WHEN AND WHY ARE NONVIOLENT PROTESTERS KILLED IN AFRICA?

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Key Takeaways

- Leaders/governments with smaller ethnic support coalitions are more likely to respond to nonviolent protests, demonstrations and strikes with lethal force than leaders with more ethnically inclusive bases of support.

- Democratic institutions and, paradoxically, commitments not to prosecute under international law, may tamp down this tendency by making exit from office less threatening to leaders.

Peaceful Protesters, Deadly Force

Why do rulers turn the guns on unarmed protesters? One reason nonviolent movements tend to be more diverse – in age, gender, and the walks of life from which participants are drawn – is that nonviolent dissent is viewed as safer. Whereas raising a gun against the government will make you a target for lethal force virtually anywhere, raising a picket sign typically does not. While police, soldiers and pro-government militias and gangs may respond to nonviolent protest with strong-armed tactics, it is relatively uncommon for security forces to use deadly force against unarmed dissidents.

Deadly force does, however, happen. Between 1990 and 2011, roughly 3% of nonviolent protests, demonstrations and strikes cataloged in the *Social Conflict Analysis Database*[1] were met with violence across Africa, resulting in at least 1,200 deaths. If we include those protests, demonstrations and strikes that began peacefully but escalated to violence on the part of dissidents – in many cases, as a result of government repression – the death toll jumps to over 7,000.

One potentially instructive case occurred in Guinea in 2009, after Moussa Dadis Camara took power in a coup d'état. After initially promising to act as a caretaker who would step down following democratic elections, Camara reneged, instead choosing to stand for election. Defying a ban on pre-election protests, thousands of peaceful protesters marched against the decision, ultimately congregating in a football stadium in the capital, Conakry. Chaos then erupted as members of the Guinean Presidential Guard opened fire. A mixture of bullets and the resultant stampede of protesters fleeing for safety resulted in 157 deaths and over a thousand people injured.

Camara had not been especially popular as a leader. Importantly, his lack of popularity was in part a function of his being a member of a small minority ethnic group. Camara is a member of the Kpelle ethnic group, which, while the largest ethnic group in neighboring Liberia, is only about 5% of Guinea's population. This specific case is emblematic of broader trends: in a new working paper, Idean Salehyan and I find that governments supported by narrow ethnic coalitions – the ethnic groups that sustain leaders in office – are much more likely to respond to nonviolent protests with deadly force. Our estimates suggest a government with a leader drawn from a majority ethnic group (51% of the population) would be roughly 40% less likely to use deadly force against nonviolent protesters than one such as Camara (5%). This finding raises questions about why ethnic minorities behave more repressively and what could be done to reduce their fears stemming from nonviolent challenges.

The decision to turn guns on nonviolent protesters revolves around the potential threat those protests pose to the government.

Why is ethnicity important?

In Africa, ethnic cleavages are frequently important axes around which individuals and organizations mobilize support and contest power.[2] Many scholars have noted that patron-client relationships and social support networks in Africa often follow ethnic lines.[3] Others have shown that political coalitions in Africa often attempt to strike a balance between excluding ethnic rivals and forming broad constituencies, and that patterns of ethnic exclusion are linked to the onset of civil conflict.[4] Therefore, it is reasonable to use ethnicity as a marker of inclusion/exclusion in the ruling coalition.

Waging successful nonviolence – using nonviolent protests, strikes, stay-aways and other forms of noncooperation to either change government policy, remove an incumbent government, or achieve territorial autonomy – is a numbers game. To win, dissidents must mobilize large numbers of people to join their cause. And while it's important to eventually separate the core members of the ruling coalition – the military, business elites, and members of patronage networks that help rulers maintain control – from the ruler, most potential dissidents are drawn from outside the regime's support coalition. Thus, the size of this potential pool of dissidents matters. When that potential pool is large, nonviolent mobilization will be perceived as more threatening. And since nonviolent movements are, on average, much more successful than violent movements, the threat is real.[5]

In contrast, groups that use violent tactics play less of a numbers game. Violent tactics, such as bombings,

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massacres of civilians and attacks on government installations, allow dissidents to threaten governments in ways that are out of proportion to their numbers. Many successful violent movements have been quite small. Francois Bozize's faction was able to topple the Central African Republic's government in 2002 with roughly 1,000 armed supporters. Even those that have not achieved their ultimate aims have nevertheless been able to create havoc and significantly diminish government legitimacy while being few in numbers. Nigeria's Boko Haram militants likely number in the hundreds to low thousands, yet the group has been able to conduct violent attacks across Nigeria that have resulted in thousands of civilian deaths and diminished confidence in the government.[6] For this reason, force is likely to be met with force, regardless of whether the pool of potential dissidents in large.

The evidence is based on statistical analysis of data drawn from the *Social Conflict Analysis Database* and the *Ethnic Power Relations Database*, as well as several other sources from which control variables were drawn.[7] For a full description of the data and statistical analyses conducted, see the accompanying working paper. The finding – that leaders with smaller ethnic support coalitions are more likely to lethally repress nonviolent challenges – is robust to a variety of statistical modeling choices and ways of measuring ethnic inclusion/exclusion. Figure 1 plots the predicted changes in the probability that a given protest, strike or demonstration will be repressed lethally as a function of a one standard deviation change in the size of the leader's ethnic support coalition, measured four different ways.[8] The results indicate that, on average, a one standard deviation increase in the ethnic inclusiveness of the regime results in a 30% decrease in the probability a given protest, strike or demonstration will be met with lethal force. More ethnically inclusive support coalitions are associated with only modest – if any – increases in the probability that violent challenges will be met with lethal force.

What Can be Done?

The decision to turn guns on nonviolent protesters revolves around the potential threat those protests pose to the government. In particular, we believe the crucial element is how the leaders of the government fear

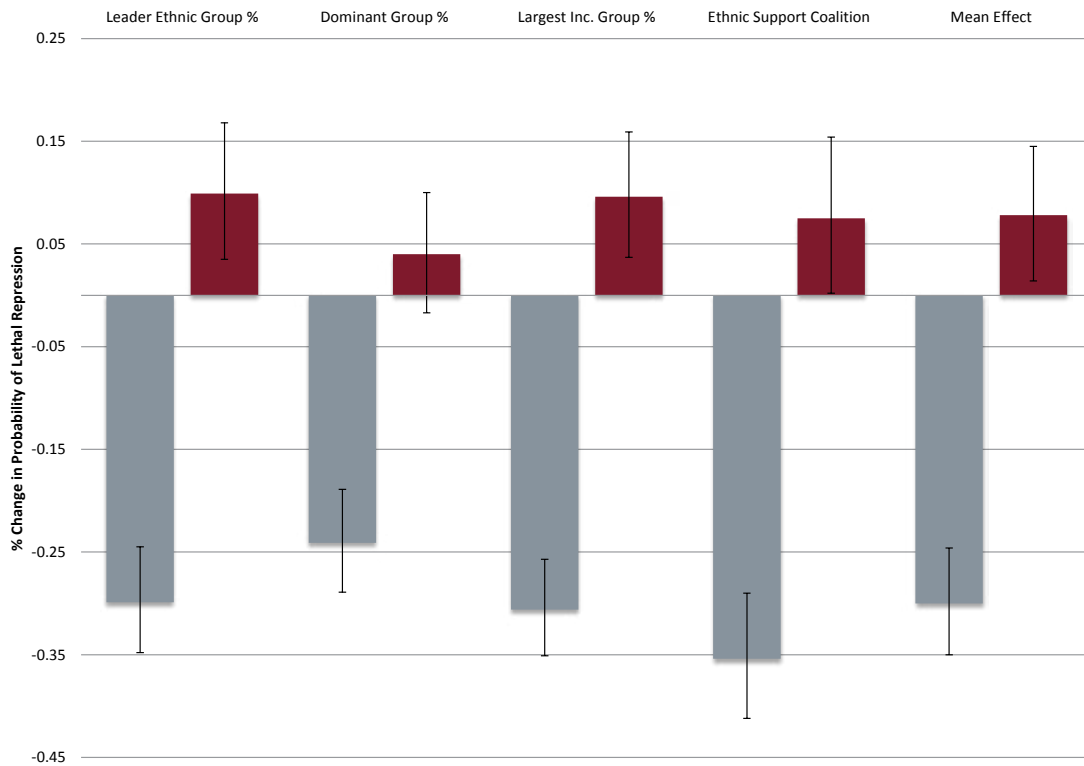# Ethnicity, Nonviolent Action, and Lethal Repression in Africa

Figure 1: Effects of changes in the leader's/government's ethnic support coalition on lethal repression of nonviolent challenges. Mean effect is the mean of the estimated effect for the four ways of measuring ethnic support coalitions. Estimates based on calculations in Hendrix and Salehyan (2015); see accompanying working paper.

that mobilization may ultimately unseat them from power. Thus, the policy implications revolve around reducing the fear of losing office.

One way to do this is through democratic institutions, which provide regular opportunities for removing leaders from office through normal institutional channels. One of the virtues of democracy is that today's losers can be tomorrow's winners; politics is not an entirely zero-sum game. Moreover, democratic institutions constrain leaders to the point that the value of staying in office is not so large compared to the prospect of leaving. In many authoritarian systems, the only options for leaving power are either in a casket or in exile. Many leaders find this particularly unattractive. One of the reasons Nigeria's recent elections did not result in chaotic post-election violence was because Goodluck Jonathan, the outgoing president, did not fear that leaving office would mean becoming a target for persecution – or worse. Our analysis further indicates that democracy does not predictably lead to the marginalization of small ethnic groups, so fears that a shift

to democracy would mean permanent minority status are largely unfounded. Of course, for democratic institutions to pacify political contestation, they must endure. Since 2005, Africa has experienced a decade of democratic backsliding into authoritarian rule.[9]

Another way of diminishing rulers' fears of leaving office may be for the international community to hold them less accountable once they leave office. Many rulers, especially in Africa, hang on to power because they fear retribution for their actions in office once they re-enter civilian life. Paradoxically, institutions like the International Criminal Court – which has thus far issued 32 indictments, all against Africans – may reinforce this tendency by making it more difficult for them to secure guarantees of post-office security and precluding efforts to build local institutions that would constrain leaders in the first place. To the extent these well-intentioned institutions engender these perverse incentives, they may make rulers more likely to meet nonviolent protest with deadly force.

ENDNOTES

1   Salehyan, Idean, Cullen S. Hendrix, Jesse Hamner, Christina Case, Christopher Linebarger, Emily Stull, and Jennifer Williams, "Social conflict in Africa: A New Database." *International Interactions* 38, no. 4 (2012): 503-511.

2   Bates, Robert H., "Modernization, Ethnic Competition and the Rationality of Politics in Contemporary Africa," in *States versus Ethnic Claims: African Policy Dilemmas*, ed. Donald Rothchild and Victor A. Olorunsola. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, pp. 152-171 (1983); Eifert, Ben, Edward Miguel, and Daniel N. Posner, "Political Competition and Ethnic Identification in Africa," *American Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 2 (2010): 494-510.

3   Wantchekon, Leonard, "Clientelism and Voting Behavior: Evidence from a Field Experiment in Benin," *World Politics* 55, no. 2 (2003): 399-422.

4   Roessler, Philip, "The Enemy Within: Personal Rule, Coups, and Civil War in Africa." *World Politics* 63, no. 2 (2011): 300-346; Buhaug, Halvard, Lars-Erik Cederman, and Jan Ketil Rød, "Disaggregating Ethno-Nationalist Civil Wars: A Dyadic Test of Exclusion Theory," *International Organization* 62, no. 3 (2008): 531-551.

5   Chenoweth, Erica, and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict*, Columbia University Press, 2011.

6   Blanchard, Lauren P., "Nigeria's Boko Haram: Frequently Asked Questions," Congressional Research Service Bulletin 7-5700, 2014; "Jonathan's PR offensive backfires in Nigeria and abroad," *Reuters* 8 July, 2014.

7   Salehyan, Idean, Cullen S. Hendrix, Jesse Hamner, Christina Case, Christopher Linebarger, Emily Stull, and Jennifer Williams, "Social conflict in Africa: A New Database." *International Interactions* 38, no. 4 (2012): 503-511; Wimmer, Andreas, Lars-Erik Cederman, and Brian Min, "Ethnic Politics and Armed Conflict: A Configurational Analysis of a New Global Data Set." *American Sociological Review* 72, no. 2: 316-337.

8   Those different measures are leader ethnic group %, which is the proportion of the population coming from the leader's ethnic group, dominant group %, the share of population that is from the politically dominant ethnic group, largest included group %, which is the share of population that is from the largest included group (accounting for situations in which leaders from small ethnic groups rule in coalition with larger groups), and finally ethnic support coalition, which applies a latent variable approach to combining the previous three measures. For a more detailed discussion, see the accompanying working paper.

9   Freedom House, "Sub-Saharan Africa," https://freedomhouse. org/regions/sub-saharan-africa#.VaPbPHiJnww.

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Cullen Hendrix is Associate Professor at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies and directs the Project of Environment, Food and Conflict at the School's Sié Center. Dr. Hendrix has published widely on the topics of contentious politics, the environment and civil conflict, food security, and human rights. Since 2010, he has held a research appointment at the Peterson Institute for International Economics. He is also Co-Director of the Geographic Information Systems Center at Lake Victoria, Uganda, and Co-Director of the Social Conflict Analysis Database, a project cataloging micro-data on social conflict in Africa, the Gulf region and Latin America.