

Faculty Fellow and Assistant Professor of Political Science NAUNIHAL SINGH (PhD, Harvard University) is an Africa expert deeply grounded in his discipline.

“I see myself as a political scientist first and an Africanist second,” he says. “I tend to see Africa not as unique but as an area that can teach us about the rest of the world.”

In contrast to his Harvard advisor Robert Bates, who first went to Africa at age 16, Singh took a roundabout path to his specialization. His interest in the region grew incrementally and “almost accidentally,” he explains.

As a Yale University undergraduate, he played African music on his world music radio show and took a few classes in African politics and history. “I did so out of a desire to be intellectually well rounded, to be knowledgeable about the world, not because I had a strong interest in Africa at that point.”

When the time came for graduate school, it was the core issues that drew him—democratization and the performance of new democracies, development, human rights, conflict—rather than the region itself. Africa seemed an apt stage on which to watch the contemporary issues in which he was interested play out, and once he did his fieldwork, he concedes, “I had been bitten by the Africa bug.”

Focusing on the military

Singh also arrived at the study of civil-military relations indirectly. In fact, a sophomore seminar on the subject left him cold. “I liked the teacher, I liked the class, I disliked the material intensely,” he remembers.

But a year at Human Rights Watch, where he worked on the Iraqi genocide of the Kurds before entering graduate school, drew him back to the subject. “It made me aware that if you’re talking about human rights, you have to pay attention to the military,” he says. As he delved into development and democratization issues, the military showed up again as a key player.

“I knew I should look at the military even though I was not predominantly interested in it,” he says. What struck him as he searched for little-studied topics on which to focus his dissertation was that scholars studying military coups had looked largely at successful coups.

“They’d ignored the fact that half the coups in the world failed,” said Singh. “No one had bothered to ask the question, ‘when and why is it that some coups fail and others succeed?’”

Taking this question as his starting point, Singh crafted a dissertation that one reader called “a real page-turner.”

His research began in a characteristically open-ended way: he went to Ghana, which had experienced ten coup attempts—six successes and four failures—and started talking to men who had taken part in the coups.

Even though the most recent coup had been more than a decade earlier when Singh began his research in 1999, talking about coup successes and failures was still a dangerous proposition.

“I couldn’t be overt about what I was doing,” says Singh. “I was a little indirect, a little subtle.”

He tracked down people who had been key actors during coup attempts—supporting the government, supporting the coup makers, or “those who were in a position to have had done something but didn’t.” Interviewees included past President Jerry John Rawlings—the leader of three coups, both successful and unsuccessful—and retired military men, former cabinet members, or others, on both sides, who had first-hand knowledge of what had occurred.

“I had them walk me through their day. I said, ‘Can you tell me what happened that day? When did you hear? What did you know? What did you think? What decisions did you make? And how did you make them?’ So I was able to get in their heads, understand their individual perspectives, and then try to create a composite, birds-eye picture of what had occurred.”

Generalizing from the Ghana case

With military coups accounting for the majority of democratic failures in the developing world, Singh’s work fits squarely into Kellogg work on democratization, complementing the more typical investigation of democratic stability. The recipient of two Kellogg research grants and a Kellogg Residential Fellowship, he is on leave in 2008–09, completing his book on global coup attempts, which attempts to generalize his Ghana findings.

Investigating Africa,

Building on the ten case histories of coup attempts in Ghana that formed the base for his dissertation, Singh is taking the same question—why some coups succeed while others fail—to the world with the help of a massive original dataset. Compiled over more than three years with the research assistance of seven Kellogg International Scholars Program (ISP) participants, it includes all coup attempts and their outcomes between 1945 and 2005.

Researching, coding, and “cleaning” the information was a painstaking process—“quite the job!” in the words of one ISP research assistant. Meticulously reviewing the definitions that form the basis of the dataset as well as the data at each stage of construction, Singh has been adamant about consistency and transparency. At the end of the project, he expects to make the dataset—the only one of its kind in the world—public for other scholars.

“I think that his drive for excellence will make this project as close to perfection as one can come in the social sciences,” says International Scholar JOHN BUSCH ’09, a political science and Arabic major who worked with Singh for several years on the project.

Chest-thumping and playing chicken

In Ghana, Singh found that who was involved in a coup—enlisted men, middle officers, or generals—created very different dynamics that affected outcomes.

“The further down the chain of command you go, the slower the coup’s likely to be, the more confused, bloody, and less likely to succeed. If a coup from the top doesn’t succeed quickly, it’s pretty much going to fail. If a coup from the bottom isn’t suppressed quickly, it has a chance at succeeding when people realize the government really isn’t in control,” explains Singh.

Contrary to popular perception, most coups are not particularly violent and military might is not necessarily critical to success.

“It’s a lot of bluffing; it’s a lot of chest thumping,” says Singh. “If you ask people why they picked the side they did, they’re trying to pick the side that they think will win.”

He calls it a “tipping-point situation,” with both sides jockeying for the appearance of victory. That explains why coup makers often rush to take seemingly nonmilitary targets such as radio stations or the presidential residence, and why his informants told him that the side that holds the radio station is likely to prevail.

It turned out that fighters did not want to use the radio waves to appeal for more supporters; in fact, quite the opposite.

“I asked someone if that’s what they did. He said, ‘Oh my god, if we did that, we would lose instantly. No, you get up there and say, “We have already won! All these people are supporting us!”—even if they’re not—you name names. “Our enemies are in retreat. They will be treated leniently if they lay down their guns.”’

“You have to claim you’ve already won. It’s about creating self-fulfilling expectations.”

Teaching the World

It’s also about “playing chicken,” he says: military men, “trained in bloodshed,” don’t want to lead their men to their deaths or kill others unnecessarily. At all costs, people wish to avoid a civil war, but they wait until the last possible moment—that tipping point—to decide which side to support.

Singh argues that much of what coup makers do is symbolic, intended to convince people that one side or the other is winning. Authority, he maintains, depends on people’s expectations of each other. When coup makers shatter those expectations, they are attempting to reshape social power to their advantage.

Political psychology and rational choice theory converge in his analysis, according to Singh. What is significant, he says, is that “we’re talking about social reality, not material reality. We’re not talking about counting up the guns and bullets but something which exists in people’s heads.”

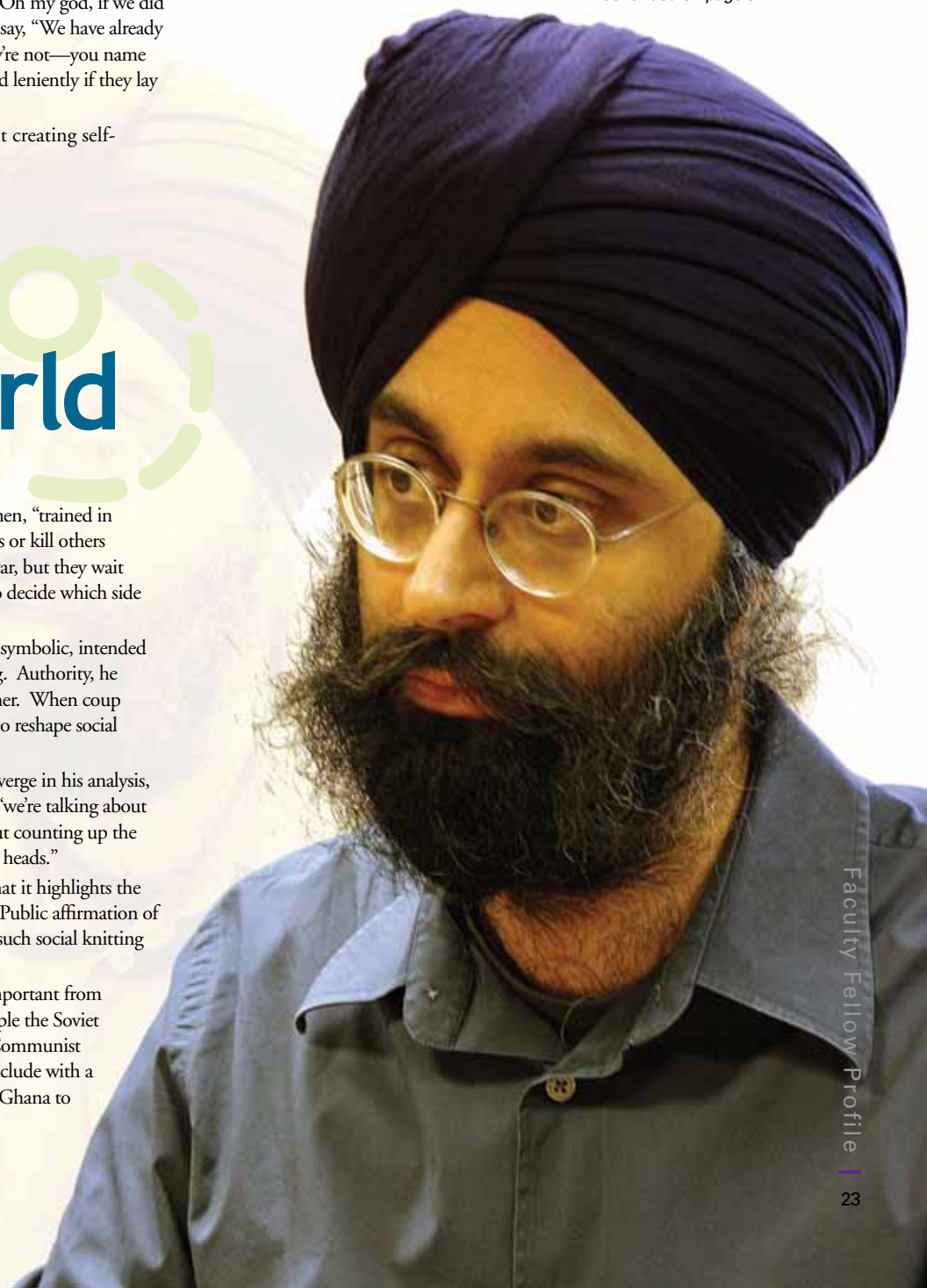
His work has implications for state formation, in that it highlights the importance of consensus around a new political order. Public affirmation of support “binds people together,” he says. “If we ignore such social knitting together, we do so at our peril.”

Coups, both successful and not, also prove to be important from a policy perspective, contends Singh, giving as an example the Soviet Union, where a failed coup led to the downfall of the Communist Party and the collapse of the regime. His book will conclude with a series of in-depth case studies of coup attempts outside Ghana to test the strength of his generalized hypothesis.

Africa at Notre Dame

At the Kellogg Institute, Singh has been active in the Africa Working Group (AWG), which brings together faculty, graduate students, and others interested in the region. According to Faculty Fellow and AWG cochair REV. PAUL KOLLMAN, CSC, Singh is an asset to the group, bringing “a grasp of Africa’s past political realities and current struggles, a generous spirit, and a capacity to connect issues and questions from different places and eras.” His extensive contacts in the world of Africa studies help bring “top-notch scholars” to share their work with the group.

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Investigating Africa, Teaching the World

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One of only a small number of Africanists at Notre Dame, Singh is pleased to see increasing interest in Africa in the University community. He ticks off examples: the more than 150 students taking introductory classes on Africa in the Political Science and History departments in spring 2008; the growing interest in research and internships in Uganda; the focus of the Ford Program not only on Africa itself but on themes such as development that are relevant to the region.

He attributes administration support of the Africa initiatives to the longtime presence of the Holy Cross in Africa, as well as the region's importance to the future of Catholicism.

"The University understands that Africa is a part of our broader mission," he says.

"Grabbing" students— Teaching with passion

Singh loves teaching and mentoring students; high course evaluations and enthusiastic comments by undergraduates show that students reciprocate the feeling.

"When I look back at my college experience many years down the road, I am sure that working with Naunihal will stand out as the highlight of my time at Notre Dame," writes COLLEEN MALLAHAN '07, who served as one of Singh's first ISP research assistants. She credits his advice and networking assistance in helping her find her current position in economic consulting in Washington, DC.

"I wanted to learn more about being an effective scholar and I knew he could teach me," says AMBER HERKEY '10, an anthropology and peace studies major who chose Singh to work with when she became an International Scholar. He has been a mentor, she says, "an invaluable piece in my Notre Dame puzzle."

"I am inspired by his work, but more importantly, the passion that fuels that work."

Singh organizes his African and comparative politics classes around three major themes: development—why some countries are rich and others poor; democratization—why some countries are democratic and others not; and genocide. The topical focus, he feels, grabs students and draws them in; when

he has their attention, he can go deeper into more traditional concepts of political economy.

"Part of the reason why I love teaching these courses is these are classes I wish I had been able to take when I was an undergraduate," he confides.

They are rigorous, academic classes that are also policy relevant. "It is much harder to teach students something abstract and removed," he points out.

A class on aid and development has morphed from a senior to a junior seminar to accommodate students who do research in Uganda with the Ford Program. A graduate class on civil war attracts political science, history, and peace studies students.

He has found his relationship with his ISP research assistants particularly rewarding.

"They've been very good, and I've been able to give them active involvement in the research process—they've actually been partners," he says.

"With undergraduates," Singh says, "I'm constantly encouraging them both to get a good gut sense of things, to work in different countries, but also to pick up more in the way of statistical tools and economics because this is going to be much more important than they think. You can't open a newspaper without seeing a story involving quantitative research or a survey."

"Following my gut"

While still working on his book, Singh already has a new project in mind, focusing on the role of the media in democracies. A current paper looks at how, in large African democracies, citizens tend to trust government media more than private media, even though private media has had a vastly more influential role in democratization.

Like much of his work, this project originated in Singh's fieldwork, where his interest in the press grew from his many encounters with journalists, including one, a former Amnesty International "prisoner of conscience," who had been jailed 14 times.

In a profession where asking the right questions is half the battle, Singh maintains that in his case, "it is about following my gut rather than having one particular area that I know I'm interested in, have always been interested in, and would like to spend the rest of my life working in."

When it comes to the "gut sense" he recommends to students, he practices what he preaches.



Coming Up...

February 13 Brazilian Carnaval

Featuring the band Chicago Samba, "bloco" parade, costume contest, and samba lessons!

February 27–28 Asian Film Festival and Conference

With films *West 32nd*, *Last Life in the Universe*, *Hula Girls*, *First Person Plural*.

March 23–24 Romero Days

"In the Footstep of the Bishop of the World," with Eugene Palumbo and Rev. Stephen Judd, MM.

April 16–17 Conference: "Social Cohesion in Latin America: The State of the Question"

Organized by Rev. Timothy Scully, CSC, and J. Samuel Valenzuela.