

CHAPTER 1

Explaining violent conflict

How do we explain violent conflict? The answer to this question depends on the type of conflict in question. Inter-state wars were driven mainly by disputes over territory. The quest for independence or for majority rule motivated liberation struggles in Algeria, Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Namibia, and South Africa. Several explanations have been proposed for other types of internal conflict. Most of them have sought to identify risk factors — factors that tend to increase the risk of violent conflict. Risk factors alone do not make violent conflict inevitable. Some risk factors change very slowly and are always present. But, it is a conjunction of risk factors that often seems to lead to violent conflict. The actual outbreak of violence is often brought about by particular events, or conflict triggers.

This chapter assesses the evidence on the risk factors of violent conflict and examines conflict triggers. It focuses on civil conflict, which involves one or more organized rebel movements fighting the government. In recent African civil wars, the rebellion usually involves relatively small numbers of persons actually engaged in direct military hostilities. The wars are fought mainly with small arms and light weapons, and the use of child soldiers is widespread. The civilian population is often abused and used as human shield, producing large civilian casualties. Arms are procured mainly from non-state actors, with primary commodities sometimes playing a major financing role.

Conflict risk factors

The last few years have seen the emergence of empirical econometric analyses — usually large, cross-country studies — that seek to identify generic risk factors of violent conflict, that is, risk factors present in most, if not all, violent conflicts. However, empirical econometric analysis by itself does not directly identify the causes of violent conflict; it merely identifies variables correlated with the risk of its occurrence, the so-called risk factors. This section analyzes the key factors that have been associated with the risk of violent internal conflict in empirical work, case studies, and the popular media.

Natural resources

Natural resources, in particular, “blood diamonds”, have been blamed for recent civil conflicts in Angola, Sierra Leone, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Liberia. However, attempts to provide generic empirical evidence on the role of natural resources in fueling violent conflict have attracted four major critiques. The first is that results are fragile and do not hold in the face of different methodologies and datasets. Collier and Hoeffler (2004a) obtained a positive correlation between natural resource dependence and the risk of civil conflict onset. However, the positive correlation largely disappeared when Fearon (2005), using the same data, coded the observations annually, in contrast to Collier and Hoeffler’s five-year coding.

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Second, the interpretation of a correlation between resource abundance and the risk of civil conflict has been disputed. Collier and Hoeffler (2004a) argue that the correlation reflects greed — the opportunities natural resources provide for financing rebellion and for making it “perhaps even attractive”. However, “greed” is just one of many plausible possibilities (Humphreys 2005). Natural resources can induce state weakness — as the resource curse literature has highlighted — raising the risk of violent conflict. Indeed, countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, and Liberia experienced state failure before experiencing resource-fuelled civil conflict. In fact, in Sierra Leone and Liberia, natural resources came to play a significant role only several years after the civil conflict started. Fearon and Laitin (2003), who find that oil dependence raises the risk of conflict, argue that oil states are more likely to have weak structures because they have less need for strong bureaucracies to raise revenue. They argue further that oil and many other types of natural resources tend to favor the government, so they cannot be seen as proxies for financing opportunities for rebellion. Oil extraction and mining are seldom controlled by rebel groups because of the large investment usually required. Moreover, governments often use large oil revenues or loans backed by future revenues to invest in military capabilities that could effectively deter rebellion.

A resource abundance-conflict correlation could also stem from conflicts fuelled by perceptions of unfair apportionment of resource revenues, as in Nigeria. Ross (2004) traces the origins of the civil conflict in

Southern Sudan to such disputes. The extraction of natural resources may also foster grievances, such as through environmental damage as in Nigeria. Also, a correlation between natural resource abundance and the risk of conflict could arise if conflict, or even expectations of conflict, causes other economic activities to cease, leaving resource extraction as the dominant activity (Humphreys 2005).

The third critique relates to the measurement of natural resources. Collier and Hoeffler (2004a), the “greed” advocates, actually exclude diamonds and narcotics — the type of resources chiefly associated with fuelling recent civil conflicts in Africa and elsewhere — from their measurement of natural resources (Fearon 2005). Their measurement includes cash crops, which are unlikely to fuel civil conflict because large profits from their exploitation require control of a national distribution or production system, which rebels usually lack (Fearon and Laitin 2003).

The fourth critique relates to the possibility of a two-way relationship between natural resource abundance and the risk of conflict: It may well be that the risk of conflict actually increases natural resource dependence. Most empirical studies ignore this two-way relationship. Their results may therefore be biased (inaccurate).

Low income

Almost all empirical studies find low per capita income to be associated with a high risk of onset of civil conflict. This finding is subject to a number of interpretations. One interpretation is that when incomes are low,

people have little to lose by joining a rebellion (Collier and Hoeffler 2004a).

However, in many cases — Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, and Sierra Leone — low income was attributable to a general governance failure that induced growth collapse, state failure, and violent conflict. Thus, it is not necessarily low income per se that raises the risk of conflict. Violent conflict stems from the underlying conditions that kept incomes low while weakening the state's capacity to deliver services and security.

Low economic growth

Many empirical studies report a strong relationship between low economic growth and a high risk of conflict onset. Several explanations could be advanced. First, if low income is a risk factor for conflict then sustained decline in income further raises the risk of conflict. Second, prolonged decline in income may be symptomatic of deterioration in governance and state capacity, which may in itself constitute a risk factor. The example of Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo has already been cited. Third, the deterioration of income may trigger distributional fights or deepen grievances with the government, which may then raise the risk of conflict.

Ethnic antagonisms

Certain conflicts in Africa have taken an outward ethnic manifestation, such as in Rwanda and Burundi. However, cross-country empirical evidence on the relationship between ethnic composition and the risk of civil war is conflicting. Fearon and Laitin's (2003) results largely

dismiss the idea that ethnic and religious differences, however measured, raise the risk of conflict. On the other hand, Reynal-Querol (2002) finds that countries with "ethnic polarization" — with two sizeable but distinct groups seem to have somewhat higher risks of conflict. Several studies find that ethnic dominance — in which one ethnic group constitutes 45–90 percent of the population — increases the risk of conflict (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004a; and Hegre and Sambanis, 2006). Some authors find that the risk is accentuated where the ethnic cleavage is combined with systematic exclusion along ethnic lines (Cederman and Girardin, 2007) or systematic income differences (Østby, 2008).

Bates (2008) argues that ethnic tensions are a symptom and a result rather than a cause of violent conflict in Africa. For example, in the case of Burundi, it is argued that the causes of violence go beyond any alleged age-old antagonisms between Hutu and Tutsi (Ndikumana 2000). The causes, analysts argue, are rooted in institutional failure that has perpetuated economic and political inequality across ethnic groups and regions.

Neighborhood effects and external instigation

Violent conflict often spills over into neighbouring countries. The civil conflict in Liberia spilled over to Sierra Leone. Subsequently, combatants from Sierra Leone and Liberia aided a short-lived rebellion in Guinea (Conakry). Some combatants from Sierra Leone and Liberia later became involved in the conflict in Côte d'Ivoire. Recent empirical studies report that conflicts in adjacent countries roughly double the

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risks in another country (Gleditsch, 2007, and Buhaug and Gleditsch 2008). Other aspects of neighborhood can also have an effect on the risk of conflict. Hegre and Sambanis (2006) and Gleditsch (2007) find that conflict onsets are less frequent in countries located in neighborhoods with high average democracy levels.

Given the porosity of national borders, conflicts in one country can spill over neighboring countries notably through refugee flows. The risk is particularly high in cases of ethnic conflicts where similar ethnic groups span across borders of neighboring countries.

Besides spillover effects, governments sometimes instigate or participate in violent conflict in neighboring countries. The apartheid regimes in South Africa and the then Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) supported the Renamo rebel movement in Mozambique. Former President Taylor of Liberia is now being tried by the special court for Sierra Leone for his alleged support for the Sierra Leone rebel movement.

Geography and large populations

Fearon and Laitin (2003) find that conflict onsets are more frequent in countries with forests and mountains, and territories that are non-contiguous (split into distinct parts such as Angola). The authors attribute this to the challenges facing counter-insurgency efforts in countries with such 'rough terrain'. Similarly, Collier and Hoeffler (2004a) find that countries with large population concentrations that are far from the capital have a higher risk of conflict. Rough terrain has aided violent conflict in several African countries. Rebels have operated from the

sanctuary of mountainous bases in Sierra Leone (the Gola forest), Burundi, and other countries.

The war resumed in 1983, this time waged by the southern-based Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) against the government. The situation was exacerbated after the government attempted to implement Sharia (Islamic) Law in the entire country in September 1983 although people in the south are mainly Christians and animists. The SPLA signed a comprehensive peace deal with the government to end the civil war in January 2005. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement granted autonomy to the South and called for a referendum on independence in 2011. Meanwhile, in Darfur, western Sudan, war broke out in 2003, involving several rebel groups.

Many studies find that populous countries have more internal conflicts (Hagre and Sambanis, 2006). One explanation is that large populations are often found in countries with large areas and long distances between the capital and peripheral areas. Rebellion could be easier to organize in peripheral areas, which may be less well defended or even ignored by the government. Second, a large population may be more difficult to police than a small one. It also increases the number of potential rebels to recruit to a rebellion. The Democratic Republic of Congo is a striking example of civil conflict aided by a large geographical size and population.

Whatever the initial or root causes of the so-called First and Second Congo Wars (1996–97, and 1998–2003) the sheer size of the country has worsened matters. Rebel groups can operate with relative ease in

distant regions, taking advantage of the administrative and military weakness of the central government.

Sudan is another example of a country whose political geography and history have aided violent conflict (see Box 1.1). Ethnic, racial and religious heterogeneity, characteristic of large populations, could lead to violent conflict, if not well managed.

Civil conflicts in Africa have not been confined to large countries. Liberia had a pre-war population of less than three million; Somalia, less than four million; and Sierra Leone, less than five million. Similarly, Rwanda and Burundi also have small populations and high population density., Yet all these small countries have experienced conflict.

Youth bulge

A “youth bulge” is a situation in which there is a large proportion of the youth population (in the 15–24 year age group) relative to the total adult population. Urdal (2005) finds that countries with youth bulges have a markedly higher risk of conflict onset. This result is consistent with the fact that violent conflict mainly involves young people. However, critics argue that the real issue is not the number of young people in society, but the extent to which they have opportunities, including employment opportunities.

Repression and corruption

In the absence of strong institutions to manage conflict and restrain government abuse in Africa, the political survival strategy

Box 1.1: Conflict in Sudan

Sudan is the largest country in Africa, and one of the most diverse. It is home to deserts, mountain ranges, swamps and rain forests. It has an area of 2.5 million square kilometers (966,757 square miles). Arabic is the official language and Islam the state religion, but the country has a large non-Arabic speaking and non-Muslim population. Sudan has experienced two sets of wars. The first was fought in the south (1955–72, 1983–2005) and the second started in the western region of Darfur in early 2003 and is still ongoing. Historically, the north of Sudan is predominantly Arab and Muslim, while the south is predominantly a mixture of Christianity and animism. These divisions were further reinforced by the British colonial policy of ruling the north and south under separate administrations. The British had, in fact, proscribed movement between the north and south. The result was increased isolation between the already distinct north and south, which, arguably, laid the seeds of conflict in the years to come. In 1955, the year before independence, a civil war began between northern and southern Sudan. The southerners, anticipating independence, feared the new nation would be dominated by the north. The conflict ceased in 1972.

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a government adopts is often critical for a country's long-term peace and security, and development. Unfortunately, governments sometimes use political repression as a survival strategy. Examples include Idi Amin in Uganda and Samuel Doe in Liberia. In such cases, the leaders tend to rely on a narrow ethnic base for support, alienating the rest of the nation. In the short term, repression may subjugate a nation. However, in the long term, organized opposition tends to build up and can take the form of violent conflict or rebellion as the only way of effecting regime change. Corruption can be used to buy off opposition, strengthening a government's hold on power. However, beyond a certain point corruption can weaken the state as key institutions and fiscal capacity are undermined, ultimately resulting in state failure. Davies (2007) offers this explanation for state failure and civil conflict in Sierra Leone, citing the collapse of fiscal revenues before the war. The Democratic Republic of Congo under Mobutu is another example.

Competition for scarce resources

Competition for scarce resources, particularly land, sometimes leads to violent conflict. Land has considerable socio-economic, political and symbolic value in African societies. It is a source of rural livelihoods and provides access to natural resources. The origins of the economic crisis in Zimbabwe can be traced, at least in part, to attempts by the government to redistribute land.

Inequality

Stewart (2000) articulates horizontal inequality — inequality between distinct

population groups — as a conflict risk factor. Uvin (2007) argues that this was a key cause of the conflict in Burundi. Østby (2008) finds some indications that “economic polarization” in which the population is divided into distinct groups of rich and poor (rather than a smooth continuum of incomes), increases the risk of internal conflict.

Bates (2008) argues that regional inequality is a major source of internal conflict in Africa: the Ashanti region versus the north in Ghana; north-south inequality in Uganda, Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire; Central Province versus the rest of the country in Kenya; Katanga versus other regions in the Democratic Republic of Congo; and oil-producing regions versus other regions in Nigeria and Sudan. Much of what some take as ethnic conflict originates from the fact that ethnic groups are geographically arrayed and so these fights over the distribution of wealth between regions often take the form of ethnic conflict. Ndikumana (2005) and Ngaruko and Nkurunziza (2000, 2003) also argue that distribution, rather than ethnicity, is the primary cause of conflict in Burundi.

Religious extremism

Religious extremism has emerged as a risk factor for violent conflict. Civilians are often targeted, sometimes with the use of suicide bombers. Iraq and Pakistan are well-known examples. Religious extremism is also identified as one of the causes of conflict in Somalia.

Flawed or incomplete transition to democracy

Democratization has been seen as integral to conflict resolution efforts by the UN and the

West. However, the democratization process has often been flawed or incomplete in several African countries. The term “inconsistent democracy” has been used in such instances. Inconsistent democracies tend to have an elected executive (usually a president) and wide and open participation in elections, but the legislature is very weak relative to the executive. Between elections, presidents and their governments can operate freely without much scrutiny. Several cross-country studies have associated this regime type with a high risk of conflict. Hegre et al (2001), Henderson and Singer (2000), de Soysa (2002), and others report an “inverted-U” relationship between the level of democracy and the risk of violent conflict: Political systems that are consistently autocratic or consistently democratic have similar risks of civil war, but in-between systems have considerably higher risks. However, the inverted-U relationship has been contested. Treier and Jackman (2008), and Vreeland (2008) find no relationship between the level of democracy and the risk of conflict onset.

Even if semi-democracies have a high risk of internal conflict, they seem to manage the conflicts less brutally. Eck and Hultman (2007) find the number of deaths in one-sided violence to be considerably higher in autocracies than in democratic and semi-democratic governments.

High military spending and large armies

Some level of military expenditure is necessary to provide security and maintain peace. Thus, high military spending and large armies may be expected to deter internal armed conflicts. However, the cross-

country evidence is somewhat mixed. Henderson and Singer (2000) find that military spending increases the risk of civil conflict, while Hegre and Sambanis (2006) find that large armies reduce it. One circumstance in which large military expenditures or large armies may raise the risk of conflict is when they are used as a means of repression and an alternative to dialogue and inclusiveness. The repressive Derg regime in Ethiopia sometimes spent nearly half of the national budget on defense.

Diasporas

Collier and Hoeffler (2004a) find that diasporas increase the risk of conflict renewal. One explanation is that diasporas can provide financing for rebellion. Diasporas may also find it easier to organize a rebellion from the sanctuary of foreign territory. Sometimes the very existence of a large diaspora is symptomatic of underlying risk factors for violent conflict such as state failure, government repression and ethnic antagonisms.

Colonialism and superpower rivalries

Some authors have stressed the role of colonialism and superpower rivalry in explaining violent conflict in Africa. Striking instances include western support for the kleptocratic Mobutu regime in the Democratic Republic of Congo; and support by the former Soviet Union and the West for the MPLA government and UNITA rebel movement, respectively, in Angola in the 1980s. The former Soviet Union also actively supported the Derg regime in Ethiopia, sending troops to repulse an invasion by

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Somalia in the Ogaden War of 1977–78. The repressive Barre regime in Somalia received support from the former Soviet Union and later from the West when it shifted allegiance.

Previous conflicts

Violent conflict exacerbates the very conditions that gave rise to it in the first place, creating a “conflict trap” from which escape is difficult (Human Security Report 2005 and Collier et al 2003). Numerous empirical studies confirm this proposition. Thus, once peaceful societies can get caught in a conflict trap. The end of combats may not necessarily mean the end of conflict if its root causes have not been resolved. In such circumstances, new conflict may be ignited, which explains the recurrence of conflicts in many countries.

Conflict triggers

Most of the risk factors discussed above have always been present. Many of them, notably rough terrain, change slowly, if at all, with economic growth rates sometimes being the main exception. Why does violent conflict erupt at some point in time if risk factors have always been present or hardly change? The following events or circumstances often serve as triggers of violent conflict. The triggers are often just a visible final step in an already deteriorating situation.

Attainment of independence, regime change, and military coups

Violent conflict sometimes follows a country’s attainment of independence, as was the case in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola, and Mozambique in the 1960s and 1970s. One explanation is that

independence opens the floodgates for competition to govern the state. In the absence of strong governance and conflict management institutions, violence may result. Also, intense political rivalry at the centre may weaken the state, increasing the feasibility of rebellion. In several cases, prior to independence, the constituent regions of a state had little in common as a “nation”, inducing a tendency to seek autonomy. Attempts by the central government to resist such moves could lead to violent conflict. Lastly, the regions may have been held together by the coercive force of the imperial power, which the post-independence governments may lack.

Other changes in a country’s political system may also trigger conflict. Several studies have shown that changes in a country’s regime type or level of democracy increase the subsequent risk of war (Hegre et al 2001). Relevant changes are the introduction or abolishing of elections of a parliament and/or the executive, an increase or a decrease in the degree to which the executive is accountable to parliament or other bodies.

Elections

Elections can provide a mechanism for peaceful change and for holding a government accountable to its citizens. In post-conflict societies, elections may signal a symbolic transition from war to peace and the setting up of a legitimate political order. As a now routine part of their mandates, UN peacekeepers have, in recent years, provided support for elections in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In Mozambique, Sierra Leone,

Liberia, and Burundi, elections have been conducted peacefully at the end of civil wars. In fact, in Sierra Leone, the opposition was victorious in the second elections conducted (in 2007) after the conflict ended in 2002.

Democratization and elections sometimes seem to increase the risk of violent conflict. Elections can be a trigger of conflict. UNITA returned to war in Angola in 1992 after refusing to contest the second round of presidential elections. In Kenya, disputed elections in December 2007 led to widespread violence with many casualties. In Zimbabwe, the opposition boycotted the second round of elections in June 2008 amidst rising levels of violence in the run-up to the elections.

Where the executive faces few constraints, winning or losing elections makes a big difference. Since executives in inconsistent democracies are hardly accountable to the electorate while in office, elections are the only means for non-elites to influence policies, and the outcome of the elections is of crucial importance. Conversely, since it is often quite profitable to be in the executive or the legislature in systems with weak checks and balances, the temptation to rig elections or to fail to honor the outcome of elections is greater than in more constrained democracies.

In post-conflict situations, Collier, Hoeffler and Söderbom (2008) find that elections shift conflict risk from the year before an election to the year after. Since both the incumbent and the opposition would prefer to come to power through elections, they tend to play a waiting game, delaying any possible recourse to violence

until after the elections. The authors also find the increase in risk after the election to be larger than the corresponding reduction before the election, and conclude that the net effect of elections is to increase the risk of civil war recurrence.

Neighboring conflicts

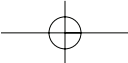
Conflict often spills over into neighbouring countries. The civil conflict in Liberia spilled over into Sierra Leone, while the presence in the Democratic Republic of Congo of the extreme Hutu factions from Rwanda helped trigger conflicts.

Dramatic events

Certain dramatic events, such as an assassination of a prominent personality, may plunge an already simmering conflict into wide-scale violence. Such events may create a power vacuum or serve as a signal or excuse for military action. An example of a conflict triggered by a dramatic event is the conflict in Burundi which erupted in 1993 after the assassination of the newly democratically elected President, the late Ndadaye.

Conclusion

The past years have seen a profusion of empirical studies aimed at explaining civil conflict. The results of such studies have been heavily contested in terms of methodology, data, and interpretation. Notably, natural resources have been blamed for fuelling civil conflict in some African countries. However, the mechanism through which natural resources raise the risk of conflict, as well as the empirical evidence, remains disputed. Furthermore, the preceding analysis of African experi-



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ences has highlighted the role of factors like legacies of colonialism and superpower rivalry, political repression and corruption, and state failure. These factors are usually omitted in empirical studies in part because they are hard to quantify. Taking into account the omission of these factors would

further qualify the findings from empirical studies. The contestability of research results, and the variety and specificities of African experiences, suggest a need for deep contextual analysis of any given conflict.

