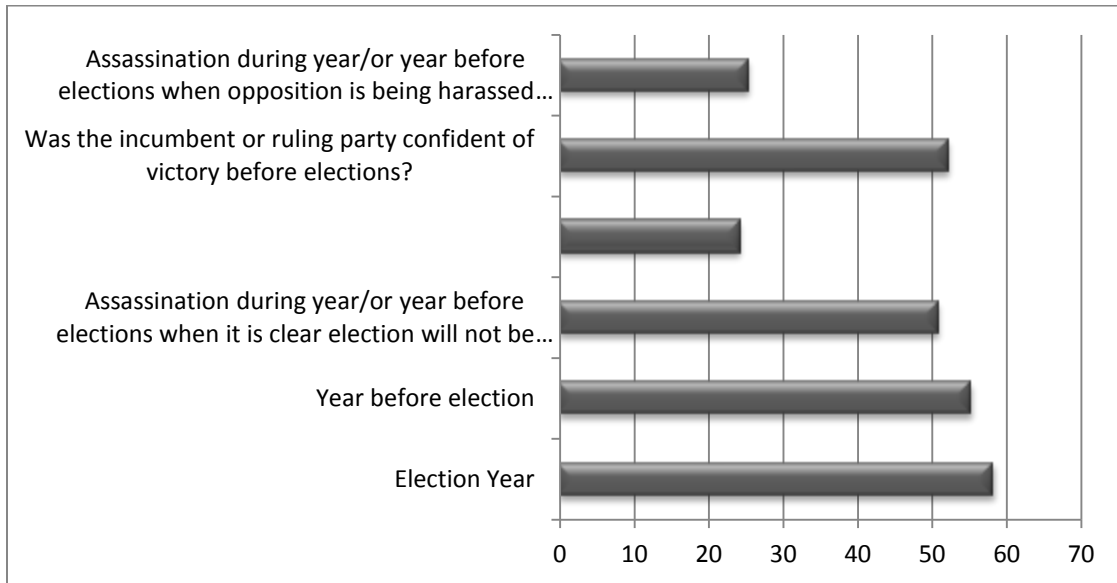
### Elections

The second environmental variable is related to electoral campaigns. Although elections were perceived for many years as political processes that can decrease political tensions, a more recent body of literature emphasizes the role of elections as facilitators of militancy and political violence, especially in polarized societies, fragmented political systems and young democracies.<sup>59</sup> The main assertion of this literature is that a contentious political environment may encourage some groups to further radicalize in order to distinguish themselves from the “crowd”; also, the electoral process may demonstrate the limited appeal of these marginal groups’ ideologies, thus pushing them to utilize violence. Moreover, elections are also times in which the leader of a political opposition has more opportunities to elevate his or her status and influence and become a significant threat to the governing leadership; therefore, he or she may be

<sup>59</sup> Leonard Weinberg, Ami Pedahzur and Arie Perliger, *Political Parties and Terrorist Groups* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Erica Chenoweth, “Terrorism and Democracy,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 16 (May 2013): 355–78.

more vulnerable to assassination by a government’s proxies or political rivals. Lastly, electoral campaigns substantially increase the visibility and exposure of political leaders to the public, making them more convenient targets for assassination from an operational perspective. Considering all the above, an examination of whether political assassinations are more common during elections seems important (see figure 3.10).

Figure 3.10: Elections and Political Assassinations



As can be seen in figure 3.10, almost 60 percent of assassinations occur during election years, and a similar portion occur during the year before an election, when a political environment is gearing up toward electoral competition (in some countries elections were conducted in subsequent years; as a result, the sum of both categories is higher than 100 percent). When combined, 76 percent of assassinations in countries holding elections occur during an election year or the year before. Moreover, figure 3.10 illustrates that the vast majority of elections that were accompanied with assassinations were characterized by some lack of fairness or limitations on opposition parties’ activities. Hence, it seems that most assassinations during election years are another extension of oppressive mechanisms against opposition political groups, or a counter-response by an opposition to a regime’s oppressive nature.

A negative binomial model with an explanatory variable for an election year provides further support for the above observations. It was statistically significant, both for the year of election (Wald=11.830\*\*) and the year before elections (Wald=5.210\*\*).

### Economic Development

The literature on political violence has also dealt extensively with the linkage among political violence, political instability and economic conditions. From a micro-level perspective, many scholars have assumed that individuals who join violent sub-state groups or engage in militant activities suffer from frustration and desperation that, in some cases, are a result of perceived economic deprivation.<sup>60</sup> From a macro-level perspective, a lack of economic growth may present challenges that will eventually undermine the political stability of and support for an existing political order.<sup>61</sup> Hence it seems important to examine how the economic development of a polity contributes to or mitigates the probability of political assassinations within it.

Interestingly, and not as assumed in some parts of the existing literature, we find positive relations between economic development and probability of assassinations. ANOVA analyses confirmed that the average GDP of country-years suffering from assassination is significantly (three times) higher than the average GDP of country-years that did not experience assassinations ( $F=41.836^{***}$ ). A separate model, which takes into account not just the occurrence of assassination, but also the quantity of assassinations in a country-year, further supports this conclusion ( $\beta=.05^{***}$ ).

Several hypotheses can be presented in order to explain these findings. First, some scholars tend to point out the positive correlation between a developed economy and effective political institutions.<sup>62</sup> Thus, polities with highly developed economies also have strong political institutions, and those holding political positions have significant power; hence, attacking those individuals may have a significant impact on political processes. In less developed countries, where the influence and power of those occupying political offices are more limited as a result of the weakness of political institutions, there may be less incentive to attack political figures.

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<sup>60</sup> Pedahzur, Perliger and Weinberg, "Altruism and Fatalism."

<sup>61</sup> See James A. Piazza, "Rooted in Poverty?: Terrorism, Poor Economic Development, and Social Cleavages," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 18, no. 1 (2006): 159–77.

<sup>62</sup> Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*, (Cambridge University Press, 1990); Minxin Peo, *Economic Institutions, Democracy, and Development* (paper presented at the Conference on Democracy, Market Economy and Development, sponsored by the World Bank and the government of the Republic of Korea, 26–27 February 1999).

Another possible hypothesis is based on the assumption that, in developed countries, the effect of economic decline on the general population is usually more comprehensive and significant than in developing countries, where the quality of living is already low. Hence, an economic crisis will have more positive effect on the ability of opposition groups to garner support and legitimacy in more economically developed countries. Although it is not possible to test the first hypothesis in the framework of the current study, the data set allows us to test the second hypothesis. However, our analysis did not find support to the assumption that assassinations are more probable following an economic decline. (Based on GDP level, this was tested by looking at the GDP levels 5, 4, 3, 2, one year before an assassination or a cluster of assassinations). It seems that a separate study focusing on the relations between economic factors and political assassinations should be conducted.

Finally, it is important also to take into consideration the possibility that, in developing countries, the level of reporting on political assassinations is lower than in developed countries.

#### History of Political Assassinations

Lastly, we should also consider whether a “contingency effect” affects the level of political assassinations as would-be assassins try to imitate past successes. We should consider this especially since the literature tends to emphasize the contingency effect of “successful” tactics among sub-state groups as well as governments.<sup>63</sup> The opposite may be the case as well, as a negative experience with political assassinations (a failed attempt or a successful assassination that yielded a negative effect for the perpetrating actor) may lead groups or individuals to avoid using this tactic. One of the major challenges in testing this assumption is the difficulty of assessing whether assassinations were perceived to be effective in the eyes of their perpetrators or other groups.

Yet some preliminary findings suggest that this factor may be important for explaining the tendency of groups to use political assassinations. Our findings show that more than 66 percent of the countries in our data set experienced multiple political

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<sup>63</sup> See, for example, Robert Pape, “The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 3 (August 2003): 343–61.

assassinations in their past, and another 13.1 percent experienced at least one assassination in their past. Another interesting related trend is the clustering of assassinations. In other words, when looking at the distribution of assassinations over time in a specific country that has suffered from multiple assassinations, assassinations are usually found to be clustered in specific time frames. For example, in the case of Afghanistan, after thirty years of no assassinations, the country suffered no fewer than four assassinations in the mid- to late 1970s, then experienced almost another twenty years of no assassinations before a barrage of assassinations in the 2000s. Algeria is another example. After a series of assassinations in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the country saw no assassinations for twenty years before another series of assassinations in the early 1990s. Lastly, Argentina suffered from no fewer than fourteen political assassinations during the nine-year period from 1969 to 1978, but it has experienced no assassinations since then. This trend illustrates both the strong contingency effect of assassinations as well as the possible effect of specific societal and political conditions on the probability for assassinations. It also provides preliminary support to the assumption regarding sub-state groups' tendency to reproduce past success when looking for the appropriate violent measure to promote their political agenda. The latter conclusion, however, demands a more rigorous examination.

### Summary

In order to examine the relative importance of the variables discussed in this chapter, two negative binomial models were employed, each including different sets of variables, with the number of assassination per country-year as the dependent variable. The first model was conducted to examine the relative importance of the political variables. It included some additional variables beyond those discussed in this chapter related to the level of fragmentation and factionalism (these were extracted from the Ethnic Power Relations data set).<sup>64</sup> The model was significant and reflected that the number of politically excluded minority groups (Wald=17.730\*\*\*) and the level of physical fragmentation (Wald=16.116\*\*\*) were the strongest predictors, followed by the level of political fragmentation (Wald=7.472\*\*), the level of democratization (Wald=6.097\*) and the level of political polarization (WALD=2.667\*). The levels of competition in the executive branch and in the entire political system were not found

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<sup>64</sup> The Ethnic Power Relations data set (EPR3) measures the characteristic and access to state power of all politically relevant ethnic groups from 1946 to 2010. Thus, it includes annual data for 157 countries and 758 groups. For more information, see [www.epr.ucla.edu/](http://www.epr.ucla.edu/).

significant. Further discussion regarding the importance of these findings will be presented in the concluding chapter of this study, but it is clear that the characteristics of the political setting have an important effect on the probability for the occurrence of political assassinations, especially in cases in which polities are characterized by deep social and political polarization and factionalism. Moreover, liberal democracies seem to have better mechanisms to prevent growing polarization from leading to political assassinations.

The second model included the environmental variables and was significant as well, although it was less strong than the model of the political variables. The occurrence of elections and the level of GDP were the only statistically significant predictors (Wald=3.975\* for election year and Wald=13.199\*\*\* for GDP); variables related to the occurrence and intensity of domestic violence were not significant. This further supports the growing body of literature that refers to the role of elections, especially in non-liberal democracies, as facilitators of political animosity rather than promoters of nonviolent political competition. These findings also illustrate the problematic side effect of effective political development, which makes political institutions relevant and those holding public offices worthy of being targeted.

The analysis and variables presented so far aim to predict the probability of a political assassination regardless of the type of target. However, some other factors and variables may be more suitable for predicting attacks against specific types of political figures. Thus more sensitive models are presented in the next chapter in relation to assassinations of heads of state, deputy heads of state, opposition leaders and members of a legislative branch.



## **Chapter 4: Facilitators of Political Assassinations of Heads of State, Deputy Heads of State, Opposition Leaders and Legislators**

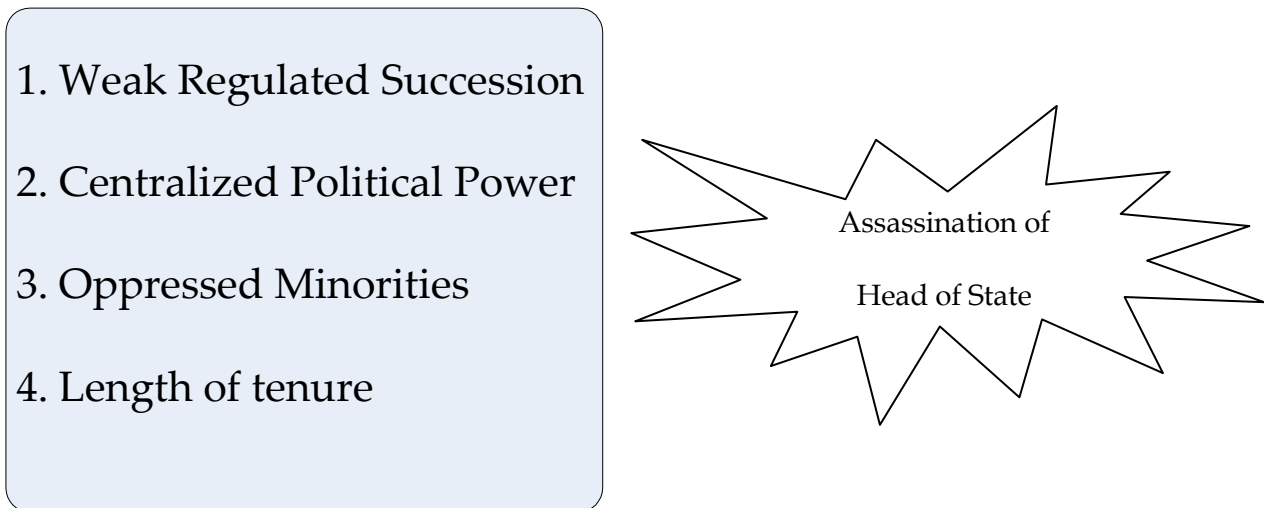
### Assassinations of Heads of State

The fall of 2012 seemed to usher in some optimism among Somalia's war-weary citizens, as Hassan Sheikh Mohamad, a university professor and social activist, was elected president by the legislature on 10 September. It is not surprising, then, that after his formal election, legislators spontaneously started to sing the national anthem, expressing their optimism that the new president would be an important force in the country's post-conflict reconstruction efforts. Just two days later, however, everyone was reminded of the volatile reality of the country. While President Mohamad was giving one of his first speeches, at Mogadishu's Jazeera Hotel in front of diplomatic delegations, two suicide bombers and two gunmen dressed in government uniforms conducted an attack with the intention to assassinate the new president. Despite the ten casualties that resulted, the president survived. But how can we explain the rationale behind a decision to assassinate a president merely two days after he was elected, before he was able to implement any significant policy changes? And if his actions were not the main motive behind the assassination attempt, what factors were in play? The following section will try to clarify such issues and to examine the unique factors that trigger the assassinations of heads of state.

In the universe of political assassinations, heads of state represent the most desirable targets. As figures positioned at the top of the political system, heads of state have a potential practical and symbolic value as targets greater than the value of political figures from lower political echelons. From a practical perspective, the head of state has the ultimate responsibility for shaping and implementing existing public policies, as well as devising long-term policy doctrines. From a symbolic perspective, few other acts of political violence are more effective illustrations of the vulnerabilities of a regime, and few other acts have the potential to elevate the visibility, legitimacy and status of a group, movement or individual, than the assassination of a head of state.

Some of the factors mentioned in the previous chapter, which may facilitate political assassinations in general, are naturally also relevant to assassinations of heads of state. However, additional specific facilitators should also be examined and are presented in figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1: Specific Facilitators of Assassination of Head of State



As indicated by Iqbal and Zorn,<sup>65</sup> the lack of a strong mechanism to determine who will replace a head of state after his or her tenure, or how a successor will be chosen, may encourage the use of assassinations as a political tool. The rationale behind this assertion is that, in countries where succession is highly regulated, the overall effectiveness of assassinations will be limited, since the political system has the tools to ensure an effective transition of power to a new leader, thus limiting the possibility of political chaos, a crisis of legitimacy and the emergence of opportunities for opposition groups. It is important to note that regulated succession is not unique to established democracies; it may also characterize some totalitarian regimes and monarchies that formalize clear lines of succession (see the cases of Saudi Arabia or North Korea).

Empirical analyses do not provide significant support for this hypothesis when looking at the overall population of assassinations (see figure 4.2), as less than 10 percent of the polities that suffered from political assassinations (of any type) had unregulated recruitment of the head of the executive branch (a change in chief executive occurring through a forceful seizure of power and not via formal or competitive mechanisms).<sup>66</sup> However, when limiting the sample to assassinations of heads of state, there is an impressive rise in the number of assassinations in countries with completely

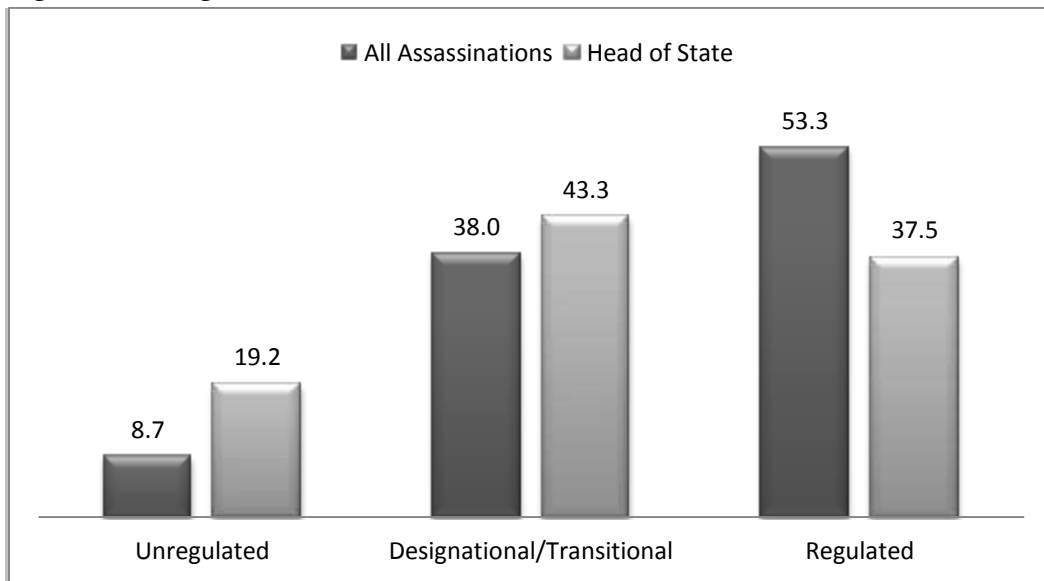
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<sup>65</sup> As also indicated by Iqbal and Zorn, "Sic Semper Tyrannis?"

<sup>66</sup> The level of regulated succession was measured using the XRREG index from the Polity IV data set.

unregulated succession or a transitional method of succession (a situation in which chief executives are chosen by designation within the political elite, without formal competition, or a situation in which there are transitional arrangements intended to regularize future power transitions after an initial unregulated seizure of power).

Figure 4.2: Regulated Succession and Political Assassinations



Close to two-thirds of assassinations of heads of states occur in countries in which groups outside the elite circles have almost no opportunities to gain influence within the executive branch. A negative binomial model with level of regulation as the independent variable and the number of assassinations of heads of states as the dependent variable further confirms our findings by indicating that the lack of regulation increases the odds of an assassin’s targeting a of head of state (Wald=17.436\*\*\*). Also, as predicted, including all assassinations (not just heads of state) in the same model as the dependent variable produced no statistically significant results.

Although the rationale that explains the impact of regulated succession on the probability of political assassinations is fairly straightforward, understanding how the level of power held by a head of state effects his or her chances to be assassinated is slightly more challenging.<sup>67</sup> On one hand, the more the political power is concentrated in the hands of a head of state, the greater the potential benefits of his assassination in

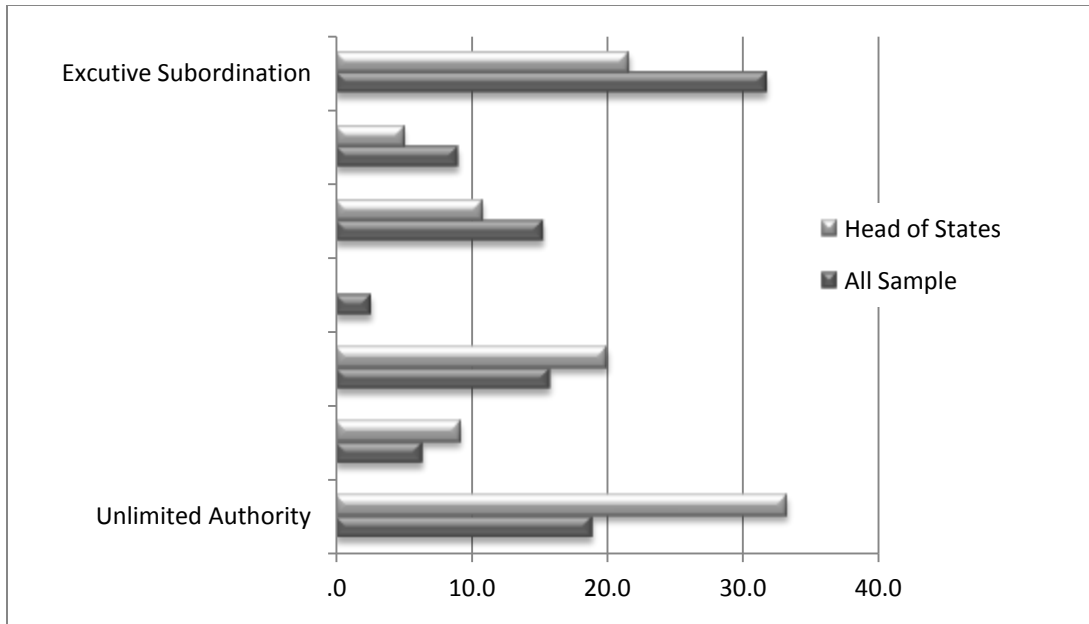
<sup>67</sup> As also indicated by Iqbal and Zorn, “Sic Semper Tyrannis?”

terms of inducing political or policy changes and making a symbolic statement. On the other hand, the more centralized the political power, the more leverage a leader has in developing mechanisms that mitigate the risk of his or her assassination. This is especially true in authoritarian systems, whether these mechanisms are a cult of personality, indoctrination or robust security forces capable of deterring an assassination. Hence, we can hypothesize that the level of power held by a leader is positively correlated with the probability of assassination, except in strong authoritarian political systems, where the relationship is inverted.

Indeed, the empirical results seem to indicate a positive correlation between the level of political power held by a head of state and the probability of his or her assassination. As can be seen by looking at the whole sample shown in figure 4.3, most assassinations occur in countries in which an executive's power is limited by a system of checks and balances (the level of executive power was measured using XCONST index from the POLITY IV data set). In contrast, when focusing on the assassinations of heads of state, the picture is reversed, as most assassinations occur in countries with limited constraints on the powers of the executive branch. A negative binomial model shows a strong association between the level of executive power and the probability for the assassination of a head of state, with a strong tendency for assassinations of head of states in highly centralized executives (Wald=32.077\*\*\*); the opposite correlation was found statistically significant when the dependent variable was assassinations in general (Wald=158.876\*\*\*).

It also seems that regime type is related to the assassination of heads of states. Two-thirds of the assassinations occurred in non-democracies, with an exceptionally high portion of them in totalitarian systems (48 percent). Furthermore, after dividing the sample of non-democratic countries suffering from assassinations of heads of state into totalitarian (POLITY score of -6 and below) and authoritarian (POLITY score between -5 and 0), we find that none of the above models were significant and thus not supportive of the assertion presented above regarding reverse relations between executive power and the probability of assassinations in the case of totalitarian regimes.

Figure 4.3: Level of Executive Power and Political Assassinations (%)



A third factor that may facilitate attacks against heads of state is related to the status of minorities in a polity, as it is well established in the academic literature that significant inequality between majority and minority groups, whether in terms of political, social or cultural rights or resources, may lead to increasingly negative relationships between the groups and an outbreak of violence.<sup>68</sup> Thus, the next analysis attempts to identify to what extent the existence of oppressed minorities within a polity increases the risk of political assassinations to leaders who usually seem the most responsible for the minorities' discrimination. Probably the most glaring example of such a dynamic may be found in Sri-Lanka, where the LTTE, representing the deprived Tamil minority, organized a bloody campaign of political assassinations against the political leadership of the state and the Sinhalese majority since the early 1980s until approximately 2009.

In order to test if the nature of minority-majority relations may affect the probability for assassinations, the Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) data set was used in a negative binomial model. The findings confirm that several variables are significantly associated with an increasing probability for the occurrence of political assassinations,

<sup>68</sup> See for example James A. Piazza, "Poverty, Minority Economic Discrimination, and Domestic Terrorism," *Journal of Peace Research* 48, no. 3 (May 2011): 339–53; Rizal Buendia, "The State-Moro Armed Conflict in the Philippines: Unresolved National Question or Question of Governance?," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 13, no. 1 (2005): 109–38.

including the number of excluded minority groups (Wald=146.356\*\*\*), the size of the excluded population (Wald=483.089\*\*\*), the size of the discriminated population (Wald=303.444\*\*\*) and the level of polarization (Wald=482.560\*\*\*).<sup>69</sup> These findings support the hypothesis that contends that the presence of and level of exclusion of minorities facilitate political assassinations. When examining how these variables are associated with the probability for the assassination of a head of state, the findings are somewhat less strong but still definitive, as the size of the excluded population (Wald=158.645\*\*\*), the size of the discriminated population (Wald=73.270\*\*\*), and the level of political polarization (Wald=116.087\*\*\*) were found significant. When looking more specifically at the nature of the minorities involved in assassinations, the negative binomial analysis found that half of them suffered from some kind of political or economic oppression or discrimination, and the discrimination was more focused on the political rather the economic dimension.

Lastly, the length of a head of state's tenure may also affect his or her chances to be assassinated. The longer the head of state remains in office, the greater the likelihood that some segments of the polity will begin to resent the length of the regime's tenure, and the less likely a peaceful political transition becomes. This may encourage a group or an individual to contemplate using violence to end a ruler's tenure. A counterargument, however, could be made along the lines that political assassinations are more attractive against a head of state in the early stages of his or her tenure. New leaders may be more vulnerable to violent attacks given their more limited control over the levers of power, especially if they preside over countries experiencing profound political polarization. Indeed, the literature on civil war emphasizes the vulnerability of "new" regimes.<sup>70</sup>

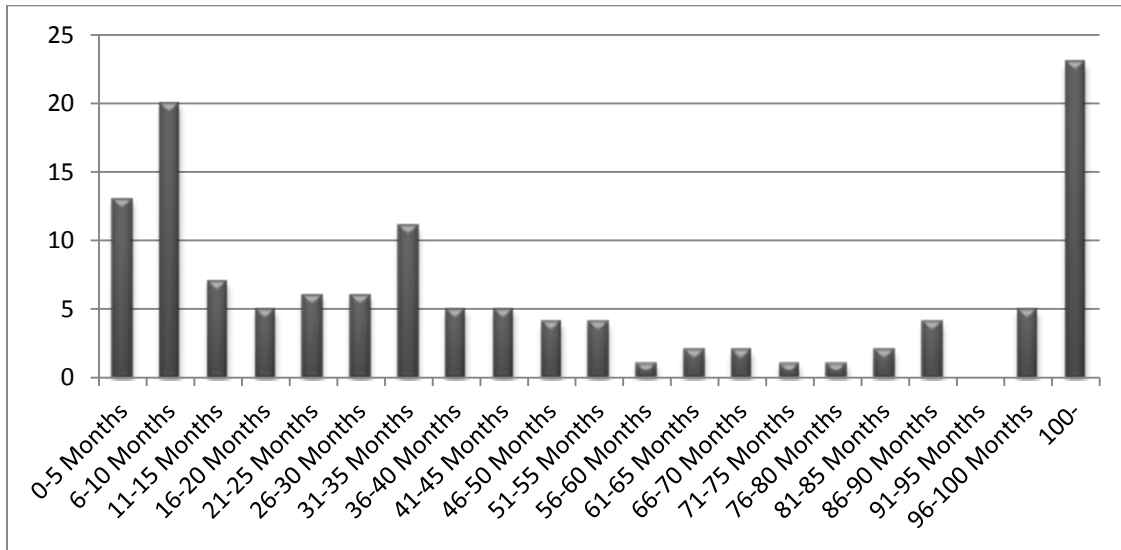
The findings (see figure 4.4) are actually supportive of both hypotheses, as the leaders with the highest chances to be assassinated are those with relatively very short tenures and those with very long ones.

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<sup>69</sup> See Joan-María Esteban and Ray Esteban, "On The Measurement of Polarization," *Econometrica* 62, no. 4 (July 1994): 819–51; Martha Reynal-Querol, "Ethnicity, Political Systems and Civil War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 1 (February 2002): 29–54.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, James D. Fearon, "Commitment Problems and the Spread of Ethnic Conflict," in *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict*, ed. David Lake and Donald Rothchild (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 107–26.

Figure 4.4: Tenure of Assassinated Figures



To conclude, in order to examine the relative importance of the variables discussed in this section and presented in the theoretical model (see figure 4.1), a negative binomial model with the number of assassinations of heads of states per country-year as the dependent variable was exercised. The model was significant, as well as two variables: POLITY score (Wald=45.224\*\*\*) and level of regulated succession (Wald=7.240\*). This indicates that weak democracies and nondemocratic systems, which are lacking effective succession mechanisms, are the most prone to suffer from assassination attacks against the head of state. It also indicates that the nature of the political structure is more influential on the probability of assassinations than dynamics related to the state’s social structure (the level of polarization, the existence of discriminate minorities, etc.), although these two realms are naturally related and interact.

Facilitators of Political Assassinations: Deputy or Vice Head of State

Why has no American vice president been killed while in office, in comparison with the numerous successful and unsuccessful assassination attempts on various American presidents? One answer could be that in the American context, the vice president usually has no special powers or significant influence on the formulation of significant policies. Another answer is that there is no guarantee that he or she will succeed the president after the latter’s term expires. Based on these possible

explanations, two hypotheses can be presented regarding the factors that might trigger the assassination of a deputy or vice head of state: (1) when it is clear that he or she is the next in the line of succession (as a result of regulated succession); (2) when he or she has some unique responsibilities or influence regarding policies the perpetrators would like to promote or prevent.

The assassination of a vice president may also be used as a signaling mechanism. Although the benefits of killing the number one politician are higher than those of killing his or her deputy, the costs and difficulties of doing so are extremely high as well. Thus, killing the second in command can present a reasonable compromise, sending a warning to the leader himself, and still generating significant symbolic benefits (in terms of publicity and exposure for a group, and in exposing the vulnerability of a government).

Lastly, we can also assume that the expected effective length of the vice president or deputy's tenure as head of state (if it exists) and his or her political importance within the system may also influence the probability of his or her being assassinated. Relatively mature deputies whose political peak is behind them will probably be less attractive targets for assassins because even if they become the head of state, their tenure will probably be relatively short.

A careful analysis of the twenty-eight cases of assassinations (and assassination attempts) against individuals who served as deputy heads of state provides confirmation of most of these assumptions while also illustrating three major dynamics that facilitate such events.

The first dynamic takes place in the context of an assassination of a vice head of state who in high probability will become the head of the state and hold unique powers and responsibilities. Probably one of the more glaring examples of this dynamic is the series of assassination attempts against Aleksander Ankvab, who was targeted no less than five times between the years 2005 and 2010 when he served as the prime minister (basically the second in power) of Abkhazia under the administration of President Sergei Bagapsh. Ankvab's attempt to participate in the 2004 presidential elections failed after he was disqualified by the central election commission on the grounds of his



limited knowledge of the native language as well as his limited time spent in the country. Unable to run for the presidency, Ankvab, an affluent businessman, supported Sergei Bagapsh's candidacy. After Bagapsh won the election, he returned the favor, as many had expected, by nominating Ankvab to be prime minister. In this role, Ankvab was the official responsible for the implementation of significant economic and legal reforms that were supposed to curb the influence of organized crime in the country and reduce the level of corruption in the public administration. Hence, the predominant assumption is that the assassinations against Ankvab were "sponsored" by organized criminal groups.<sup>71</sup> To conclude, this case includes a deputy head of state with unique powers, strongly associated with new and controversial policies, and who in the eyes of many was the clear successor to the head of state.

The circumstances surrounding the assassination attempt against Chiang Ching-kuo in April 1970 illustrate some similar characteristics, and again emphasize the importance of the future role of the deputy head of state and his relations with the existing head of state. Chiang Ching-kuo was not just the son of Chiang Kai-shek (the first president of the Republic of China), but he also held a long line of roles within his father's government shortly after the nationalist troops consolidated their control over the island of Taiwan; these roles included the director of the secret police, defense minister and eventually vice president in 1969. At that point, it was clear that he would be his father's successor and that he intended to maintain the authoritarian policies that ensured the ongoing rule of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) and marginalized the political influence of natives of Taiwan. Hence, in April 1970, members of the World United Formosans for Independence (WUFI), a movement dedicated to the liberation of Taiwan and the establishment of an independent state, tried to assassinate Chiang Ching-kuo while he was visiting New York City. Here again, there was a clear understanding that Chiang Ching-kuo would be the future head of state, and strong indications that he intended to maintain his father's policies as well as his unique powers within the political system, factors that presumably made him an attractive target for assassination.

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<sup>71</sup> "Bagapsh: 'Criminals' Behind PM Assassination Attempt," *Civil Georgia*, 1 March 2005, <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=9213-accessdate=4> ; <http://archive.today/U3baX>; "Abkhaz MPs Call Government to Investigate Attack on Ankvab," *Regnum*, 11 July 2007, [www.regnum.ru/english/polit/854515.html](http://www.regnum.ru/english/polit/854515.html).

The last example of this kind of assassination is the killing of the Paraguayan vice president Luis Maria Argaña in 1999. A prominent politician and former supreme court judge, Argaña clearly had strong odds of inheriting the presidency from Raúl Cubas. At that time Cubas was close to being impeached and under investigation for abusing his power as president. The military's elites, who were involved in a failed attempted coup in 1998 and enjoyed significant influence over President Cubas, were major suspects in facilitating the assassination, as they were concerned that Argañas, their long-term rival, would push for more restrictions on the role and powers of the military establishment.<sup>72</sup>

The second dynamic involves cases of assassinations against politicians who, after completing their tenure as deputy head of state, remain involved in the political process and thus are perceived to be potential threats to the existing regime. Several examples illustrate this trend. Antoine Idrissou Meatchi, a former vice president of Togo, was assassinated while imprisoned by Gnassingbé Eyadéma's military regime in 1984, while he was still perceived as a potential political threat. In another example, Hardan Takriti, who was the Iraqi defense minister and premier deputy between 1968 and 1970 before moving to Kuwait to organize a coup against Ahmed Hassan al-Bakar's government, was assassinated in 1971 by Saddam Hussain's agents (at that time Hussain was already the most powerful figure in al-Bakar's regime). The assassination of the Syrian major general Mohammed Umran follows the same pattern. He was assassinated after retiring from his position as deputy premier and minister of defense before the coup that facilitated the rise of Hafez al-Assad to power. He was still perceived as a threat by the relatively young Assad's regime, which organized his assassination in 1972. In all these cases and similar ones, the political capital of deputies was perceived as endangering a relatively new authoritarian regime looking to solidify its control over a country.

Finally, the third type of assassination of deputies takes place in the context of a political struggle during or following a civil war, when opponents are looking to target prominent political figures of the other side. Cases in point are the assassination of Sheik Mohammed Ali Othman in Yemen in 1973; the assassination attempt against

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<sup>72</sup> "Arrested Gunman Implicates Oviedo, Cubas in Argaña Assassination," *Miami Herald*, 29 October 1999, [www.latinamericanstudies.org/paraguay/gunman.htm](http://www.latinamericanstudies.org/paraguay/gunman.htm).

Hojatoleslam Mohammed Ali Khomeini in Iran in 1981; the assassination of Hakija Turajlić, the deputy prime minister of Bosnia-Herzegovina, by a Serbian nationalist in 1993; and the assassination of Mihajlo Ljesar, the vice president of Montenegro, that same year.

To conclude, it is important to note that the assassination of a deputy head of state is a fairly rare phenomenon. When it happens, it may be perceived as a selective attempt to block particular policies or the deputy's future nomination as the head of state, or as part of a larger violent political struggle (usually a civil war).

#### Assassinations of Leaders of Political Parties and Opposition Movements

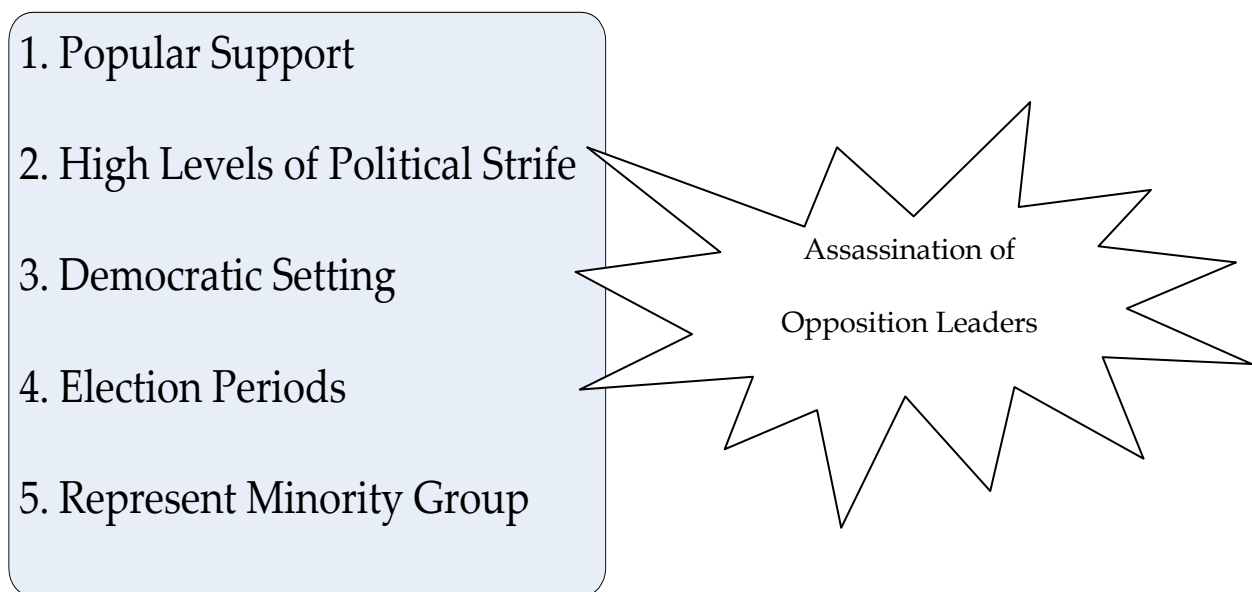
Although the academic literature on political assassinations has focused almost exclusively on the assassinations of members of the executive branch, the targets of political assassinations are in many cases political leaders who are not part of the government. Whether they are leaders of opposition parties, social movements or other political groups, they may be targeted by rival political groups or by proxies of the regime. In any case, it seems logical to assume that the factors that trigger their assassinations are sometimes different from those that facilitate the assassinations of members of the government.

Since the leaders of opposition political parties or social movements are not part of the executive branch, they do not have access to executive power and cannot directly shape policy. Their political importance and power is derived almost exclusively from their popularity. In other words, they are influential figures as long as they can garner enough popularity and support, which in turn allows them to pressure a government to concede to their demands, or even to challenge a state's leadership and the sociopolitical order. Thus, we can assume that party and movement leaders must pass some threshold of support in order to become "candidates" for assassination by their rivals. Moreover, based on this logic, we can also assume that the likelihood of their assassination will increase at times when they can more readily translate their popularity to political achievements (therefore becoming more threatening to the political status quo). One of these times is during election campaigns, and especially those campaigns in which preliminary indications show a close race between the governing party or leader and the opposition party or leader. Another situation that

may provide an opportunity for external actors to challenge a government is during times of popular dissatisfaction and political strife, especially when opposition leaders are perceived as responsible contributors to the growing unrest. In these circumstances, a regime or rival groups may resort to action against these leaders, including, in extreme cases, their assassination.

Lastly, an opposition leader may be especially influential when she or he represents a committed and loyal constituency such as an ethnic or religious minority. Hence, we can further speculate that the leaders of such groups may be more vulnerable to assassination in comparison with leaders who represent a less cohesive constituency that a regime can hope to mobilize. A summary of the factors that may facilitate assassinations of opposition leaders is presented in figure 4.5.

Figure 4.5: Facilitators of Assassination of Party and Movement Leaders



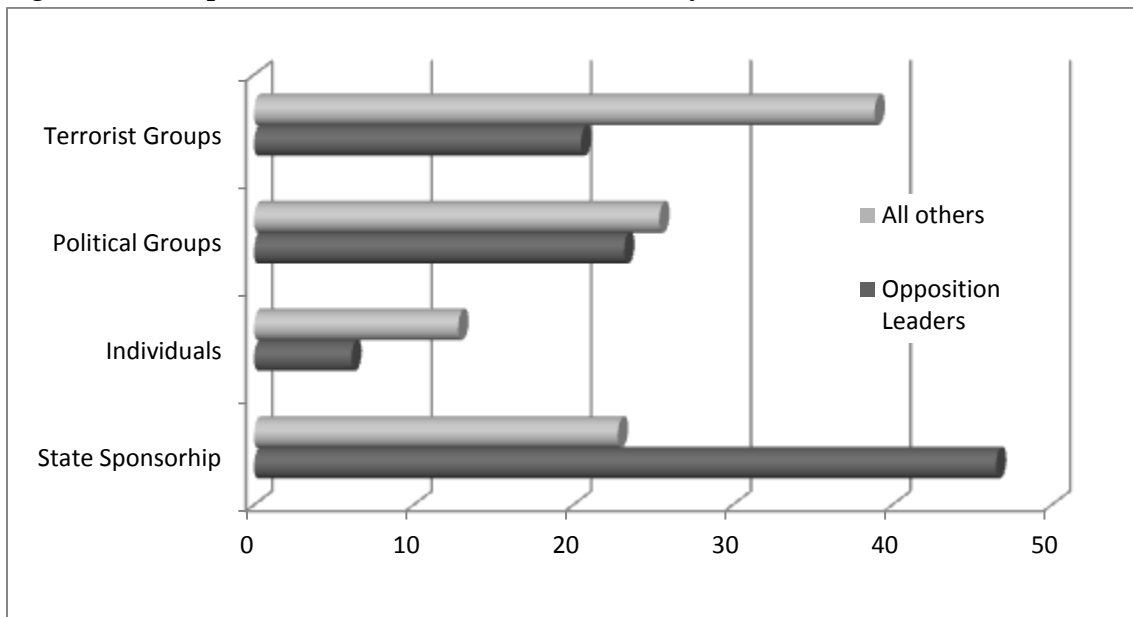
Although standardized data on the level of popularity of opposition leaders is difficult to obtain, empirical analyses based on 163 assassinations<sup>73</sup> (or assassination

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<sup>73</sup> Some may expect a higher number of cases in this category. It is not clear if the number of attacks against opposition leaders in the dataset is a result of a report bias, the fact that many opposition leaders are members of parliament (hence included under the category of attacks against parliament members), or other reason. In any case, there is no reason to assume that the cases included in the dataset do not

attempts) of political figures that did not serve in the executive office at the time of their assassination confirm many of the assumptions presented in this section, and also indirectly help us substantiate the hypothesis regarding the correlation between an opposition leader’s popularity and his or her chances of being targeted.

Figure 4.6: Perpetrators of Assassinations of Party and Movement Leaders

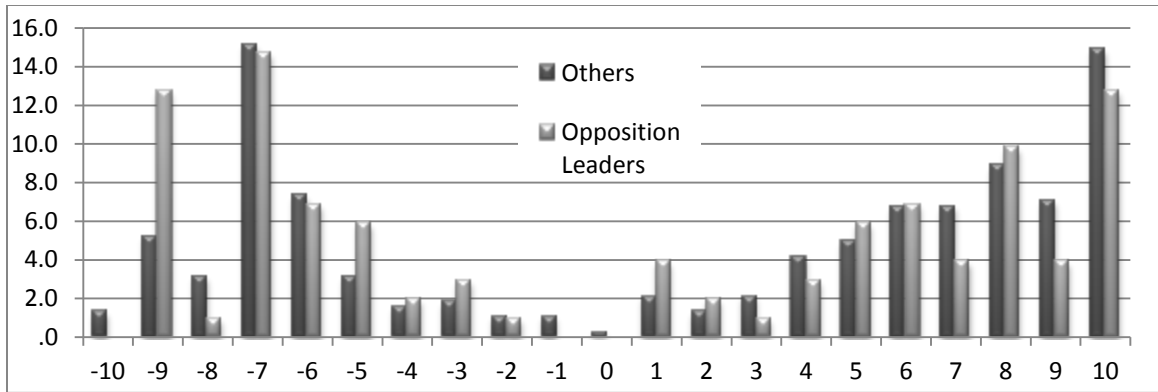


To begin with, as expected, the involvement of governments in these kinds of assassinations is much higher in comparison with their involvement in other types of assassinations (see figure 4.6). Proxies of governments perpetrated close to half of the assassinations of opposition leaders; other competing sub-state actors perpetrated the rest of the assassinations. Hence, opposition leaders are usually targeted by the government they are challenging, or by sub-state actors whom they are competing against.

Figure 4.7: Type of Regime and Assassination of Party and Movement Leader  
*(Polity scale from the Polity IV data set used to differentiate between types of regime: -10=totalitarian regime; 10=strong liberal democracy)*

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adequately represent the population of assassination attacks against opposition leaders.



These violent competitions seem to evolve mainly in countries in which democratic norms and practices are weak. As can be seen in figure 4.7, the portion of assassinations of opposition leaders is lower (in comparison with other types of assassinations) in strong democracies (POLITY scores of 9 and 10) and overall is higher in non-democratic countries. Indeed, the average country-year POLITY score of countries in which opposition leaders were assassinated was three times lower (.47) than in country-years suffering from other types of assassinations (1.58).

These findings correspond with the fact that a significant portion of the perpetrators of assassinations of opposition leaders are governmental proxies, and also with the tendency of authoritarian systems to delegitimize formal expressions of opposition to the government. A negative binomial model with the POLITY score as the dependent variable further confirmed these assumptions (Wald=930.652\*\*\*).

Beyond the reality that authoritarian and non-liberal political frameworks are more dangerous for opposition leaders, can we identify particular circumstances in which the risk is further elevated? In the model presented in figure 4.5, I suggest two such possibilities. The first is related to increased political tensions and strife. Indeed, the data provide several indications that support this assumption. To begin with, 65.6 percent of the assassinations of opposition leaders occurred against the backdrop of violent political clashes. It should be noted that some assassinations occurred in the midst of multiple expressions of political violence including coups d'état (4.9 percent), state violence (12.9 percent), clashes involving external actors (11.6 percent), clashes based in ethnic or religious violence (13.5 percent), limited clashes between state and sub-state groups (6.7 percent), and all-out civil wars (20.9 percent). Hence, civil wars

seem to be the most common trigger for the assassinations of opposition leaders, followed by more restricted incidents of ethnic or religiously motivated violence, as well as state violence. These broad categories suggest that an overall escalation in relations between intrastate communities, or between communities and a regime, provide the major context for opposition leaders' assassinations. Moreover, we were able to identify that 17.2 percent of the assassinations were associated with an escalation in the relations between the perpetrators' political platform and the victims' political platform. Hence, more than 80 percent of the attacks overall are a result of growing hostility within the political environment.

By using PRIO's Armed Conflict data set, it is possible also to conclude that the majority of the civil wars that included assassinations of opposition leaders were intrastate conflicts (84.6 percent) and that the majority of them eventually escalated into serious conflicts (conflicts with more than one thousand battlefield casualties).

Negative binomial models with the existence and the intensity of civil war<sup>74</sup> as dependent variables confirm the association between the emergence of internal violent conflicts and the increasing chances for assassinations of opposition leaders (Wald=296.480\*\*\*\*). When using PRIO's cumulative intensity as the dependent variable, the results are also significant (Wald=11.080\*\*), emphasizing that the lengthier the conflict, the higher the chances that eventually the tactic of assassination will be used against political figures who are not part of the executive branch.

Another factor that may increase the chances of opposition leaders to be targeted is elections. Here, however, the findings are less definitive. Our data show that 38 percent of assassinations against opposition leaders occurred during an election year or the year before. The share is close to 60 percent when taking into consideration only countries with electoral processes. Around half of these attacks occurred in instances in which it was clear that the elections were not fair and when the incumbent party or candidate was not sure about his or her ability to win the election. Models that included the various election variables as independent variables and the assassination of opposition leaders as the dependent variable were not statistically significant, further

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<sup>74</sup> PRIO level of conflict intensity differentiates between minor conflicts, which result in between 25 and 999 battle-related deaths in a given year, and major conflicts, which result in at least 1,000 battle-related deaths in a given year.

confirming the descriptive findings that election periods are not necessarily more dangerous for opposition leaders.

Lastly, we assumed that opposition leaders who represent minority communities would be more vulnerable to assassination in comparison with leaders who represent a less cohesive constituency. This is because state agencies have less hope of mobilizing support from the minority constituency and less incentive to do so. This hypothesis also didn't receive significant support from our data. Among all opposition leaders, the portion of those representing minority groups was a little less than 30 percent. Moreover, various models confirmed that the size of excluded and discriminated communities, as well as level of ethnic polarization (extracted from the EPR data set), are not associated with an increased likelihood for the assassination of opposition leaders.

To conclude, it seems that assassinations of opposition leaders are mainly an extension of wider violent intrastate clashes in weak democracies and authoritarian regimes, but are not significantly associated with specific levels of ethnic polarization and diversity or the timing of electoral processes. Since the latter are usually not associated with violent clashes, this serves as a further confirmation that opposition leaders are particularly vulnerable during times of violence. Moreover, it may suggest that regimes feel more comfortable to attack opposition leaders in times of all-out war, when it is much less clear who is responsible for such attacks, when there are multiple issues competing for attention, and when the opposition may be perceived as less legitimate.

### Assassinations of Legislators

Assassinations of legislators, who in some cases are local politicians, represent a unique challenge for those interested in understanding the causes of political assassinations. To begin with, these assassinations may be related to local policies, which are relevant only to a specific district, state or county, or to local tribal or familial conflicts. In other instances, the assassination of legislators takes the form of what could be described as "collateral damage"; that is, they are killed by way of their proximity to the main target of an attack (usually the head of state). And lastly, some assassinations may still be more related to national-level issues and rivalries. In any case, the same set



of variables that are usually helpful in identifying the factors facilitating the assassination of national-level leaders may not be helpful in explaining legislators' assassinations.

In order to overcome this challenge an inductive method will be utilized. I will try to identify common trends using the data, and based on that, develop an explanatory model. Using this inductive approach, I hope to at least partially answer several relevant questions: (1) What are the contextual and political factors that trigger assassinations of legislators? (2) Is there any correlation between the volume of assassinations of other national-level leaders and legislators? (3) Are there specific actors who tend to target legislators?

A brief overview of the countries that experienced assassinations of legislators reveals that the vast majority of them are developing countries. More specifically, out of 169 assassinations of legislators, just 13 (7.6 percent) occurred in Western Europe or in North America. Not surprisingly, GDP is a strong predictor of legislators' assassinations (Wald=565.228\*\*\*). Moreover, it seems that while the occurrence of other types of assassinations is positively correlated with GDP, exactly the opposite is the case in the assassinations of legislators.

It is also clear that a significant number of these assassinations were the result of severe internal conflict between a government and sub-state groups, sometimes even an actual revolution or a civil war. To illustrate, no less than thirty-four Iranian legislators were assassinated in 1981, when the new revolutionary regime was consolidating its control over the country. In Sri Lanka, thirteen legislators were assassinated during the struggle between the LTTE and the Sinhalese government between 1990 and 2009. Finally, in Afghanistan, twelve legislators were assassinated in just seven years (2007 to 2014), against the backdrop of the current struggle between the Afghan government and the Taliban and other militant groups. The data support this anecdotal evidence, as more than two-thirds of the attacks occurred during periods of violent clashes within the state (68.1 percent). A negative binomial model found that both the occurrence of a civil war and its intensity are positively correlated with the probability for the assassinations of legislators (Wald=229.210\*\*\* and Wald=3.207\* respectively).

These observations seem to indicate that assassinations of legislators may be more associated with national-level conflicts than with local ones. This conclusion is further supported by the fact that in countries that have experienced a high number of assassinations of legislators (such as India, Armenia, Lebanon, Russia and Somalia), most of the attacks were conducted by violent groups or government proxies focused on affecting national-level policies rather than local ones. (Overall, 73.4 percent of the assassinations of legislators were perpetrated by sub-state groups, and just around 20 percent by state proxies).

On the other hand, factors related to the political structure of a polity seem to have a limited effect on the probability of legislators' assassinations, as a negative binomial model reveals that the levels of democratization, political competition, executive power and political fragmentation are not correlated with the occurrence of legislators' assassinations.

If indeed legislators' assassinations are mainly a result of national-level conflicts, it seems reasonable to assume that some correlation exists between assassinations of other national-level leaders and attacks against legislators. In order to examine this assumption, basic correlations were examined (based on a number of assassinations per country-year), but these were not found meaningful. Even when looking at the possibility of a delayed effect, no significant correlations were identified. This is not completely surprising, considering that assassinations of heads of states have no correlation with the occurrence of civil war or violent conflicts (both strong predictors of legislators' assassinations) and that in general assassinations of other political figures are actually more probable in countries with high levels of GDP. (Again, the opposite trend was found in the case of legislators' assassinations.)

To conclude, the findings presented in this section confirm that the assassination of legislators is a phenomenon that is mostly restricted to the developing world, as well as being a phenomenon that is more likely to happen in the context of violent intrastate conflict. When comparing these findings with the findings related to other types of assassinations, we see confirmation of one of the basic premises of the current study: that it is important to recognize that different types of political assassinations are triggered by different sets of factors. This chapter also illustrates the importance of

understanding the interactions among different types of political violence, as well as the facilitating factors of such violence. The concluding chapter of this study will further elaborate these broad insights as well as more specific findings.

## Chapter 5: The Consequences of Political Assassinations

### Introduction

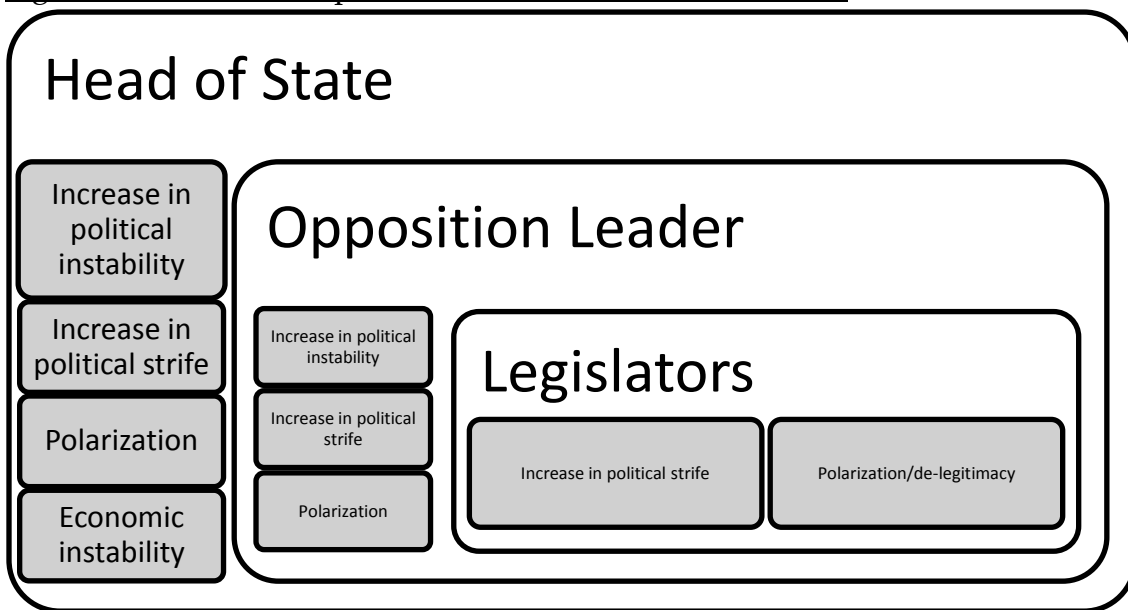
Although the assassination of a political leader may have severe implications on various dimensions of a polity and a society, there are still cases in which it is difficult to identify a meaningful impact. The assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981, for example, didn't lead to significant changes in the fundamentals of Egypt's authoritarian regime under the National Democratic Party. It also didn't have a long-term effect on the country's foreign policy, as the peace treaty with Israel and the country's growing reliance on American support were maintained. The variation in the impact of political assassinations and the relevancy of this issue from a theoretical and policy perspective make it essential to identify why some political assassinations cause changes in the political and social environment, and the conditions in which the impact of an individual's assassination is mitigated or enhanced.

But before trying to provide answers to these questions, two clarifications should be made. First, the scope of the current study prevents it from covering the entire spectrum of possible consequences of political assassination. Thus, it is intended to provide some preliminary indications that will hopefully provide a road map for future studies on the influence of political assassinations. Second, political assassinations do not occur in a vacuum. As was illustrated in the previous chapters, political assassinations are linked to both social and political processes. Hence, it can be challenging to separate the effect of the assassination from the impact of parallel social and political developments. Did the assassination of dozens of Iranian parliamentarians shortly after the Iranian revolution affect the political landscape in Iran, or had this landscape already been determined by the revolution itself? Considering this challenge, and since in many cases the data do not lend themselves to analyses that can help isolate the impact of specific events, including assassinations, we should be cautious about drawing definite conclusions. Nonetheless, the analyses in this chapter provide some important insights about the nature and extent of assassinations' impact on political and social processes.

So what are the possible implications of political assassinations? Havens, Leiden

and Schmitt<sup>75</sup> noted that it is important to differentiate between the immediate personal impact and the macro-level impact on the sociopolitical system. They indicate that the latter includes: (a) cases in which there are no changes following an assassination; (b) personnel changes that are a direct result of an assassination (Shimon Peres replacing Yitzhak Rabin as the Israeli prime minister, or Lyndon Johnson replacing John F. Kennedy); (c) significant changes in the nature of the political system; (d) social revolution; and (e) collapse of the entire political system (the killing of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914). These categories seem too broad. For example, it is not clear what the difference is between social revolution and significant changes in the political system. Moreover, these categories are not exclusive. In order to overcome these problems, figure 6.1 uses more specific criteria to provide a baseline for understanding the possible multifaceted impact of various types of political assassinations.

Figure 6.1: Potential Implications of Political Assassinations



As can be seen, the expectation is that the assassination of a head of state generates the most severe impact. There is a high probability that the disappearance of the most important player in a political system will create instability within that system, especially in countries with limited succession mechanisms. It may also increase political strife (this is especially relevant if opposition forces escalate their struggle

<sup>75</sup> Murray C. Havens, Carl Leiden and Michael M. Schmitt, *The Politics of Assassination* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970).

against the government or if supporters of the assassinated leader retaliate); and it may also intensify polarization within a society if the assassination was in the context of ethnic, religious, cultural or normative struggles. Finally, in some cases we may expect the political chaos caused by the assassination of a head of state to affect economic stability, especially when the assassination was part of broader political strife or when it may lead to major shifts in economic policies (for example, Libya after the assassination of Gaddafi).

Most of the implications of an assassination of an opposition or party leader relate to the way such an event affects the constituency that was supporting the assassinated leader. It can trigger the constituency to escalate its struggle against the government, or it can lead to demoralization and the decline of the opposition party or movement. In either case we may expect to see an impact on the level of political activism. When these assassinations are associated with the regime, they may become a trigger for significant violent clashes, and decrease the legitimacy of the government and the level of trust and support it enjoys. All of these effects should be reflected in growing political strife and instability.

In the case of the assassination of legislators, the fact that the head of state is still in office after the assassination helps to mitigate most of the potential implications mentioned previously. Nonetheless, since the assassination of a legislator still represents a significant challenge to, or attack on, the legitimacy of a political system, it may produce an escalation in political strife and enhance the level of hostility, distrust and animosity between political parties.

The subsequent sections of this chapter will try to test the hypotheses described so far. But before looking at the impact of specific types of assassinations, a preliminary analysis of the impact of assassinations on society at large will be presented.

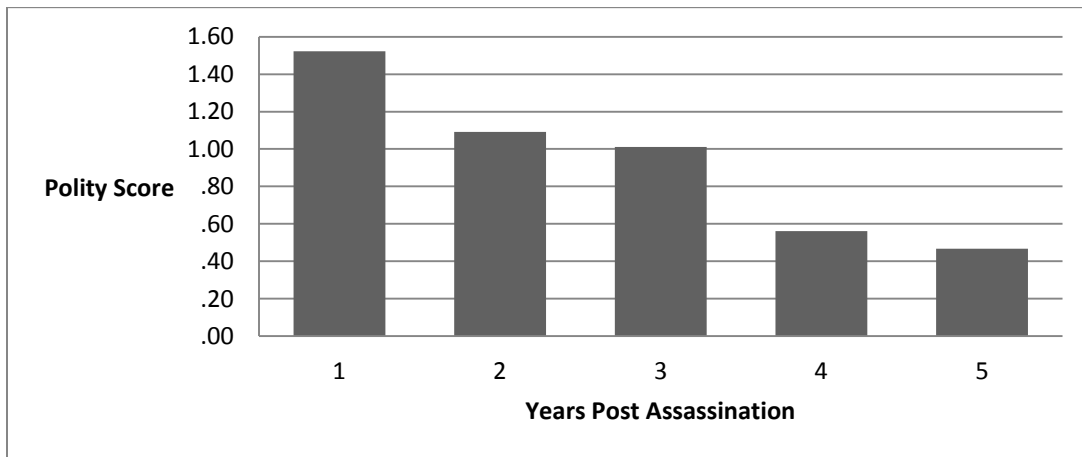
#### Impact of Assassinations: General Overview

When looking at the impact of assassinations in general, empirical analyses reveal several important effects on the political and social environment.

Interestingly, and contrary to the perception that an assassination is an effective

tool for making an immediate impact on political processes, some effects seem to emerge only years after an assassination. For example, as can be seen in figure 6.2, while overall it is clear that a decline in the democratic nature of a polity is evident following acts of political assassinations, the potential impact manifests itself mainly four and five years after the assassination. ANOVA analysis confirms that this trend is statistically significant ( $F=2.078^*$ ).

Figure 6.2: Impact of Political Assassinations on Polity Score



When looking at the impact of assassinations on GDP level, a similar trend is identifiable, although it is less consistent. Overall there is a significant decline in the GDP in the fourth and fifth years after an assassination in comparison with the level of GDP in the third year. Here again, the trend is statistically significant ( $F=18.169^{***}$ ).

In addition, more specific political and social variables were used in order to identify their association with post assassination's dynamics. The results are presented in table 6.1.

Table 6.1: Post-Assassination Effect on Social and Political Characteristics\*

Variable	Average in Years Post-Assassination					Kruskal-Wallis Test <sup>†</sup>
	1	2	3	4	5	
Physical Fragmentation (FRAGMENT)	.87	.56	.44	.38	.27	18.387***
Competitiveness of Executive Recruitment (XRCOMP)	1.89	.84	1.83	1.75	1.74	3.274
Openness of Executive Recruitment (XROPEN)	3.22	3.27	3.31	3.16	3.14	2.460
Constraint on Chief Executive	4.36	4.24	4.22	4.02	4.00	4.574

(XCONST)						
Competitiveness of Political Participation (PARCOMP)	2.81	2.81	2.82	2.77	2.79	.284
Regulation of Chief Executive Recruitment (XRREG)	2.42	2.40	2.42	2.39	2.40	.557
Regulation of Participation (PARREG)	3.31	3.45	3.50	3.56	3.57	12.524**
Level of Competition and Institutionalization (POLOCOMP)	5.48	5.38	5.36	5.25	5.24	.618
Level of Polarization	.686	.683	.681	.678	.696	.848

\* All variables except level of polarization are from the POLITY IV data set; Polarization variable is from the EPR data set).

† Since the independent variable is interval/ordinal, and the dependent is ordinal, a nonparametric test, the Kruskal-Wallis test, was used.

As can be seen, assassinations are followed by a decrease in a physical state's fragmentation, as well as a decline in political openness. The latter finding is compatible with the earlier finding that suggests a decline in the level of democracy following political assassinations. Generally, assassinations do not facilitate economic growth and are associated with more authoritarian practices within a polity, probably by *de facto* delegitimizing of open political competition, undermining a regime's monopoly on the use of force and creating a chilling effect on actors considering joining the political process.

Can we find similar trends when examining specific types of assassinations? The following sections will look into the impact of assassinations of heads of state, opposition leaders and legislators.

### Impact of Political Assassinations: Heads of State

The analytical framework that is illustrated in Table 6.2 assumes that the major potential effects of assassinations of heads of state are related to a decline in political and economic stability and openness, as well as increasing levels of political polarization.

Table 6.2: Post-Assassination (of Heads of State) Effect on Social and Political Processes\*

Variable	Average in Years (Post-Assassination)					ANOVA/Kruskal-Wallis Test
	1	2	3	4	5	
POLITY	-1.74	-1.42	-1.28	-1.31	-.83	F=13.463***
GDP (in Billions of Dollars)	458	532	461	494	513	F=5.911***



<i>Physical Fragmentation (FRAGMENT)</i>	.81	.90	.89	.94	.50	1.630
<i>Competitiveness of Executive Recruitment (XRCOMP)</i>	1.35	1.45	1.45	1.45	1.54	1.152
<i>Openness of Executive Recruitment (XROPEN)</i>	2.71	2.89	2.84	2.80	2.88	.664
<i>Constraint on Chief Executive (XCONST)</i>	3.39	3.56	3.60	3.50	3.64	.720
<i>Competitiveness of Political Participation (PARCOMP)</i>	2.40	2.43	2.44	2.45	2.54	.423
<i>Regulation of Chief Executive Recruitment (XRREG)</i>	2.21	2.27	2.28	2.25	2.29	.745
<i>Regulation of Participation (PARREG)</i>	3.70	3.72	3.67	3.75	3.73	.485
<i>Level of Competition and Institutionalization (POLOCOMP)</i>	4.16	4.25	4.29	4.29	4.49	.506
<i>Level of Polarization</i>	.701	.693	.691	.706	.706	.198

\* All variables except level of polarization are from the POLITY IV data set; the polarization variable is from the EPR data set.

As can be seen in table 6.2, the results illustrate some counterintuitive trends. Although assassinations in general are followed by a decline in the democratic foundations of a state, as well as by a decline in GDP, this trend is reversed in the case of assassinations of heads of state. Both POLITY score and GDP level actually increase following an assassination. This may be related to the fact that assassinations of heads of states most often occur in authoritarian systems; therefore the elimination of a strong political figure may facilitate more competition within that system. As for the other dependent variables, the results are less definitive. None of them seems to be significantly affected by the occurrences of assassinations according to Kruskal-Wallis test; however, the trends of each variable across the five years following an assassination seem to indicate that there is some impact on competitiveness of the executive branch (the system becoming more competitive), and an increase in the competitiveness of the political system (see the Parcomp and Polocomp variables). These findings are hence compatible with the statistically significant increase of the POLITY score.

Lastly, an ordinal model with the time elapsed since the assassination as the independent variable was conducted in order to further verify the findings extracted from the analyses of variance. However, the model didn't include any statistically significant independent variables.

Besides changes in the political environment, we are also interested in examining if the assassination of heads of state facilitates an increase in the levels of various types

of political activism and violence. Thus I used data from the CNTS data set; the results of my analysis are presented in table 6.3.

Table 6.3: Post-Assassination (of Heads of State) Effect on Levels of Political Activism and Violence

<i>Type of Political Activism</i>	<i>Year of Assassination</i>	<i>One Year after Assassination</i>	<i>Two Years after Assassination</i>	<i>T-Test</i>
<i>General Strikes</i>	.21	.12	.16	.515
<i>Insurgent Attacks</i>	.59	.32	.34	1.988*
<i>Government Crises</i>	.50	.36	.38	1.655
<i>Purges</i>	.51	.24	.22	3.070**
<i>Riots</i>	1.38	.92	.91	1.179
<i>Antigovernment Demonstrations</i>	2.23	.99	1.03	1.738*
<i>Weighted Conflict Index</i>	3039	2115	1954	4.087***

Surprisingly, the findings indicate that a post-assassination period is characterized with a decline in the levels of political activism. This is particularly significant in the cases of insurgent attacks, purges and antigovernment demonstrations. In other words, the killing of a head of state acts as a tranquilizer of a conflict rather than an escalator of it. Two explanations for this may be considered: First, following the assassination, the regime becomes more oppressive in its treatment of political activism. That naturally leads to a decline in the ability and willingness of the population to engage in acts of political participation. This assumption, however, is not in line with the trend that was identified above—when analyzing the political variables—toward more political openness and competition. A second explanation, which is more compatible with the previous findings, assumes that the assassination of a head of state opens the political system to competition regarding who will be the successor. This kind of competition may facilitate new alliances within the political system, create a new balance of political power, and in many cases force the existing regime to better respond to demands from various groups or parties. This new access to political influence may discourage opposition groups from supporting acts of political activism and violence. Regardless of the actual narrative, the assassinations of heads of state seem to be less traumatic to a polity than suggested by previous studies.

Impact of Political Assassinations: Opposition Leader

Opposition leaders are challengers of the political status quo. Ironically, their

assassination may indirectly facilitate their goals, if it is followed by further political instability and strife as well as greater polarization within the political system. In order to examine the consequences of the assassinations of political leaders who are operating outside the government, the effects of such assassinations on the political environment and the level of political activism were tested (see tables 6.4 and 6.5).

**Table 6.4: Post-Assassination (of Opposition Leader) Effect on Social and Political Processes\***

Variable	Average in Years (Post-Assassination)					ANOVA/Kruskal-Wallis Test
	1	2	3	4	5	
<i>POLITY</i>	1.14	1.11	.62	.79	.70	F=.102
<i>GDP (in Billions of Dollars)</i>	169	195	215	252	277	F=.280
<i>Physical Fragmentation (FRAGMENT)</i>	.88	.52	.42	.44	.33	4.705
<i>Competitiveness of Executive Recruitment (XRCOMP)</i>	1.92	1.92	1.82	1.80	1.78	1.301
<i>Openness of Executive Recruitment (XROPEN)</i>	3.42	3.53	3.53	3.37	3.39	1.774
<i>Constraint on Chief Executive (XCONST)</i>	4.24	4.28	4.13	4.13	4.09	.363
<i>Competitiveness of Political Participation (PARCOMP)</i>	2.75	2.77	2.70	2.75	2.78	.189
<i>Regulation of Chief Executive Recruitment (XRREG)</i>	2.42	2.41	2.34	2.36	2.34	1.183
<i>Regulation of Participation (PARREG)</i>	3.33	3.35	3.38	3.37	3.41	.351
<i>Level of Competition and Institutionalization (POLOCOMP)</i>	5.24	5.30	5.14	5.30	5.30	.164
<i>Level of Polarization</i>	.704	.709	.704	.697	.707	.131

\* All variables except level of polarization are from the POLITY IV data set; the polarization variable is from the EPR data set.

As can be seen from table 6.4, although there are several identifiable consequences of assassinations, none of them is statistically significant (this may be a result of the fairly small number of observations in each of the groupings). These identifiable consequences include a decline in the level of democracy, an increase in GDP, an increase in fragmentation, and a decline in the competitiveness of the executive branch. Overall, attacks against opposition leaders seem to further undermine the competitive nature of the political system and the willingness of opposition forces to operate within it.

Table 6.5: Post-Assassination (of Opposition Leader) Effect on Levels of Political Activism and Violence (all variables are from the CNTS data set)

<i>Type of Political Activism</i>	<i>Year of Assassination</i>	<i>One Year after Assassination</i>	<i>Two Years after Assassination</i>	<i>T-Test</i>
<i>General Strikes</i>	.43	.34	.24	1.174
<i>Insurgent Attacks</i>	.98	.79	.95	.059
<i>Government Crises</i>	.54	.42	.48	.633
<i>Purges</i>	.58	.18	.26	1.505
<i>Riots</i>	1.93	1.18	1.34	1.097
<i>Antigovernment Demonstrations</i>	2.45	1.55	1.33	1.507
<i>Weighted Conflict Index</i>	4175	3127	3140	2.199*

The findings presented in table 6.5 suggest that assassinations of opposition leaders tend to be followed by a decline in the level of political activism (see the statistically significant result of the Weighted Conflict Index). This finding is compatible with the overall decline in the level of political competitiveness that was indicated previously. To conclude, the elimination of opposition leaders further facilitates a decline in the democratic nature of a political system, as well as discourages the emergence of opposition and political participation. Nonetheless, none of the findings was statistically significant, which, as mentioned above, may be a result of the limited number of observations in each grouping. Thus, further study needs be conducted to more strongly confirm these initial observations.

#### Impact of Political Assassinations: Legislators

Legislators are probably the most diverse population of targets in terms of their influence, importance, and role in the political system. Hence, we can assume that it may be difficult to identify strong trends in terms of the impact of their assassination. Indeed, as table 6.6 indicates, no statistically significant trends were identified in the case of assassinations of legislators, although it seems that such assassinations are followed by some decline in the level of democracy and political competitiveness, as well as by increased polarization and the physical fragmentation of the polity.

Table 6.6: Post-Assassination (of Legislators) Effect on Social and Political Processes\*

Variable	Average in Years (Post-Assassination)					ANOVA/Kruskal-Wallis Test
	1	2	3	4	5	
POLITY	4.20	3.81	3.00	2.48	2.04	F=.279
GDP (in Billions of Dollars)	250	278	284	329	395	F=549
Physical Fragmentation (FRAGMENT)	1.07	.83	.78	.71	.63	.979
Competitiveness of Executive Recruitment (XRCOMP)	2.40	2.41	2.22	2.20	2.08	1.675
Openness of Executive Recruitment (XROPEN)	4	4	3.85	3.84	3.83	2.696
Constraint on Chief Executive (XCONST)	5.20	4.94	4.74	4.44	4.33	3.314
Competitiveness of Political Participation (PARCOMP)	3.29	3.25	3.19	3.12	3.17	.375
Regulation of Chief Executive Recruitment (XRREG)	2.63	2.63	2.59	2.56	2.50	.757
Regulation of Participation (PARREG)	2.91	2.97	3.11	3.12	3.17	1.029
Level of Competition and Institutionalization (POLOCOMP)	6.80	6.66	6.41	6.32	6.29	.205
Level of Polarization	.567	.547	.527	.527	.502	.452

\* All variables except level of polarization are from the POLITY IV data set; the Polarization variable is from the EPR data set.

These findings may suggest that the elimination of legislators is usually part of a process in which a regime consolidates its power and control over a population and their country's political institutions. This assumption is also supported by the findings presented in table 6.7. As can be seen from these results, the assassination of legislators is followed by a decline in the levels of political activism and political violence; the assassination also expedites the end of political crises.

Table 6.7: Post-Assassination (of Legislators) Effect on Levels of Political Activism and Violence (all variables are from the CNTS data set)

Type of Political Activism	Year of Assassination	One year after Assassination	Two years after Assassination	T-Test
General Strikes	.09	.15	.13	-1.743*
Insurgent Attacks	.72	.82	.71	-.199
Government Crises	.59	.24	.27	5.107***

<i>Purges</i>	.07	.04	.1	-.601
<i>Riots</i>	.95	.68	.55	1.562
<i>Antigovernment Demonstrations</i>	2.88	1.16	.74	6.743***
<i>Weighted Conflict Index</i>	4067.40	2548.47	2312.37	6.214***

### Summary

This chapter provides insights regarding the impact of political assassinations on political and social processes. As expected, different types of assassinations generate different effects, and some of them have no observable effects at all. Moreover, in many cases these effects are not in the same direction and do not always facilitate further violence. These findings not only further validate the importance of disaggregating the concept of political assassination, but they also illustrate that in some cases assassinations can be counterproductive to the desired outcomes of their perpetrators. Finally, while this chapter provides initial findings, further investigation of the outcomes of political assassinations may provide better tools for policymakers to shape more relevant security policies.

## Chapter 6: Concluding Remarks

The current study aims to improve our understanding of the causes and implications of political assassinations by utilizing a comprehensive data set and by employing quantitative analyses. The findings illustrate the trends that characterize the phenomenon and challenge some of the existing conventions about political assassinations and their impact.

This study is guided by the rationale that the logic of political assassinations is different from that of other manifestations of political violence. Hence, it is important to understand the unique factors that may encourage or discourage violent groups or individuals from engaging in political assassinations. Moreover, it seems reasonable to assume that these factors vary among different types of assassinations, because in most cases the characteristics of the targeted individual shape the nature and objectives of the assassination. Indeed, our findings provide substantial support to the notion that different processes trigger different types of assassinations, and that in many cases the processes that trigger political assassinations differ from those associated with terrorism or insurgency. Additionally, this study establishes that different types of assassinations generate distinct effects on the political and social arenas, and that some types of political assassinations are ineffective.

In the following sections a summary of the empirical findings will be provided, as well as a discussion of their importance from both theoretical and policy perspectives.

### General Observations

Although the first two decades after World War II were characterized by a limited number of political assassinations, the number of such attacks has risen dramatically since the early 1970s, reflecting the emergence of a new wave of terrorist groups, radical and universal ideologies operating on a global scale, and a growing willingness by oppressive regimes to use assassinations as a tool in their treatment of political opposition. Indeed, while most assassinations against government officials were perpetrated by sub-state violent groups, most assassinations of opposition leaders were initiated by ruling political elites or their proxies. This important observation

supports the notion that a growing number of terrorist groups see assassinations as a legitimate and effective tool and that one of the major obstacles for democratization is the vulnerability of political opposition. This study also suggests that in many cases the perpetrators of political assassinations are the most experienced members of their groups, government proxies, individuals with military training, or those with past service in law enforcement agencies or the military.

Finally, this study establishes the universal nature of political assassinations, as they are not excluded from any geographical region, nor are they unique to any type of regime. Moreover, in contrast to some expectations, processes of democratization can actually facilitate assassinations under certain conditions rather than impede them. The next section will further expand on this study's conclusions regarding the factors that facilitate political assassinations.

#### Causes of Assassinations

The research findings indicate that, in general, political assassinations are more probable in countries that suffer from a combination of restrictions on political competition and strong polarization and fragmentation. More specifically, countries that lack a consensual political ethos and homogeneous population (in terms of the national and ethnic landscape) and include societal groups that have a limited ability to affect the political processes will face a decline in the legitimacy of the political leadership and the political system, and an increasing likelihood for direct attacks against political leaders. And since these issues tend to be present mainly in times of electoral processes or of actual violent strife, one should not be surprised that our findings indicate that election periods or periods characterized by a general increase in domestic violence are moments when a country is more susceptible to political assassinations. Another interesting finding is that the territorial fragmentation of a country is correlated with an increase in the number of assassinations. In other words, when a government loses control over some part of its country to opposition or rebel groups, both sides are more willing to use assassinations to enhance their influence and public recognition and to consolidate their status as the sole legitimate rulers of the polity.

When looking specifically at the factors that facilitate assassinations of heads of



state, we can identify some unique trends. To begin, the polities most susceptible to assassinations against the head of state are authoritarian polities in which a leader enjoys significant political power but lacks regulated succession. This is especially true in polities that also include oppressed minorities and high levels of political polarization. It is important to note that these findings stand in contrast to some of the trends found in the entire population of assassinations (when excluding assassinations against heads of state), as assassinations in general tend to occur more often in countries with less centralized executive power and more regulated succession. Therefore, non-democratic countries that include leaders who are able to garner significant power, but in which the state lacks efficient mechanisms for leadership change following an assassination, provide more prospects for success in advancing political changes via political assassination as compared with democratic systems, in which it is clear that the elimination of the head of state will have limited long-term impact on the sociopolitical order.

Although heads of state represent what could be considered the crown jewel of political assassinations, lower-ranking political figures also face this threat. In this study, we looked into cases of attacks against legislators and vice heads of state. Attacks against the latter are fairly rare and are usually intended to promote highly specific policy changes (related to policy areas under the purview of the vice head of state) or to prevent the vice head of state from inheriting the head of state position. In addition, we found that assassinated vice heads of state are often victims of new political elites who have tried to eliminate possible challengers from the remnants of a previous regime. On the other hand, legislators are most often victims of civil wars or similar violent domestic clashes in developing countries; in democracies they are almost never targeted. Assassinations of legislators are almost always a result of national-level conflicts rather than local ones, contrary to what some may suspect. Lastly, the political structure of a polity seems to have a limited impact on the probability of legislators' assassinations, as these assassinations are rarely perpetrated to promote specific policies or to gain access to the political process. In other words, the assassination of legislators should be considered more as acts of protest against an existing political order than political actions that are intended to promote specific political goals.

One of the other unique features of this study is its focus on assassinations of

political figures that are not part of governing platforms. Unlike other types of assassinations, the state is typically a major actor in assassinations against opposition figures. Consequently, it should not surprise us that opposition leaders are more likely to be targeted in authoritarian systems or in weak democracies, as in these types of regimes the political environment provides a space for the emergence of an opposition while also providing the ruling elites tools and legitimacy for oppressive measures against a “successful” opposition. It is also clear that opposition leaders are more vulnerable during violent domestic conflicts, when the number of opportunities, and maybe also the legitimacy to act against them, are on the rise.

Overall, our study provides a nuanced and multilevel understanding of the factors that contribute to the probability of political assassinations. It also further confirms that distinct dynamics are in process in different types of assassinations.

#### Impact of Political Assassinations

In many instances, political assassinations are perceived as symptoms of growing social unrest and a decline in the legitimacy of the sociopolitical order. The current study provides several important insights on this issue. In general, political assassinations seem to intensify prospects of a state’s fragmentation and undermine its democratic nature. The latter is usually manifested in a decline in political participation and a disproportionate increase in the strength of the executive branch.

When we looked specifically at the effects of different types of assassinations, we were able to find significant variations among them. For example, assassinations of heads of state tend to generate a decline in the democratic nature of a polity and an increase in domestic violence and instability. They also increase economic prosperity, which sounds counterintuitive but may reflect the rise of a more open economic system after the elimination of authoritarian ruler. The assassination of opposition leaders has a limited impact on the nature of a political system but has the potential to lead to an increase in overall unrest and domestic violence. Finally, assassinations of legislators are often followed by a decline in the legitimacy of the government and by public unrest (illustrated by growing anti-government demonstrations).

#### Policy Implications

This study illustrates that political assassinations are a constant feature in most polities. Our ability to improve our understanding of political processes must also include a deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of political assassinations. But how can the findings presented in this study help us to understand the potential role of policymakers in the prevention of political assassinations?

To begin, it is evident that governments can promote political and social conditions that may decrease the prospects of political assassinations. For example, while governments in polarized societies sometimes have the tendency to restrict political participation in order to prevent further escalation in intrastate communal relations, our findings indicate that this action will actually increase the probability of political assassinations. Moreover, in order for electoral processes to become a viable tool for promoting a productive and peaceful political environment, it is clear that they need to come after ensuring political grievances have been addressed. Otherwise, electoral competition has the potential to instigate further violence, including the assassinations of political figures. The shaping of stable and regulated succession mechanisms is also highly important, especially in countries that are struggling to construct stable democratic institutions. Interestingly, while theories of democratization have long advocated the creation of institutions as a first step to ensure wide representation, followed by stable routines and protocols, the opposite order may be more effective for the promotion of stability and eventually a liberal-democratic environment.

The findings in this study also indicate that more attention needs to be given to the safety of the political leaders during instances of violent domestic clashes or transitions to democracy. Opposition leaders are most vulnerable in the early stages of democratization, so the effort to facilitate a democratic environment must also include the creation of mechanisms to ensure the safety of opposition leaders. This in turn will enhance the legitimacy of political participation, reduce polarization, and enhance political stability. Moreover, although civilian victims naturally attract most of the public attention during a civil war, this study highlights the need to evaluate how harm to political figures may be prevented, as this has significant potential to lead to further escalation of a conflict, especially when the assassinated figures are heads of state or opposition leaders.

This study's findings also provide several practical insights for law enforcement. For example, legislators are almost never targeted in democratic countries, and in democratic environments sub-state groups are usually responsible for assassinations, rather than other actors such as lone wolves, for example. In addition, basic firearms are almost always the preferred weapons of assassins. The few cases in which more sophisticated weapons were used (such as car bombs) were mostly in developing countries rather than in established democracies (the Irish Republican Army's operations in the United Kingdom being a known exception).

Finally, like all studies, this one has some clear limitations. For example, there is room for more in-depth examination of the socio-demographic characteristics of individual perpetrators, as well as the contextual make-up of each case of assassination. Also, further study is needed to identify the linkage among other types of political violence and political assassinations and how these various forms of political violence interact (for example, if assassinations are necessarily a reflection of a group's changing strategy or are opportunity-based). Finally, there is space for inquiries that will delve into the moral aspects of state assassinations, as well its role in theories of just war.

