



RESEARCH BRIEF – DECEMBER 2014

UNDERSTANDING THE TARGETS OF SOCIAL CONFLICT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why do social movements and dissidents sometimes target the government, while at other times they target non-governmental actors? As natural and man-made disasters negatively affect people's livelihoods and well-being, dissidents can focus their attention on a number of targets to express their grievances, so what factors influence the decision by dissidents to target the government? The authors present statistical findings indicating that protests about *economic issues* such as unemployment and inflation are more likely to target the state as state penetration into the economy increases. Protests about *ethnic issues* are less likely to target the state as ethnic diversity increases. These relationships are examined statistically using a newly updated and extended version of the Social Conflict Analysis Database (SCAD), an events-based dataset on social conflicts from 1990-2013, covering all of Africa and now also Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean for comparative analysis.

AUTHORS

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Since the end of Apartheid, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) has been a major force in South African politics as one of the vanguards of the labor movement. While the organization enjoys close relations with the ruling party—the African National Congress—it has coordinated several strikes and organized protests across the country, including many that have targeted the state. For instance, in 2001 COSATU launched major nationwide protests against government plans to privatize several state-owned industries, a move that would potentially reduce wages. In other cases, COSATU targeted private firms, such as in protests in 2008 against a major retail chain, Pick n Pay, over rapidly rising prices that negatively affected consumers. Thus, the organization has been quite varied and nuanced in its choice of tactics and targets.

Such diversified tactics in times of social upheaval are not unique to African politics. For example, organizations engaged in the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1960s marched on Washington and lobbied Congress for federal legislation, but also launched boycotts and protests against segregationist businesses across the South.

As these examples illustrate, social movement organizations and dissident groups face important strategic choices about the appropriate venue for action. While the state is often an attractive target given its power to implement and enforce policies, groups sometimes also choose to target other social actors.

This brief examines how the issues driving social conflict events, and societal factors such as ethnic diversity and government involvement in the economy, interact to influence the target choices of dissidents. In the face of climate change and natural disasters, grievances over

the economy are likely to mount and are often manifested as ethnic antagonisms. As popular discontent increases, it is important to understand how social groups and political organizations channel their energies and why they choose to take action against particular institutions.

THE ECONOMY, ETHNIC DIVERSITY, AND TARGET CHOICE

First, this study posits that dissident incentives to target the state are influenced by the centrality of the government in the everyday lives of citizens. Specifically, this logic argues that as the level of state penetration into the economy increases, there will be an increase in government targeting when protests are addressing economic issues such as unemployment and inflation. From protests against food price spikes to those against structural adjustment programs, economic problems are often of central concern to dissidents.

In free-market economies, the state plays a relatively light role in managing the economic affairs of the country. States may impose taxes on private incomes and corporate profits, regulate business practices as they pertain to issues such as employment discrimination or environmental impact, and partner with private enterprises as when firms bid on public contracts. Few industries are directly controlled by the government, and private enterprises are allowed to operate in a competitive business environment.

As popular discontent increases, it is important to understand how social groups and political organizations channel their energies and why they choose to take action against particular institutions.

In command economies, on the other hand, the state plays a much more active role in managing economic life. The size of the public sector is typically much larger, with several industries (e.g. oil, telecommunications, and railroads) being run by the government itself, and employment in the public sector is a large share of the workforce.

When the state plays a more active role in the economy, grievances about economic issues such as unemployment, inflation, or environmental externalities effectively become grievances against the state itself. In a free-market economy, workers who are unhappy with their wages may form unions and launch strikes and protests directly against the company for which they work. When the public sector is the dominant employer, however, wages are set by the state as a matter of government policy. In that case, grievances are thus more likely to be directed at the state, as there are few other alternatives for addressing one's demands.

Second, dissident incentives to target the state are influenced by the availability of non-governmental targets. Specifically, patterns of ethnic dominance and heterogeneity shape target choice. Ethnicity has been a powerful force in shaping social unrest, particularly in Africa, but also in other parts of the world that are marked by deep ethnic cleavages. In many societies, a particular ethnic group is dominant, making up a large share of the population and effectively controlling state institutions; relatively small minority groups are marginalized and excluded from power.

In several Latin American countries, for instance, Spanish-speaking descendants of European immigrants and those of mixed origin (mestizos) dominate the economic and political arenas, with indigenous peoples being relatively marginal political actors. In such scenarios, protests about ethnic and cultural issues are often expressed as demands for cultural recognition and greater rights or

autonomy, directed against the state, as the state is seen as favoring a particular group. For example, the short-lived Zapatista uprising in southern Mexico and subsequent protests were framed as demanding greater rights, cultural recognition, and educational opportunities for impoverished indigenous groups that had been ignored by the government. Similarly, in 2009 the Miskito people of Nicaragua declared independence from the state, which they argued had neglected their economic and cultural aspirations for decades. Thus, ethnic grievances become grievances against the state, and there are few alternatives but to target the state for redress.

In more diverse societies, however, there is often not a singularly dominant ethnicity. State institutions are not strongly identified with one particular ethnic group, but rather, various groups vie for economic and political influence. Ethnically based political parties may compete for power and each has a credible chance of controlling the state.

Take for example the political situation in Kenya, where the Kikuyu, Kalenjin, Luo, Luhya, and Kamba each are a viable 'threat' to the other and loose coalitions of ethnic parties regularly compete for power. These cleavages have often boiled over to major turmoil, as seen following the 2007 elections.

In such settings of high ethnic diversity, ethnic groups are much more likely to directly challenge one another rather than issue demands against the state. While these conflicts may have political undertones, they are not directly targeted at government officials or institutions. Ethnic riots and inter-communal violence will target members of other groups that are perceived of as rivals or threats.

Ethnic grievances, therefore, might be targeted at the state or against other available communities, depending on the level of diversity in society.

DATA ANALYSIS

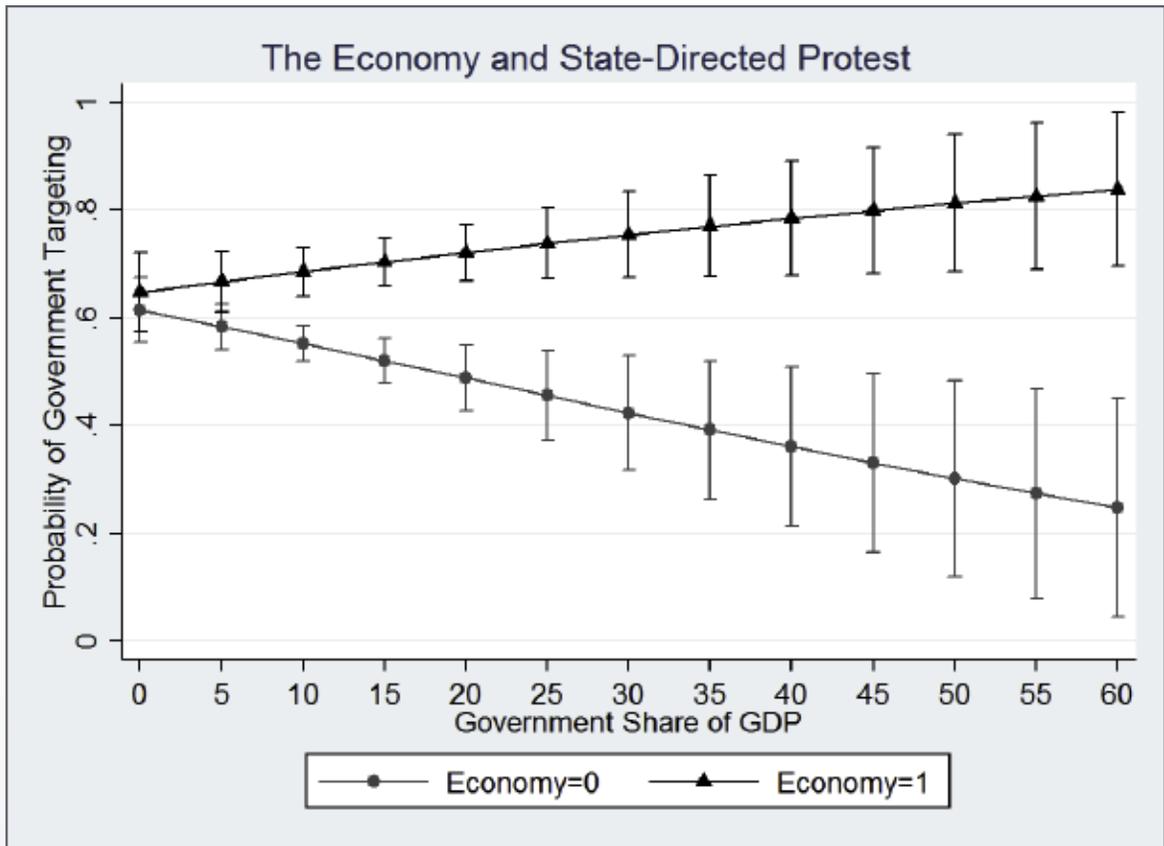
To test the claims presented above, this research uses a newly updated and expanded version of the Social Conflict Analysis Database (SCAD), which now contains data on social conflict events including peaceful demonstrations, riots, strikes, and armed attacks in 47 African countries and 13 countries in Latin America including Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean for the period 1990-2013.¹ Data on whether or not dissidents targeted the central government come from SCAD.²

Likewise, several of the explanatory variables considered in this analysis are from SCAD. First, this includes data on the *issue* driving each event. Specifically, SCAD includes a variable for economic issues that denotes when the contentious action included demands about employment, inflation, and the like (issue category 2 in SCAD). There is a separate variable for ethnic issues that denotes when the protest was about ethnic discrimination or ethnic rights (issue category 5 in SCAD).

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Second, the study includes a variable for *whether an event was violent*. This uses a variable in SCAD that tracks riots, anti-government, extra-government, and intra-government violence. Data for the other explanatory variables come from a variety of other sources.³ The main explanatory variables of interest are *government involvement in the economy*, operationalized by government share of GDP, and *ethnic heterogeneity*, measured by the Ethno-Linguistic Fractionalization Index (ELF). ELF is a variable that ranges from zero to one and measures the probability that two randomly selected individuals belong to the same ethnic group.

Figure 1. Likelihood of Government Targeting for Economic and Non-Economic Grievances Given Government Share of GDP



Notes: Economy = 0 refers to events about non-economic issues while Economy = 1 refers to protests about economic issues. The vertical bars represent 90% confidence intervals in the statistical analysis.

Economic Grievances

The statistical findings offer support for the theoretical framework. As hypothesized, the likelihood of government targeting increases as government share of GDP increases. Protests about economic issues such as unemployment and inflation are shown to target the state more

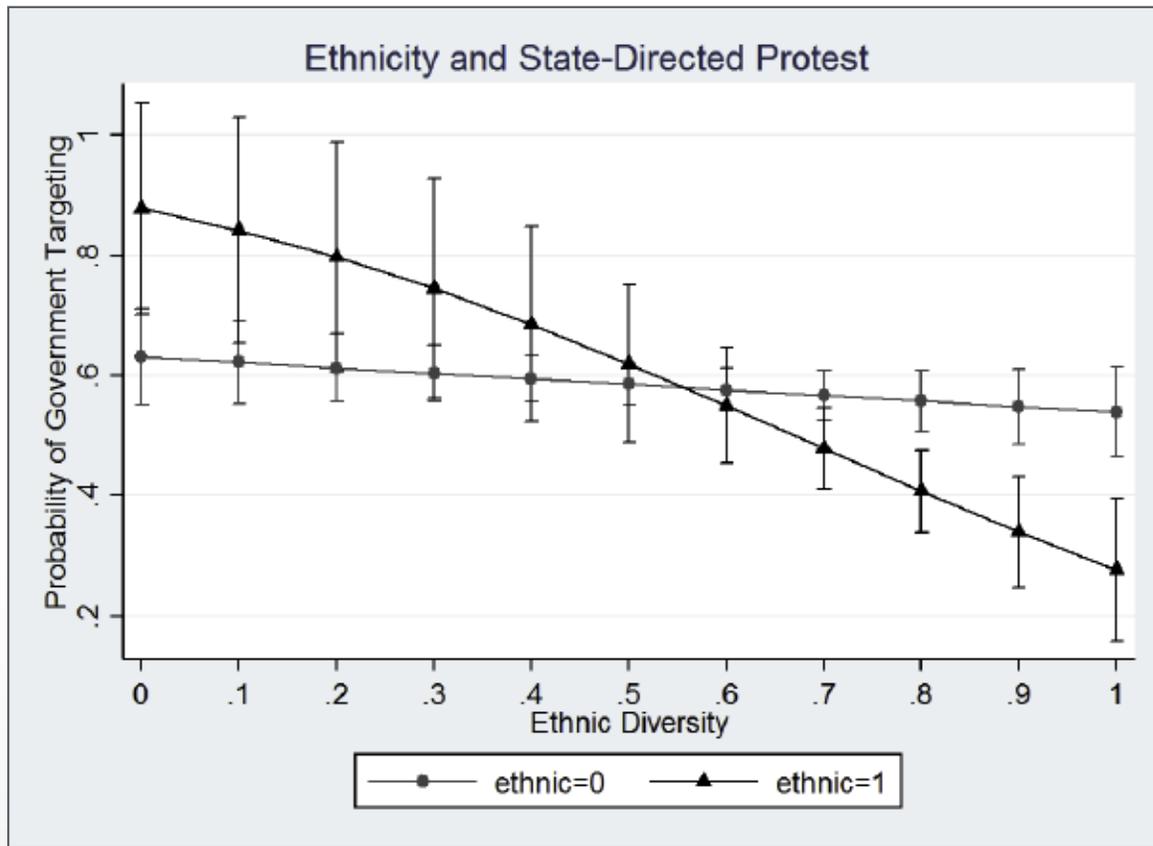
often as state penetration into the economy increases. While events related to economic issues have a 65 percent chance of targeting the state when government share of GDP is close to zero, such events have a 75 percent chance of targeting the state when government share of GDP is 30 percent (see Figure 1).

For non-economic issues, there is the reverse effect. In other words, the probability of government targeting for non-economic issues decreases when government share of GDP increases. Specifically, the probability of targeting the government when government share of GDP is close to zero is approximately 62 percent. However, when government share of GDP increases to 60 percent, the chance of government targeting for non-economic issues drops to less than 50/50.

The likelihood of government targeting increases as government share of GDP increases.

Protests about economic issues such as unemployment and inflation are shown to target the state more often as state penetration into the economy increases.

Figure 2. Likelihood of Government Targeting for Ethnic and Non-Ethnic Grievances Given Country Ethnic Heterogeneity



Notes: Ethnic = 0 refers to events that are not about ethnic issues while Ethnic = 1 refers to protests about ethnic issues. The vertical bars represent 90% confidence intervals in the statistical analysis.

Ethnic Grievances

With respect to the effect of ethnic diversity, the results are somewhat less pronounced, but still striking.

For non-ethnic issues, groups are roughly equally likely to target the state across varied levels of ethnic diversity. From the most homogeneous to the most diverse countries, the odds of an event targeting the state remain in the 55-65 percent range.

However, as diversity increases, the odds of an event about ethnic issues targeting the state plummets significantly (see Figure 2). In the most homogenous countries (with an ELF score close to zero), the odds of targeting the state are close to 90 percent. Yet, as countries

become very diverse, the odds of targeting the state fall to less than a third. Thus, protests about ethnic issues are less likely to target the state as ethnic diversity increases.

In a nutshell, these results tell us something important about when dissidents target the state. Free-market systems are inherently more complex as the government plays a relatively small role in managing the economy. Just as state dominance of the economy leads to more anti-government protests about economic issues, the presence of a dominant ethnic group leads to more anti-government protests about ethnic issues. Ultimately, being able to predict where dissidents will focus their energy will help in developing appropriate strategies for redressing popular demands.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Policy makers are often concerned with understanding when and where mass unrest events will take place. Equally important, however, is insight into which groups such social and political actors will target. This is true for violent events, when policy makers must take precautions to protect vital government functions and take measures to ensure that private actors do not become victims of violence. And it is also true for non-violent action, which can be disruptive, but also often suggests that more can be done to address legitimate public demands.

Some countries have much larger state sectors and government management of the economy. In such societies, it is important for governments to be proactive and work with non-governmental groups to ensure that economic shocks are ameliorated such that unrest does not turn violent.

Issues such as climate change, environmental degradation, food price inflation, and water scarcity have clear economic impacts. For historical reasons, some countries have much larger state sectors and government management of the economy. In such societies, it is important for governments to be proactive and work with non-governmental groups to ensure that economic shocks are ameliorated such that unrest does not turn violent. In some cases, this may mean a gradual reduction of price supports, well-managed privatization of state-owned enterprises, and the elimination of anti-competitive regulations to liberalize the economy. In sectors where this is not feasible, providing labor unions and non-governmental groups access to the decision-making process can help stave off unrest.

In more free-market systems, it is equally important to manage economic shocks by expanding access to insurance mechanisms, providing social programs such as job training and agricultural extension, and regulating uncompetitive business practices.

Moreover, steps can and should be taken to ensure that marginalized ethnic groups have a greater say over decisions that directly affect them. Constitutional measures that provide all ethnic groups with representation and legal protection can reduce the perception that particular groups dominate the state. Autonomous regions and local decentralization may also assist in this regard. When and where ethnic antagonisms do flare up and lead to conflict, it is important that leaders are held accountable for their actions to avoid the perception of impunity. Such steps may not eliminate all tension and conflict, but can help to avoid the most disruptive instances of violence and unrest. 🇳🇵

ENDNOTES

- 1 Due to data limitations on some of the other variables included in this study, this analysis is for the period 1990-2011.
- 2 For details, see Idean Salehyan, Cullen Hendrix, Jesse Hamner, Christina Case, Christopher Linebarger, Emily Stull, and Jennifer Williams, "Social Conflict in Africa: A New Database," *International Interactions* 38, 4 (2012): 503-511.
- 3 Other controls and modeling choices are described in a complete version of this paper, which is available from the authors.
- 4 For details regarding government share of GDP, see Alan Heston, Robert Summers, and Bettina Aten, Penn World Table Version 7.1, Center for International Comparisons of Production, Income and Prices at the University of Pennsylvania, November 2012. For details regarding ethnic fractionalization, see Alberto Alesina, Arnaud Devleeschauwer, William Easterly, Sergio Kurlat, and Romain Wacziarg, "Fractionalization," *Journal of Economic Growth* 8, 2 (2003): 155-194.

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A photograph of a man in a red shirt and orange cap pushing a blue cart filled with produce, including bananas and green beans, in front of a mural depicting soldiers in military gear. The scene is set outdoors on a paved surface.

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