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Urban geography and protest mobilization in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Urbanization has long been seen by scholars and policymakers as a disruptive process that can contribute to social and political unrest, yet there is little cross-national quantitative empirical research on the topic. In this paper we provide a comprehensive analysis of the links between urban geography and the incidence of protests (i.e. demonstrations, riots and strikes) in African countries since 1990. In contrast to previous studies, we are careful to distinguish between urban population scale effects, urban population ratio effects, population rate-of-change effects and urban population distribution effects. We also provide an explicit test of the long-standing hypothesis that 'over-urbanization' increases the risk of civil unrest. Employing multilevel negative binomial models that control for key political and economic variables we find that urban population size and the number of large cities in a country are both positively and significantly associated protest incidence. By contrast, we find that a country's level of urbanization is negatively associated with protest incidence and reject the over-urbanization hypothesis: higher levels of urbanization are associated with less frequent protests at all income levels. We find no evidence that the pace of urban population growth or urban primacy significantly influence protest mobilization. In sum, our results provide a nuanced picture of the relationship between urban geography and protest incidence that challenges conventional wisdom and contemporary hyperbole about the dangers of 'rapid urbanization' in Africa in particular, and developing countries more generally.

Introduction

The process of urbanization has long been seen by scholars and policymakers as a disruptive process that can contribute to social and political unrest (see Cornelius, 1969; Goldstone, 2010; Hibbs, 1973; Huntington, 1968; Pye, 1969; Walton & Ragin, 1990). In his classic 1968 work *Political Order in Changing Societies* Samuel Huntington argued that "rapid urbanization leads to social dislocation and political instability" in cities in developing countries (2006 [1968], 299). More recently Jack Goldstone has identified urbanization in poor countries as one of the key 'mega-trends' shaping global security risks in the twenty first century, claiming that "the more heavily urbanized, the more [poor countries] are likely to experience Dickensian poverty and anarchic violence" (2010, 39). Yet despite this longstanding interest in the links between urbanization and civil unrest there has been little cross-national quantitative empirical research on the topic. In this paper we make a contribution to addressing this gap in the literature by examining the complex relationships between urban geography and protest mobilization in African countries between 1990 and 2013. We focus on Africa for two reasons. First, countries across the continent have experienced the highest rates of urban population growth on average in the world in recent decades. Second, it is the only continent for which comprehensive, comparable and transparent national-level data on protest activity are available.

Our analysis offers two contributions to the literature. First, we provide a comprehensive discussion and empirical investigation of the links between various aspects of urban geography and the likelihood of protests, including public demonstrations, riots and strikes. In contrast to previous studies of contentious collective action events such as protests, which often incorporate one or two urban demographic variables without controlling for others, we are careful to explicitly distinguish between urban population scale effects, urban population ratio effects, population rate-of-change effects and population distribution effects. We also provide a direct test of the long-standing hypothesis that 'over-urbanization' (i.e. urbanization without economic development) increases the likelihood of outbreaks of civil unrest.

Our second innovation is the use of a multilevel modelling strategy that allows us to distinguish between (a) the effects of changes in individual variables within countries over time, and (b) the effects of variation in key explanatory variables across countries. This is in contrast to previous empirical studies, which generally employ a country fixed-effects approach. Fixed effects models only consider within country difference, and do not allow differences between

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countries to be considered, meaning their presentation of the processes at hand are always incomplete in comparison to our approach.

Multilevel negative binomial models controlling for key political and economic variables show that urban population size and the number of large cities in a country are both positively and significantly associated with the frequency of protest events, as expected. Conversely, we find that a country's level of urbanization is negatively and significantly associated with protest incidence. We also reject the over-urbanization hypothesis (at least with regard to protest activity): interaction terms designed to explicitly test this hypothesis indicate that levels of urbanization are associated with less frequent outbreaks of unrest at every level of income. We find no evidence that the pace of urban population growth or urban primacy significantly influence the frequency of protest mobilization. In sum, our results provide a nuanced picture of the relationship between urban geography and protest incidence that challenges conventional wisdom and contemporary hyperbole about the dangers of rapid 'urbanization' in Africa in particular, and developing countries more generally. This more nuanced perspective hinges on recognizing the substantive difference between population ratio, scale, rate-of-change and distribution effects.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section two reviews the existing theoretical and empirical literature on the links between urban geography and civil unrest. It also provides a cursory review of key political and economic variables associated with civil unrest. Section three summarizes the variables used in our models and describes our multilevel binomial estimation strategy. Section four summarizes our key results and section five concludes.

Urban geography and protest mobilization: a review of theory and evidence

Existing literature on the causes of contentious collective action events such as protests offers a diverse range of theories which can roughly be grouped into four categories: grievance-based approaches, resource mobilization theory, political opportunity approaches, and modernization theory (Chenoweth & Ulfelder, 2015). In turn, these four broad approaches can be intuitively summarized as seeking to identify how the motives, means and opportunities for contentious collective action shape the frequency and intensity of events such as protests.

Theoretically there are many ways in which the size and distribution of populations, as well as changes in these variables, may affect the motives, means and opportunities for collective mobilization. In order to provide a structured approach to analysing these relationships we distinguish between four separate types of effects: population ratio effects, population scale effects, rate of population change effects and population distribution effects.

Urbanization and ratio effects

The term 'urbanization' is used somewhat carelessly in the literature to refer to a range of related but distinct phenomena. As a result, it is conceptualized and operationalized in a variety of ways in empirical research. Here we use the term in the way it is deployed by professional demographers: urbanization refers specifically to the proportion of a country's total population living in urban areas ('level of urbanization'), or the rate at which this proportion is changing ('rate of urbanization'). However, the fact that many authors use the term in a more generic way to refer to the demographic growth and physical expansion of towns and cities can lead to some confusion about causal mechanisms.

Theoretically, the association between a country's level of urbanization and contentious collective action is ambiguous. From a resource mobilization perspective, population concentration mitigates the perennial 'time-distance' costs associated with coordinating collective action thereby making it easier to organize a protest and hence increasing the probability of such an event (Sewell, 2001; see also Glaeser & DiPasquale, 1998; Herbst, 2009; Staniland, 2010; Wallace, 2013; Walton & Ragin, 1990). In more urbanized countries there may also be a lower probability of being detected or punished by a repressive political regime than in a less urbanized country, which might reduce the opportunity costs of participation. From a grievance perspective, population concentration creates challenges in terms of public goods delivery and the management of conflicts between diverse groups while at the same time bringing the prosperous and poor into close proximity and throwing socioeconomic inequality into stark relief (Blanco & Grier, 2009; Cornelius, 1969; Goldstone, 2010; Huntington, 1968; Wallace, 2014; Walton & Ragin, 1990). And from a modernization perspective, urbanization is traditionally associated with the emergence of a middle-class that is likely to agitate for enhanced political and economic rights or take to the streets to express their grievances (Chenoweth & Ulfelder, 2015; Huntington, 1968; Reissman, 1970). Through these resource mobilization, grievance and social modernization mechanisms, we might therefore expect a country with a highly urbanized population to experience more protest events than an identical country with a lower level of urbanization.

On the other hand, high levels of urbanization could plausibly reduce the incidence of contentious mobilization. While population concentration creates challenges, it also yields economies of scale in the provision of public goods (thereby reducing grievances or motives for protest) and facilitates government monitoring and strategic repression, which can reduce opportunities for mobilization and raises the costs of doing so (Collier & Hoeffler, 2004; Herbst, 2009; Staniland, 2010). Urbanization can also encourage social integration and the emergence of a unifying nationalist sentiment by bringing members of diverse and geographically dispersed communities into close physical contact (Reissman, 1970). This may have the effect of attenuating inter-communal tensions by cultivating personal friendships, intermarriages and economic interdependences between groups. For example, Green (2013) shows that urbanization has had a statistically significant negative effect on ethnic diversity in Africa, and ethnic diversity is often cited as a structural factor that may increase the likelihood of conflict or clashes (e.g. ethnic riots) between groups.

An increase in the proportion of a population living in urban areas could also affect the composition and behaviour of key political actors in ways that render protests less likely. Huntington (1968) argued that "[sustained] urbanization not only increases the number of slumdwellers, but it also expands and diversifies the middle class, bringing into existence new, more conservative middle-class strata" (301) that may be less likely to take to the streets. In other words, the first generation of urban middle classes may agitate in the streets, but the second is likely to have more to lose by doing so. Moreover, as the share of a nation's population living in urban areas increases it is rational for political elites in power to cater to urban preferences in order to (a) build a broad base of constituents and/or (b) mitigate the risk of outbreaks of urban unrest, which could undermine the authority or legitimacy of a ruling regime. The threat of urban unrest has been a concern for rulers since the birth of cities, hence the frequent recourse throughout history to 'bread and circuses' to appease urban masses (Ades & Glaeser, 1995; Anthony & Crenshaw, 2014; Wallace, 2013). In the contemporary era of at least nominally democratic mass politics in Africa, the ratio of urban dwellers may well factor into the political calculus of incumbent elites or their opponents. A study of urban political attitudes in Africa by Harding (2010) offers some indirect support for this hypothesis. Using Afrobarometer data, Harding found that urbanites in Africa generally have a more negative view of incumbent political parties than their rural counterparts, but this bias appears to be inversely correlated with the percentage of the population living in urban