

# Politics of the Poor and Social Protection in Emerging Asia: A Comparative Analysis of China, India, and Turkey

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## ABSTRACT

Social protections have proliferated across the world. Their rapid expansions have coincided ironically with ongoing debates pitting triumphalist accounts of the global spread of market-based systems of economy and governance against critical accounts of the same process that have been described as neoliberal. Expanding social protections in neoliberal political economies pose a puzzle for protagonists and critics alike of the alleged neoliberal triumph. Nowhere is this puzzle more evident than in the context of Asia's emerging market economies (EMEs) which often upheld as the poster-children of neoliberalism. The puzzle of expanding social protections in political economies of the EMEs demands further investigation. What factors explain the expansions in social protections in these countries despite conditions of free-market neoliberalism? The present paper addresses this puzzle by focusing on China, India and Turkey, countries that have adopted a number of neoliberal policies alongside expanded social protections. The paper focuses on the political factors that might explain such expansions. It thus challenges the "diffusionist" and "structuralist" paradigms often deployed to explain policy change in developing countries.

**Keywords:** Social protection, China, India, Turkey, politics of the poor, contentious politics, political consent

## **Políticas de los pobres y protección social en los países emergentes de Asia: un análisis comparativo de China, India y Turquía**

### RESUMEN

Las protecciones sociales han proliferado en todo el mundo. Su rápida expansión ha coincidido irónicamente con debates en curso que enfrentan las teorías triunfalistas de la expansión global de los sistemas económicos y de gobernanza basados en el mercado con las teorías críticas del mismo proceso que se han descrito como neoliberales. La expansión de las protecciones sociales en las economías políticas neoliberales plantea un enigma tanto para los protagonistas como para los críticos del supuesto triunfo neoliberal. En ningún otro lugar este enigma es más evidente que en el contexto de las economías de mercado emergentes (EME) de Asia, que a menudo se consideran los modelos del neoliberalismo. El enigma de la expansión de las protecciones sociales en las economías políticas neoliberales de las EME exige una investigación más profunda. ¿Qué factores explican las expansiones de las protecciones sociales en estos países a pesar de las condiciones del neoliberalismo de libre mercado? El presente artículo aborda este enigma centrándose en los países de China, India y Turquía que han adoptado una serie de políticas neoliberales junto con la expansión de las protecciones sociales. El artículo se centra en los factores políticos que podrían explicar tales expansiones. De esta manera, se cuestionan los paradigmas “difusionistas” y “estructuralistas” que suelen emplearse para explicar los cambios de políticas en los países en desarrollo.

**Palabras clave:** protección social, China, India, Turquía, política de los pobres, política contenciosa, consentimiento político

## **新兴亚洲的穷人政治与社会保障：中国、印度和土耳其的比较分析**

### 摘要

社会保障在世界各地激增。讽刺的是，它们的快速扩张恰逢正在进行的辩论，这些辩论将“基于市场的经济和治理体系在全球扩张”的胜利主义论调与“被描述为新自由主义”的批判论调对立起来。扩大新自由主义政治经济体中的社会保

障对所谓新自由主义胜利的支持者和批评者来说都是一个难题。这个难题在亚洲新兴市场经济体(EME)的背景下最为明显, 这些经济体经常被视为新自由主义的典型代表。扩大EME新自由主义政治经济体中的社会保障, 这一难题需要进一步研究。除了自由市场新自由主义的条件, 哪些因素能解释这些国家中社会保障的扩大? 为应对该难题, 本文聚焦于中国、印度和土耳其, 这些国家在扩大社会保障的同时还采取了一系列新自由主义政策。本文重点介绍了可能解释这种扩张的政治因素。因此, 本文挑战了“传播主义”和“结构主义”范式, 这两种范式经常用来解释发展中国家的政策变革。

关键词: 社会保护, 中国, 印度, 土耳其, 穷人政治, 争论性政治, 政治同意

## **The Problem**

**S**ocial protection systems have proliferated across the world since the 1990s. Their rapid expansions have coincided ironically with ongoing debates pitting triumphalist accounts of the global spread of market-based systems of economy and governance (Fukuyama 1992; Friedman 2008) against critical accounts of the same process that have been described as neoliberal (Harvey 2007; Davis 2006; Klein 2008). Neoliberalism is, we are told in an influential account, “congenitally blind to the need for social protection” (Evans 2008, 217). The market-friendly and state-restructuring nature of neoliberalism primes us to expect that poor people receive less attention (not more) from national states. In this vein, the theme of poor people’s social exclusion under conditions of “free market neoliberalism” has been emphasised in several influential accounts

(Hindess 2002; Wacquant 2009; Sassen 2010; Somers 2008). The ferocity of the debate between protagonists and critics of the apparent “neoliberal triumph” has resulted in an underestimation of the growth of social protections.

Expanding social protections in neoliberal economies pose a puzzle for protagonists and critics alike of the alleged neoliberal triumph. Nowhere is this puzzle more evident than in the context of the emerging market economies (EMEs), countries that are often upheld as the poster children of neoliberalism. The emergence of this cluster of economies has attracted much academic, policy and business attention, under such acronyms as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), MINTS (Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria, Turkey, South Africa) and CIVETS (Colombia, Iran, Vietnam, Egypt, Thailand and South Africa). Protagonists have gushed about their role in leading global economic growth since the global econom-

ic crisis of 2007-08 and touted their economic success as evidence of the success of neoliberal economics (O'Neill 2013). Critics have disparaged these economies as little more than lubricants of global neoliberalism, pointing to the social, economic and environmental unsustainability of neoliberal economics (see extensive literature reviewed in Nielsen and von Holdt 2019). Given these characterisations, scholars would be primed to expect that the EMEs would aggressively whittle down the presence of the state in society and oppose all forms of social protection.

However, social protections in the EMEs are extensive. The five largest social assistance programs in the world—provided by China, India and Brazil—reach 486 million people, almost the total population of Europe (World Bank 2014). Social assistance programs reach 54 per cent of the population in Indonesia, 24 per cent in India, 61 per cent in South Africa, 25 per cent in Brazil, 44 per cent in Turkey, and 59 per cent in Mexico (The Global Welfare Dataset 2019). Individual social assistance programs in the emerging markets boast some of the most extensive coverage in the world. The Child Support Grant in South Africa covers 21 per cent of the population. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Program in India covers 16 per cent of the country's population. Brazil's Bolsa Familia and Mexico's Oportunidades—Opportunities—each cover nearly one-third of the households in their respective countries. China's Minimum Livelihood Standards Guarantee Program

was slated as one of the largest minimum-income cash transfer schemes in the world (World Bank 2015). Turkey's social protections target over a quarter of the population, while India's programs reach nearly 30 per cent (ILO 2014). Not only are social protections in the emerging markets extensive, they are also de-commodifying. Social assistance contributes 51 per cent of total income of beneficiaries in Brazil and 45 per cent in Mexico (World Bank 2014). Furthermore, they comprise up to 70 per cent of the minimum wage for households under the poverty line in Turkey (Özgür 2014).

The puzzle of expanding social protections in neoliberal political economies demands further investigation. What factors explain the expansions in social protections despite conditions of neoliberalism? The present article addresses this puzzle by focussing on China, India and Turkey, three countries that have adopted a number of neoliberal policies alongside expanded social protections. The article focuses on the political factors that explain such expansions, which have been under-examined in the existing literature on social protection programs. A recent systematic literature review has illustrated that among all studies of social assistance programs, 73 per cent look at the effects rather than causes of these programs, and 13 per cent present a descriptive account of them. Only 13 per cent of scholarly analyses have looked at the causes of social assistance programs. More interestingly, only 2.5 per cent of studies provide a political explanation and only 0.5 per cent of studies look at

contentious politics as a driving force for social assistance programs (Yörük, Kına, and Bargu 2023). By emphasising the political power of the poor as a form of support and challenge for the elites, this article challenges the “diffusionist” and “structuralist” paradigms that have permeated explanations of the adoption of social protections since the World War II.

### **Social Protection in Emerging Market Economies**

**T**hat emerging markets have rapidly extended the ambit of social protection within their jurisdiction within the last three decades is now well documented (Haggard and Kaufman 2008; Hanlon et al. 2010; Brooks 2014; Saraceno 2002; Brooks and Manza 2006; Goldberg and Rosenthal 2002; Tabatabai 2011; Seekings 2008; World Bank 2014 and 2015; ILO 2014). Their “dark” political trajectories (Fischer 2020) have also received justifiable attention, given the ways in which such protections have been appropriated by neoliberal, populist and conservative movements in contexts as widespread as Brazil (Putzel 2020), Turkey (Buğra 2020) and India (Gudavarthy and Vijay 2020).

While the rapid expansions of social protections have been well documented in terms of their characteristics and impacts, their causes are less well understood and studied. Much of the existing comparative research on the politics of social protection is limited to within region comparisons. Thus, while we have illuminating accounts

of regional trajectories for Europe (Esping-Anderson 1990; Danforth 2014; Arts and Gelissen 2002; Scruggs and Allen 2006; Bambra 2005), Latin America (Fenwick 2016; Huber and Stephens 2012; Niedzwiecki 2015; Pribble 2013; Segura-Ubierno 2007), East Asia (Holliday 2000; Mok and Lau 2014), and South Asia (Koehler and Chopra 2014; Singh 2016; Tillin et al. 2015), studies that attempt cross-regional analysis (Gough and Wood 2004; Haggard and Kaufman 2008; Rudra 2007; Sharkh and Gough 2010) are considerably fewer and skewed overwhelmingly toward quantitative approaches (see Tillin and Duckett 2017; Melo et al. 2011 for notable exceptions). The few qualitatively oriented multiple country case studies that do exist (Midgeley and Pichaid 2013) do not endeavour to undertake a systematic cross-case comparative analysis. Consequently, as Tillin and Duckett (2017, 254) note perceptively, “scholars are left with several fine-grained explanations of political drivers of social protection in individual countries or regions, but limited attempts to explain patterns across countries with starker differences of historical, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.” The comparative approach adopted for this article departs from the existing scholarship by systematically examining similarities and variations across the three selected cases so as to reflect on global patterns in the expansion of social protections.

## Explanations of Expanded Social Protections: A Survey of the Literature

What explains the expansion of social protections under neoliberalism in emerging market economies such as China, India, and Turkey? The limited volume of scholarly explanations for the development of social protection in countries outside Europe have been dominated by: “Diffusionist” explanations, which emphasise the spread of policy innovations from advanced industrialised capitalist democracies to developing countries (Simmons and Elkins 2004; Weyland 2005; Mintrom 1997; Nelson 1996; Mintrom and Vergari 1998); and “Structuralist” explanations, which emphasise demographic and economic factors and argue that enhanced welfare provisioning is the natural consequence of labour informalisation, unemployment, globalisation, deindustrialisation, increasing incidence of poverty and the growth of the services sector (Alesina et al. 1999; Buğra and Keyder 2006; O’Loughlin and Friedrichs 1996; Lopez-Calva and Lustig 2010; Fiszbein et al. 2009; Grosh et al. 2008; and Hanlon et al. 2010).

Both approaches suffer from serious limitations while explaining the expansion of social protections in emerging markets. The assumption in much of the “diffusionist” literature is that developing countries are “policy takers” who accept policy conditions because of their inability to negotiate. However, as recent scholarship has illustrated (Serrano 2014; Hopewell 2016),

this depiction is empirically inaccurate. Structuralist explanations, while useful to contextualise expansions in social protections, underspecify the causal connections that lead to the emergence and consolidation of such interventions. They ignore the motivations for politicians and other political agents to adopt social protections (Kpessa and Beland 2013; Mares and Carnes 2009). Departing from such views, political explanations call upon scholars to emphasise the actions of political agents such as politicians and political parties, social movements and civil society activists, and the general population. In contrast with diffusionist and structural explanations, political explanations highlight the role of coalitions and conflicts over the distribution of authority and resources. Political explanations enable us to formulate a more effective response to the question of expanding social protections.

Nonetheless, scholars disagree on the specific political variables that specify the expansion of social protections outside of the North Atlantic heartland of welfare states. While some scholars argue that *regime type* is crucial (Lake and Baum 2001; Haggard and Kauffman 2008; Mares and Carnes 2009), others emphasise institutional factors such as the importance of capacity (Sandbrook et al. 2007), commitment (Vu 2007) and credibility of the state (Singh and Vom Hau 2016) as factors that directly impact the development of social protection in developing countries. Yet others who examine the role of *political settlements* document the contests and collaborations between different interest

groups on the adoption of social protection (Lavers and Hickey 2016; Potetee 2009; Bebbington 2015; Nino-Zarazu et al. 2016). Nevertheless, despite their illuminating perspectives on the political factors that might elucidate the emergence of social protection, such scholars have continued to be inattentive to the potential role of poor people's politics in the making of social protections.

### **The Analytic Approach: Politics of the Poor**

**O**ur analytic focus on poor people's politics emphasises the ways in which they negotiate with the institutions that shape the distribution of resources. In defining politics, we follow Hayward's (1998) focused formulation of politics as a contest over the distribution of material and social resources. On the one hand, such an understanding entails recognising the strategies through which people elect their representatives, who in turn control funds, set policy agendas and shape the functioning of public institutions. On the other hand, our understanding of politics appreciates the ways in which people challenge the writ of such institutions, which may come to be associated with the perpetration of injustice and oppression, through collective mobilisations and social movements. Thus, our approach to politics encompasses both electoral contests as well as contentious mobilisations. We recognise that definitions of politics abound but choose to restrict our focus to the conjunction of electoral and contentious politics.

Defining the poor, to whose politics we are referring, is no less contentious. Even as we admit the limitations of conventional understandings of poverty that are based on income, wealth and assets as indices, the literature on which we draw use such measures. The obvious advantage of adhering to such understandings lies in their external and internal validity as well as comparability over time, at least within the same country. Nevertheless, we complement such conventional definitions by drawing on a well-established literature that emphasises the connections between poverty and oppression (Young 1990). Subscribing to this view alerts us to the ways in which the poor are not merely a discrete category to be identified on the basis of income, property or consumption levels (Wright 1995). Rather, we remain sensitive to the relational dimension of poverty which emphasises the ways in which poverty is perpetuated by unjust social and political structures (Piven and Cloward 1979). Adopting the relational perspective enables us to consider the ways in which processes of dispossession of rural producers, rural to urban migration, commodification of labour, low wages and underemployment have generated poverty in the emerging markets (Vanaik 2014; Portes and Hoffman 2003; Nilsen and von Holdt 2019).

Combining the available insights on politics and the poor, we understand the politics of the poor as an ensemble of negotiations that encompass both cooperation and conflict *vis-à-vis* the political institutions. Poor people's politics is, thus, on the one hand, about

extending their consent to political institutions through such mechanisms as elections to parliaments or political parties. On the other hand, however, poor people's politics also involves contentions against the very premise of the political institutions in their respective states. Poverty intersects with racial, ethnic, religious, and ideological cleavages that pit the poor against their governments. Such contentions entail collective mobilisations against the state through social movements or revolutionary insurrections. Indeed, as noted above, a wealth of literature, drawing on ethnographic methodologies, has now delineated the often contradictory practices that characterise poor people's politics, sometimes consenting with and at other times contesting the institutional mechanisms that influence redistribution. Recognising the insights from these literatures, our focus on poor people's politics highlights the dual role of such politics: their political support to governments and regimes on the one hand and their emergence as a political threat on the other.

### **The Methodological Approach: Comparative Analytic Narratives**

This article comparatively investigates the politics of expanded social protection in three emerging markets: China, India, and Turkey. At first glance, comparing China with India and Turkey—where regular competitive elections take place—might seem inappropriate. However, China's integration into a comparative framework along with

countries having periodic competitive elections corrects “a stark democratic bias” whereby “the explanation and evaluation of the social welfare expansion were conducted mainly under the framework of electoral or partisan politics” (Huang and Gao 2019, 82). Moreover, applying the Most Different Systems Design in comparative politics (Anckar 2008; Mecksroth 1975), suggests that a comparison along the lines undertaken in this article is a promising direction to achieve a truly comprehensive political explanation of welfare policies and regimes by accounting for nonelectoral dynamics of welfare provision. Moreover, although the Chinese party state does not allow much room to democratic rights and freedoms and checks and balances mechanisms, it has, like the Indian and Turkish states, continuously aimed to maintain a certain degree of legitimacy for its rule and prevent large-scale political unrest. All three countries, as we shall demonstrate, have used welfare provision as a tool to achieve these goals.

This question becomes all the more pertinent when we note the crucial institutional and structural variations among them, as we may discern from a comparison of the three emerging market economies. People's Republic of China (PRC) is a single-party regime under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The legal existence of eight minor political parties—that established a “united front” with the CCP during the civil war (1945–1949)—does not change the character of the political regime because these parties are subservient to the CCP. Electoral rules vary



between India and Turkey: while India elects its representatives based on the “first-past-the-post” principle, Turkey deploys proportional representation based on the D’Hondt method. Furthermore, as we see from Table 1, the structure of the three economies differ. Agriculture continues to be a far more

important contributor to the GDP in India than in either China or Turkey. Even more important, nominal per capita gross national income is very different in these three countries, as Turkey has US\$11,650, China US\$13,400 and India US\$2,540 as of 2023.

**Table 1.** *Select Socioeconomic Indicators of China, India, and Turkey*

	Gross National Income (GNI), 2023 (current \$ tn)	GNI per capita (current \$), 2023	% share in income bottom 20%, 2021	GDP Sector composition, 2023		
				Agriculture	Industry (Including construction)	Services
China	17,66	13,400	7.4	7.1	38.3	54.6
India	3,5	2,540	8	16	25	49.8
Turkey	1,1	11,650	5.2	6.2	28.3	54

Source: World Bank, n.d.

Our methodological approach in this article entails a “structured, focused comparison” (George and Bennett, 2005) of the three EMEs to investigate the political drivers of social protection. This structured, focussed comparison builds on analytical narratives (Bates et al. 1998; Skarbeck and Skarbeck 2023) of each of the three polities under study in a bid to identify the causal mechanisms that link poor people’s politics to expansions in social protections. The case oriented, rather than variable oriented, nature of the study enables us to closely examine the causal conditions shared by the three cases, intentionally selected because they differ relatively

little from each other in relation to the outcome under investigation (Ragin 2004). Recent perspectives (Collier et al. 2010) that such studies offer crucial advantage in testing explanations from the within-case analysis, inform the purposive selection of cases based on outcomes with little variation.

Comparative analytical narratives help us identify and isolate the relevance of different political drivers of social protection in cases under study in two crucial steps. First, for each studied case, the processes leading from our explanatory variable of interest (poor people’s politics) to the outcome variable (social protection) were reconstructed

and analysed by directing attention to ideal-type mechanisms (see Mahoney 2000; Beach and Pederson 2003). As part of this process, shifts in the political practices of the poor are narrated. Second, these processes were compared by utilising the mechanisms and relevant analytic periodization (slicing up of a temporally ordered process into relatively homogenous periods). Descriptive inferences were transformed into analytical explanations, necessitating the conversion of chronological accounts into thematically organised accounts of the process through which the transforming politics of the poor lead to expansions in social protections in Asia's emerging markets.

Accordingly, in what follows, we describe the expanded social protections in the three cases: China, India and Turkey. Thereafter, we narrate the role of consent, and of contention in motivating legislators' decisions to adopt social welfare in the three countries. We conclude by outlining the mechanisms through which poor people's political practices were instrumental in persuading their governments to consider expanding and consolidating social protections in their respective realms.

### **Expanding Social Protections in China, India, and Turkey**

**C**hina, India, and Turkey illustrate the expansions in social protections more generally observed in the emerging market economies. In terms of their economic systems, they have witnessed significant liberalization

since the 1980s. Policies favouring import substitution industrialization were whittled down and public sector undertakings were downsized. Regulations on international trade were relaxed and foreign direct investment made easier. The tendency toward neoliberal trajectories in the economy remain contained within widespread state controls (Nölke 2014). The state in these countries remains a key factor in the economy, not so much as facilitating business actors to compete freely but actively choosing winners and losers from among them. Even as the state does maintain a low-wage regime under pressure from entrepreneurs and producers, it also institutes social protections for the poor.

#### ***China***

The restructuring of the state-owned urban enterprises led to chaos in Chinese urban pension system. Suspension or delayed payment of the pensions became a major problem in the 1980s and 1990s (Liu and Sun 2016, 16). The central government established a new urban pension system whose coverage reached 55.2 per cent of urban employed workers by 2005 (Liu and Sun 2016, 17-18). The government also established a pension system for the villagers in 2009 and for the urban unemployed in 2011. Urban pension program has achieved almost full coverage and the rural pension system currently covers over 80 per cent of the adult population (Liu and Sun 2016, 17-24).

*Zuidi Shenghuo Baozhang* (Di-bao)—The Minimum Livelihood Standards Guarantee Program—is a means-tested in-cash social assistance

program in China targeting the population below the official poverty line. The Shanghai municipal government first launched the Dibao program in 1993 (Gao 2013, 195). The restructuring and privatization of the state-owned and collective enterprises added over 40 million people to urban unemployed in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Solinger and Hu 2012; Solinger and Jiang 2016). In 1999, amid this process of urban dislocation, the Chinese government launched the Dibao as a national program for entire urban China. Dibao finally covered entire rural China by 2007 (Gao 2017, 3). By the end of 2019, a total of 43,166,000 people (8,605,000 urban and 34,561,000 rural) receive Dibao assistance (Zhongguo Minzheng Tongji Nianjian n.d.).

### **India**

Over the last decade, India has largely expanded its social assistance programs for its poorest populations. Inclusive social policies have been instituted, laying the foundations of a potentially universal social welfare system. Five major programs constitute this expansion: school meals; the Integrated Child Development Services; the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA); the public distribution system; and social security pensions for widows, the elderly and disabled persons. Prior to this expansion, India's welfare system was fragmented and confined to those in formal employment. Social benefits such as old-age pensions, health insurance and maternity benefits barely touched the millions of people outside formal employment, who accounted—

in one official estimate—for nearly 90 per cent of the population. Social sector expenditure as a proportion of GDP increased from 0.3 per cent in 2004-5 to 0.9 per cent in 2009-10 and declined marginally thereafter and presently hovers at about 0.65 per cent (Roy 2023).

Between 2004-5 and 2011-12, the proportion of children between six and 14 years of age who received a mid-day meal in their school increased from 37 per cent to 50 per cent. The proportion of pregnant women who received any benefit from the ICDS increased from 20 per cent to 53 per cent during the same period as did the proportion of young children who benefited from the ICDS increased from 27 per cent to 57 per cent. The coverage of social security pensions for elderly men increased from 6 per cent to 22 per cent and for elderly women from 7 per cent to 19 per cent. Over half of all households purchased cereals at subsidized rates from the targeted public distribution system in 2011-12, compared with 27 per cent in 2004-5 (Dreze and Khera 2017). Social protections have been further expanded since 2014 after which free liquefied petroleum gas connections were supplied to poor women (Deshpande et al. 2019).

Most of the aforementioned programs are “centrally sponsored,” which means their introduction and implementation is monitored by India's central government. The plethora of schemes provisioning food to diverse sections of the country's population are organized under the rubric of the National Food Security Act. In some cases,

centrally sponsored schemes are complemented by social security legislation at the state level, such as the Chhattisgarh Food Security Act, 2012.

In 2006, Congress-led United Progress Alliance (UPA) government launched the National Rural Employment Guarantee Program, under which rural households were guaranteed employment on public works programs (such as laying brick roads, excavation of lakes and ponds, and afforestation) for 100 days in a year. Following the introduction of the scheme, the proportion of rural households employed on public works for any duration of time increased from 0.5 per cent in 2004-5 to 29 per cent in 2011-12. The National Rural Employment Program is now mandated under the aegis of the NREGA, which makes the Indian Parliament its constitutional guarantor. The program eschews means-tested targeting and is instead premised on the principle of self-selection. Any member of a rural household can apply for employment under the program, as long as they are able to and willing to undertake the manual labour entailed in public works (Roy 2023).

### ***Turkey***

During the 2000s, Turkey has witnessed a boom of social assistance programs for the poor. Before the 2000s, the Turkish welfare system was based on a corporatist fragmented social provision, in which employees in the state sector, workers and the self-employed were members of different institutions with different qualities of service and benefits. The new welfare system of the

2000s has largely eliminated this fragmented structure and created a social security institution and a general health insurance system to cover all citizens so that services for the informal poor have been equalized with formal sector employees (Buğra and Keyder 2006). In 2011, the Ministry of Family and Social Policy was established to administer central government programs and to introduce new social assistance benefits. The budget of the Ministry of Family and Social Policy increased from US\$955 million in 2002 to US\$11.6 billion in 2014. Total public social expenditures as a percentage of the GDP increased from 5.53 per cent to 13.51 per cent (OECD Social Expenditure Database, n.d.).

Between 2000 and 2010, the percentage of social assistance spending in total government spending increased by 266 per cent (Üçkardeşler, 2015). *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP)—The Justice and Development Party—has drastically expanded means-tested social assistance, in-kind or cash transfers, and free healthcare programs for the poor, conditional cash transfers, programs for orphans, food stamps, housing, education and disability aid for the poor, sharply increasing the number of beneficiaries and the share of government budgets allocated (Buğra and Keyder 2006; Elveren 2008; Günel 2008; Yoltar 2009). The coverage of the free healthcare card program for the poor (the Green Card Program) increased from 4.2 per cent to 12.7 per cent of the population from 2003 to 2009. In 2012, a universal health care system was established, and Green Card holders were included in

the new system. As such, the regular in-kind and cash benefits from the central government for a poor family adds up to US\$260, while the official minimum wage in Turkey is US\$370.

The AKP government has also initiated social housing programs targeting the poor that provide houses with cheap credit, covering over three million families by 2013. The Ministry of Education distributed all school course books free of charge to all students in primary and secondary education, amounting to 15 million students. Six hundred thousand students each year are part of free-transportation-to-school programs, where they are served free lunch at the school. The party has put into the constitution affirmative action policies for disabled people, which largely increased their participation in the labour market. The coverage and generosity of disability benefits tripled and doubled, respectively, since 2002. This is also the case for old-age pensions for the poor. Most importantly, if a poor family provides nursing to a disabled family member, it receives US\$350, which is almost equal to the minimum wage (Özgür 2014).

As we outlined in the beginning of the article, we will now focus on the political power of the poor as a source of consent and as a source of contention. We will argue that this power is a driving force of the expansion of social protection policies in these countries, as governments try to mobilize the consent and contain the contention of the poor by delivering higher social protection.

## **The Poor as a Source of Consent**

In China, India, and Turkey, poor people's importance in the political arena came to be especially recognized after the 1990s, when the three countries underwent crucial political changes. India's democracy deepened considerably as the Congress' single-party dominance collapsed in 1989. The patronage structures, through which the Congress ensured electoral victories by coopting local elites, could no longer be counted on to deliver votes. Poor people performed a key role in both processes. In Turkey, poor people's consent has been crucial for the governing party AKP that has ruled throughout the 2000s, in its struggle to capture and maintain national power. AKP waged this struggle first against the Kemalist bloc that consisted of the main opposition party, military and judicial bureaucracy, and second against the Gülenist community that came to replace Kemalist cadres and waged the coup attempt in 2016. The poor has been the main popular base of the party, in both elections and mass mobilizations against the enemies of the party. As a result, through the subsequent decades, political contenders in India and Turkey competed vigorously for their votes, which remained tantalizingly fragmented across different political parties.

In China, a single-party regime without free elections, massive pro-democracy protests on Tiananmen Square in Beijing that started on 15 April 1989, and ended with a bloody army crackdown on 4 June 1989, shook the founda-

tions of the political system. The movement had two main social components: first, the workers in state-owned factories who were dissatisfied with price inflation and enterprise reforms; and second, the university students demanding democratization. However, the villagers (which consisted of about 80 per cent of the population), who were most satisfied with the market reforms and the relaxation of restrictions on rural to urban migration, remained silent during the protests, which was a critical factor behind the success of the army crackdown (Wang 2009, 23, 28). Hence, the 1989 protests showed that the government's performance in meeting the basic socioeconomic demands of various subaltern groups substantially affects the survival of the Chinese regime.

Poor people's consent to the political regimes of the emerging market economies is important, though not—as we shall see—the only contributor to welfare policy in these countries. Such consent was extended primarily through the mechanism of national elections in India and Turkey, and the poor exercised their suffrage in a manner that was unprecedented. Although poor people rarely voted as a social bloc, political parties began to realise the importance of their vote as they pursued legislative victories.

### **China**

Despite the single-party rule and absence of political freedoms, Chinese government has been flexible in its strategies of garnering popular consent through two main conciliatory mechanisms. First, “people's congresses” serve

to this end. Local people's congresses are established at the provincial, municipal, county, and township levels. Only the delegates of the county and township congresses are elected by popular vote. Delegates of higher level congresses are picked up from among the CCP members, army officials, members of the seven parties other than the CCP, and various state-directed mass organizations “in a way that is designated to maximize representation from all walks of life” (Chang and Chao 2019, 69). People's congresses usually rubber stamp the decisions previously made by the party-state leadership. However, county and township delegates elected by popular vote are in regular contact with their constituencies and lobby the delegates of higher-level congresses and local officials just to meet some of the popular demands for public goods and welfare (Manion 2014). Maintaining stability is the *raison d'être* of this controlled representation: “Congress delegates give local governments the opportunity to act pre-emptively to address community complaints that might otherwise spark petitions and protests” (Manion 2014, 334). Overall, people's congresses serve “as an information feedback mechanism that allows the CCP to ... placate anti-government sentiment at the grassroots, and address grievances from various constituencies” (Ma and Thomas 2020, 102).

Second, the cadre evaluation has contributed to welfare expansion in China (Hwang 2019, 211). The performance of cadres is annually graded, and promotion and demotion decisions are based on these grades (Edin 2003). Rise

of protests in an administrative unit seriously harms cadres' career prospects. In fact, "the Party's nomenklatura system gives local government leaders reason to care about social stability—and that this is the incentive for government leaders to pay attention (when they do pay attention) to reports of discontent reflected up to township and county delegates, who live and work among their constituents" (Manion 2014, 333). As the central government has increasingly emphasized welfare expansion as a key target, local officials strive to serve this mandate to get promotions (Zhang 2020).

### **India**

Poor people's electoral participation witnessed a remarkably steep increase in India during the 1990s. Drawing on longitudinal data assembled through National Election Surveys (NES), Yogendra Yadav (1999) estimates that the odds ratio that the "very poor" would vote in an election increased from 0.89 in 1971 to 1.24 in 1996. Similarly, the odds ratio that the "poor" would vote increased from 0.98 to 1.13 during the same period. Defying the standard assumption that educated, urban and wealthy individuals were more likely to participate in electoral processes, the poor in India, particularly the historically oppressed Shudra (low caste), Dalit (untouchable), and Adivasi (indigenous) communities enthusiastically cast their vote during that decade, emerging as the main source of support for political parties during the 1990s. Their increased electoral participation has been referred to variously as a "democrat-

ic upsurge" (Yadav 1999) and a "silent revolution" (Jaffrelot 2002), reflecting as it did the increased politicization of the poor in India. The Congress Party, which had ruled India for most of the first 50 years since Independence, began to collapse, as voters began voting for political alternatives.

The reduction in the Congress' electoral presence through the 1990s was accompanied (but not necessarily accomplished) by the meteoric rise of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—Indian's People Party—which increased its vote share from 11.5 per cent in 1989 to 25.5 per cent in 1998. The party went on to form a short-lived government in coalition with over a dozen regional parties in 1998-99, before winning midterm elections again in 1999. The BJP and its allies went on to form another coalition government in 2014. This government was re-elected in 2019 and yet again in 2024, thus entering its third term in parliament. Although the BJP remained primarily a party for which elite and middle-class Indians tended to vote, it considerably diversified its social basis during this decade, thanks largely to its allies. While support for the Congress party poorer voters during the elections of 1999 was widespread, it was not overwhelming.

An analysis of the National Election Survey (NES) dataset for India's 2004 elections confirms the fragmented political allegiances of poor voters. Such fragmentation made their support a matter of intense competition for India's political parties (Yadav 2004). The

Congress Party and its allies, which contested these elections under the umbrella of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA), secured 38 per cent of the votes of voters identified by the NES as “very poor” and “the poor.” By contrast, the BJP and its allies, which constituted the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), claimed 31 per cent of the votes of the “very poor” but as much as 36 per cent of the votes of the “poor.” In particular, the proportion of support for the NDA among the “poor” and the “very poor” in rural areas was higher than that of the poor in towns and cities, indicating that the vote of the rural poor was in flux, not beholden to the Congress Party or its allies as it once did nor willing to embrace the BJP as wholeheartedly as wealthier sections of the population did. Nevertheless, as Thatchil (2014) notes, the BJP and its social affiliates assiduously cultivated poor people’s support through grassroots service provision. Welfare programs initiated by Congress-led Union Government were often better implemented in BJP-ruled States.

Voters at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy preferred the UPA only slightly more than they did the NDA. In power, the UPA government faced intense pressure from these parties, now its allies, to redeem its electoral promise of guaranteed employment and enhanced social protection. NREGA was launched in 2006, followed by the extension of social protections ranging from midday meals, food subsidies and health and education provisions. Although the BJP remained wary of endorsing the NREGA and other social

programs in its electoral campaigns, once in power after 2014 they have continued and even expanded these.

### **Turkey**

After the 1990s, the poor in Turkey have replaced the declining organized working class as the main source of political support for governments. AKP originated from the radical Islamist Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*), in a reformed and politically more organized form and came to national power with the 2002 elections. AKP has gained the support of a large number of people who were economically and socially hurt by the harsh economic crisis of 2001. Over the 2000s, the political competition between the AKP and the old secular elite that had traditionally ruled the country evolved into a regime crisis. Both sides have done their best to annihilate each other’s political leverage with the mobilisation of every possible judicial, social and bureaucratic force. In the struggle with the secular establishment, the AKP garnered the necessary legitimacy and power from the dynamism, activism and massive support of the urban and rural poor, as opposed to the CHP who has mostly relied on a middle class base. To maintain their support from the poor, the party increased the level of pro-poor social welfare programs and used an anti-elite populist discourse.

During the 2000s, the governing AKP has also been competing intensively with these Kurdish parties across the Kurdish majority regions of southern and southeastern Turkey as well as in the slum areas of metropolises. The AKP and pro-Kurdish *Halkların*



*Demokrasi Partisi* (HDP)—Peoples' Democracy Party—largely compete for the support of Turkey's Kurdish poor while the main opposition *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (CHP)—Republican People's Party—gains its votes mainly from the middle classes and bourgeoisie (KONDA, 2018). Kurdish party support is twice as high among the unemployed and those unable to work as its overall national vote. For both AKP and HDP, there is also a negative correlation between income and support. AKP expanded its popular base among the poor over the course of its rule. The share of votes coming from those with household incomes less than two minimum wages increased from 57 per cent to 71 per cent for AKP between 2007 and 2015 (Yörük and Comin 2020).

From the second half of 2023 onwards, there have been clear indications that the AKP's support among the poor is declining. Skyrocketing inflation has severely eroded living standards, disproportionately affecting the lower-income groups who were once the backbone of the party's support. The cost of basic necessities like food, housing, and energy has increased dramatically, leading to widespread economic hardship. The government has implemented neoliberal-style austerity measures, including cuts to social spending and subsidies that previously alleviated poverty and inequality. These austerity policies have further strained the economic conditions of the poor, undermining the decommodifying effects of social assistance programs that the AKP had expanded in earlier years to secure its popularity among the lower

classes. The reduction in welfare provisions and social services has left many feeling abandoned by a government they once staunchly supported. This growing discontent is not only rooted in economic grievances but also in a perceived betrayal of the social contract that the AKP had established with the poor through its pro-welfare stance.

The decline in support is also evident in recent electoral shifts, which show a waning confidence in the AKP's ability to manage the economy effectively. Opposition parties have begun to capitalize on this discontent by advocating for more inclusive and redistributive economic policies. The CHP, traditionally reliant on middle-class support, has started to reach out to the lower-income electorate, offering alternative solutions to the economic crisis. The decline in the AKP's support among the poor has been evidenced by the outcomes of the 2024 municipal elections, in which the CHP achieved a significant victory by winning all major cities and becoming the leading party. Despite high inflation in 2023, the AKP managed to secure the presidential election through expansionary policies and welfare initiatives, such as addressing the concerns of those affected by the retirement age regulations (known as *Emeklilikte Yaşa Takılanlar*). However, in 2024, the government's shift toward austerity measures led to a significant erosion of living standards among the lower classes. These developments corroborate our argument that the AKP's support among the lower classes is closely tied to its welfare-oriented policies.

## **The Poor as a Source of Contention**

**P**oor people's consent to the regimes in their respective countries was not the only contributor to the emergence of welfare neoliberalism. In fact, their contentions against the regimes are an equally important part of the story. Collective mobilisation of mostly poor people against the state were commonplace in both countries as in other emerging markets. Such mobilisations contested the real and perceived exclusions perpetrated by state policy or inaction.

### ***China***

Most protests in China fall under the category of "regime-engaging" movements, which do not seek to overthrow the existing system or found a separate nation state. Instead, they often express microlevel grievances and demand action from local governments and, in some cases, the companies, by using extra-legal forms of protest such as strikes and street demonstrations (Li 2017). Unlike "regime-threatening" movements (Li 2017) that the state can relatively easily discredit through charges like "terrorism" this is not the case for regime-engaging protests. More importantly, overtly coercive approaches risk pushing protests toward a regime-challenging direction. According to Christian Göbel's (2019) dataset of 74,452 protests in China in 2013–2016, 57 per cent of protests are related to land, labour, and housing issues. Hence, the majority of protests express the grievances of low-income groups.

Tibetan and Uyghur nationalisms are the most formidable regime-challenging movements in contemporary China. The unrest of Tibetan Buddhists led by Dalai Lama (in exile in India since 1959) has a large following in the Tibet Autonomous Region and parts of Sichuan province in China. Large-scale protests by his supporters erupted in 1988 and 2008 (BBC 2014). Following the suppression of the 2008 protests, a wave of self-immolations by Tibetan dissenters started in 2009. Over 150 self self-immolations have taken place during the last decade (Flynn 2018). The unrest of the Uyghur Muslims of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is another significant challenge. The East Turkestan People's Party supported by the Soviet Union waged armed resistance against the Chinese rule between 1968 and 1989. The East Turkestan Liberation Movement, founded in Turkey in the late 1990s and the World Uyghur Congress, established in Germany in 2014, are two major organizations of the Uyghur unrest today. The Al-Qaeda and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have also recruited many Uyghurs during the last two decades. Uyghur unrest has not subsided despite severe crackdowns by the Chinese authorities. Following the anti-Han riots of the Uyghurs in Urumqi in June 2009, the situation became especially tense. Uyghur insurgents have waged a series of lethal attacks against targets across China since then (BBC 2016; Millward 2004).

Chinese government has used both coercive and conciliatory methods to contain regime-engaging and

regime-challenging forms of unrest. Government spending on public security increased by about five times between 2004 and 2015 (National Bureau of Statistics, various years). Crackdown against social movements has intensified since Xi Jinping took the party-state leadership in 2013 (Fu and Distelhorst 2018). Local governments frequently use extra-legal means such as hiring thugs to intimidate protestors (Ong 2018).

Chinese government has also expanded welfare provision for political containment purposes. Chinese officials admitted that the urban Dibaos intended to respond not only to the poverty problem *per se* but also to urban unrest caused by the restructuring and privatization process. In 1997, when the program was in the trial period, the then Premier Zhu Rongji stated that “the Dibaos’ support of social stability and guarantee of the reform of the state firms has important significance” (Solinger 2010, 256). In 1999, an official at the Ministry of Civil Affairs stated that one of the goals of Dibaos was to “guarantee that the economic system reform, especially the state enterprises’ reform, could progress without much incident.” The same ministry also instructed the local governments to “spend a little money ... to buy stability” (Solinger and Hu 2012, 746-747). A report about the implementation of Dibaos circulated by the Shijiazhuang city government of Hebei province underscored that privatization of the SOEs created 13 million new poor who formed “a potential threat to ... economic development and social stability.” According to the same

report, Dibaos aimed “to give these people a basic stable life, to mitigate the fear of disturbances, and to get rid of long-term hidden danger ... by tightening the relations between the masses and the Party, stabilizing the social order, and eliminating unstable elements ... through soothing people’s hearts” (Solinger 2010, 256). Furthermore, as the rural unrest against taxes, fees, and involuntary land acquisition with low compensation soared, the government expanded the Dibaos program to the countryside in the early 2000s. In 2006, the then Premier Wen Jiabao stated that his number one priority was to “show special care for the low-income masses, ensuring their livelihood through the mechanism of the Dibaos,” which would help in “constructing a socialist harmonious society” (Solinger 2010, 257).

Similarly, although ethnic unrest is not merely due to poverty, the government has utilized Dibaos to contain it. A study based on a quantitative analysis of the 2011 China Household Ethnicity Survey found that ethnic minorities benefit more from the Dibaos program compared to the Han majority even after controlling all poverty-related variables. Hence, Chinese officials use Dibaos “to buy off potentially troublesome poorer minority households at a higher rate than Han households” (Hasmath and Macdonald 2018, 18-19).

### **India**

Parallel to the electoral participatory upsurge analysed above was the growing sympathy and support for the Maoist guerrilla rebellion that flared across central and eastern India’s poorest dis-

districts at the turn of the millennium. Although violent left-wing extremism was not unheard of since India's independence, these were usually carried out by splinter groups that rarely, if at all, coordinated their actions. However, by 2004, these different splinter groups had converged to constitute the Communist Party of India (Maoist) and waged a revolutionary war against the Indian state. A secretary of one of the outfit's divisional committees declared their objective was to "liberate India from the clutches of feudalism and imperialism" (*The Economist* 2006). The force and extent of the rebellion prompted the usually mild-mannered Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (2004–2014) to declare it "the single biggest internal security challenge ever faced by our country." Maoists currently operate across over 200 districts, thereby forming what came to be called the "Red corridor," stretching from districts of the Southern State of Karnataka all the way north to the frontier with Nepal.

The extent to which poor people involved themselves in the Maoist insurgency remains unclear. While the Maoists and their sympathisers keenly emphasized the passionate recruitment of the poor to the revolutionary cause, researchers intimately involved in the study of the movement treat such claims with scepticism. Bhatia (2005) argues that poor people associated with the movement longing for "change" rather than "revolution." Kunnath (2012) suggests that, although impoverished Dalits were initially attracted to the insurgency, their enthusiasm cooled off upon the realization that leadership

of the movement remained in the hands of the higher castes. Nevertheless, the poor's sympathy toward the Maoist insurgency—even if they may not all have actively participated in it—cannot be denied (Sundar 2013). Furthermore, the fervour demonstrated by poor people in India for electoral politics during the 1990s appears to have considerably dampened over the following decade. Kumar (2009) notes that turnout among poor people reduced from 62 per cent in the 1999 elections to stabilize at 58 per cent during the 2004 and 2009 elections. Moreover, analysis of the NES dataset available for the 2009 elections reveals that turnout among the poor in among the country's poorest states was considerably below the national average of 58 per cent (Bihar: 44 per cent; Chhattisgarh: 53 per cent; Jharkhand: 48 per cent; Madhya Pradesh: 51 per cent; and Uttar Pradesh: 48 per cent). While there is little evidence to suggest that poor people were being recruited as participants in the Maoist insurgency, there was little doubt that their political behaviour was marked by a remarkable degree of electoral apathy than during the previous decade.

Under such circumstances, the newly elected UPA government recognised the potential of social protections in undermining the appeal and actions of the Maoist insurgents. Policy-makers in the UPA agreed that programs such as the NREGA were key to win the "hearts and minds" of the poor in some of the country's most impoverished districts (a view most cogently expressed by Shah 2009). That they may well have succeeded in their efforts is

borne out by Hoelscher et al.'s (2012) admittedly cautious inferences suggesting that the launch of the NREGA appeared to have stemmed Maoist-led violence. Further evidence of the use of the NREGA as a counterinsurgency strategy is provided by Khanna and Zimmerman (2014) who argue that the implementation of the NREGA was accompanied by a spurt of state-sponsored violence in the short-run, with local populations who benefited from the NREGA more willing to support police action against Maoist insurgents. A recent statistical analysis combining the district-level Maoist violence data from the period before the NREGA implementation (1999–2005) with the household survey data that was conducted three years after the program was implemented nationwide (2011–2012) shows that controlling for relevant household and district characteristics, higher intensity of violent conflicts between the Maoists and the Indian government is associated with higher MGNREGA benefits (Koyuncu et al. 2023). The present BJP government continues this strategy.

### ***Turkey***

Since the 1990s, the informal proletariat of the slums, and particularly the Kurdish poor, became the centre of contentious politics in Turkey. Since the 1990s, an informal proletariat has replaced the formal proletariat as the centre of grassroots politics, and the main hegemonic struggle has shifted into winning the support of the informal proletariat in the struggle to delegitimize neoliberal policies. The poor as a political threat emerges, not unintentionally, but

through the mobilization of radical political actors. The Islamist and Kurdish political movements became the main political actors managing to mobilize grassroots opposition to the neoliberal project.

First, the Islamist movement in Turkey was the first large-scale actor to radicalize the poor during the 1990s. Following the military coup in 1980, the political stage was set for the Islamic movement to flourish and mobilize broader segments of the population. By the 1990s, Islamism had been organized into a mass political movement led by the Welfare Party. Islamists were able to develop as the main political power garnering the political support of the growing informal proletariat, using a powerful ideological framework called *Adil Düzen*—the Just Order. The Welfare Party embraced the slums with a rhetoric that combined justice and tradition, supported largely by welfare populism as well as by increasing the quality of urban services, especially in the long-neglected slums. This growing political power of the Islamists was translated into electoral success as the Islamist share of the vote increased from 8 per cent in 1987 to 16 per cent in 1991 and 22 per cent in 1996, bringing the Welfare Party to national office. After less than a year in power, however, the Welfare Party's coalition government was overthrown by a military intervention in 1997.

Second, 30 years of Kurdish armed struggle, urbanization, proletarianization, and impoverishment expanded the Kurdish political movement into the slum areas of Turkey's major

cities. Kurds became increasingly radicalized, staging massive protests and uprisings since the 1990s, in both the Kurdish southeast and western cities. This ethnic threat to the regime was also expressed as electoral competition. Since the 1990s, the Kurdish movement in Turkey has been organized through both illegal and legal wings, in a similar fashion to Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (Basque Homeland and Liberty [ETA]) and Herri Batasuna (Popular Unity) in Spain, and the Irish Republican Party (IRA) and Sinn Fein (We Ourselves) in Northern Ireland. The legal and illegal wings of the Kurdish movement, together with hundreds of non-governmental organizations, youth and women's organizations, and political organizations of the Kurdish diaspora in most European countries have together managed to mobilize Kurds, both to provide electoral support and instigate frequent uprisings in Turkey's urban areas. Since the late 1990s, uprisings, protests and police appearance have become constant features of the Kurdish populated urban slums, both in the Kurdish southeast and western regions. The HDP has risen to become the governing AKP's main radical political rival in both areas, especially as the ceasefire agreed between PKK and the Turkish state since the early 2000s has improved its chances of success in democratic politics. This growing power of the Kurdish opposition has become the main challenge to the AKP's hegemony. In sum, during the 2000s, AKP has competed with the Kurdish parties to win the support of Turkey's Kurdish proletariat. While the Kurdish

movement has partly replaced the radical Islamists of the 1990s in responding to the grievances against neoliberalism of the informal proletariat, AKP has turned Islamism into a force for containing the political activism of the slums. AKP has largely utilized social assistance to contain the political threat from the Kurdish poor, as evidenced by the fact that social assistance programs are disproportionately directed to the Kurdish minority, controlling for poverty indicators (Yörük 2012). The poor have compelled the state to expand social protections through a combination of consent and contention.

### **Politics of the Poor and Expanded Social Welfare in Emerging Asia**

Poor people's political practices in China, India, and Turkey were instrumental in persuading their governments to consider expanding and consolidating social protections in their respective realms. On the one hand, poor people enthusiastically voted in Indian and Turkish elections, thereby signalling their consent to the extant political systems. Their electoral support, while important for such parties, could not be taken for granted. On the other hand, the poor sympathised with, supported and participated in radical movements that challenged the socio-economic structures which sustained poverty and inequality. Such movements could not be easily contained within the extant political parties, including those on the left of the spectrum. While poor people did not

specifically demand the adoption of social protections, their contingent negotiations with political institutions successfully conveyed their importance in sustaining the polity and potentially subverting it. Despite the single-party rule and lack of fundamental political freedoms, the Chinese regime has been flexible enough to get information about and respond to widespread socio-economic grievances. During the last two decades, the Chinese government has expanded welfare provision to prevent regime-engaging movements to take a regime-challenging direction. The Chinese state has also used welfare provision to deradicalize the mass base of the regime-challenging movements, especially the Tibetan and Uyghur ethno-religious movements.

Data from India's parliamentary election surveys illustrate the growing electoral relevance of poor people to the country's competing political parties. The Congress Party implemented the NREGA to consolidate poor people's electoral support. The program was also intended to fulfil a related political goal: to undermine support for Naxalite insurgents who threatened to subvert India's parliamentary democracy. The support to and sympathy for the Naxalites among the poor in India illustrates this tenuousness even more. Their stated objective of overthrowing parliamentary democracy in the country, alongside the attacks carried out by their cadres on symbols of the Indian state such as the railways, post offices and police personnel rendered them the single largest internal security threat. They explicitly opposed the Indian con-

stitution, arguing that it was no more than an eyewash. Their effective control across the so-called 'Red Corridor' undermined the very existence of the Indian state, irrespective of the political party affiliation of the government of the States in which the corridor lay.

The poor in Turkey, which includes the urban informal proletariat and large parts of the peasantry, have become the centre of grassroots politics during the decades after the 1990s. On the one hand, the poor emerged as the main source of political consent for the ruling AKP government, in its struggle against the secularist elites, as the share of the poor within the AKP electorate has continued to expand. On the other hand, the poor have replaced the formal working classes of the postwar period as the main actor of contentious politics. Through the mobilization of the Islamist movement during the 1990s and of the Kurdish movement in the 2000s, the poor has become the main threat that challenge the authority of governments.

The "politics of the poor" analysed in this article resonate with recent findings from research on the politics of social protections from elsewhere in the emerging markets. Yörük et al. (2019) discuss the ways in which members of indigenous communities blend consent to Mexico's electoral politics with contentions *vis-à-vis* the Mexican state via armed insurrections, thereby compelling the government to initiate social protections such as the Oportunidades model. Roy's (2018) research on the paradoxical expansion of social protection programs in India suggests a simi-

lar role of poor people's politics, which entwined consent with contention. Roy and Ianoni (2023) analyse similar processes in the comparative context of India and Brazil. The comparative analysis of China, India, and Turkey presented in this article illustrates a comparable dynamic in the three countries.

The tenuousness of poor people's engagement with the electoral process—revealed by their support to, sympathy for and participation in regime-challenging movements—contributes in no small measure to the political origins of social protection in the three countries. Even as poor people take enthusiastic part in electoral politics, their consent to the polity cannot be taken for granted. Contest is an important tool in their repertoire, which they activate from time to time to challenge a polity that they believe legitimises inequality. Contest, entwined with consent, is thus a defining feature of poor people's politics, which compels their respective governments to adopt social protections.

We conclude our paper by highlighting two key features of contemporary welfare programs in the Global South. First, while we stress the importance of containment and the mobilization of the poor in the formulation and implementation of welfare schemes, we also recognize the significant role that ideational factors have played, particularly in shaping social protection programs in India. The creation of NREGA, for instance, was not solely a response to the Maoist threat. Activists such as Aruna Roy and Jean Drèze were instrumental in its design, emphasizing the

provision of guaranteed employment as a fundamental right (Khera 2011). This ideational foundation illustrates how values and advocacy can directly shape the architecture of welfare policies.

At the same time, historical and institutional legacies have been crucial in determining the form these programs take. India's long-standing tradition of centrally and state-funded public works programs contrasts sharply with China's approach, which, until the mid-2000s, mobilized peasant labor for rural infrastructure projects without wage payment. These distinct historical trajectories explain why India chose a public works and employment guarantee program like NREGA, while China implemented a cash transfer scheme, Dibao, to address the politics of poverty. This divergence underscores how the interplay of ideational commitments and historical legacies influences the direction and structure of contemporary welfare policies.

Finally, it is essential to emphasize that government welfare interventions aimed at containing socio-political unrest have produced varying outcomes. Recent research on the interaction between social movements and welfare programs shows that these outcomes depend largely on how the movements respond. Comparative studies of the Indian Maoists and the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement (MST) illustrate this dynamic. In Brazil, the Bolsa Família program contributed to the demobilization of the MST by addressing rural grievances without directly meeting the movement's demands—an approach referred to as “substitution.” This strategy



successfully reduced unrest by addressing broader rural concerns (Yörük et al. 2019; Kına 2023).

In contrast, the Indian Maoists reframed the NREGA program as a collective action demand, transforming it into a tool for further mobilization. By advocating for extended workdays under the program, they politicized NREGA, holding the state accountable for rural inequalities and reversing the

program's intended demobilizing effect (Kına 2023; Kına 2024; Koyuncu et al. 2023). These cases demonstrate that insurgent groups can either be demobilized by welfare programs or use them to sustain mobilization, depending on their strategic responses. Ultimately, the success of welfare schemes in deradicalizing movements depends on how these movements engage with and adapt to such policies.

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