

Donor Attention and Civil Unrest in Africa

Dominic ROHNER

Abstract :

Governments may be tempted to crack down on the opposition when the attention of donor countries is distracted. As strategic reaction to this, the opposition will have incentive to not incite such crackdowns. At the level of individuals, with agitations already under way, agents will substitute visible forms of unrest (riots) for more covert operations on soft targets (civilian targeted violence). We start from a simple game-theoretic model of the strategic interaction between the government and opposition in the face of anticipated versus unanticipated shocks. The empirical test of the theory exploits both unanticipated (disaster) and anticipated (election) shocks taking place in major donor countries to explain different forms of social violence in recipient countries. Consistent with the model's predictions, we find that in times when a given government has "leeway" to repress, the opposition reacts by reducing public agitations. But this is accompanied by increased violence towards private, pro-government, citizens. This implies that international lack of attention hurts democratic oppositions through the out-of-equilibrium threat of repression, and has knock on violent effects, even when on the surface the situation appears "calm". Thus, observed political crackdowns may only represent the "tip of the iceberg", and policies that would enhance international scrutiny would help safeguard public demonstrations of dissent, and reduce violence against civilians.