



Politics and social violence in developing democracies: Theory and evidence from Brazil



Kristian Hoelscher

Department of Political Science, University of Oslo & Peace Research Institute Oslo, PO Box 9229 Grønland, NO-0134 Oslo, Norway

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 16 October 2014

Keywords:
Social violence
Homicide
Democratisation
Hybrid democracy
Political institutions
Local politics
Urbanisation
Brazil
Latin America

ABSTRACT

How do the political institutional features of developing democracies influence how violence occurs? Building on research showing that 'hybrid democracies' are more prone to social violence, this article argues that elite competition for power in the context of limited institutional oversight plays an important role in explaining violence. The framework here presents possible mechanisms linking sub-national political dynamics and rates of social violence in poorly institutionalised contexts. It highlights how political competition, concentrated political power, and constraints on cooperation can create opportunity structures where violence is incentivised and the rule of law is undermined. This is examined empirically using sub-national homicide data from over 5000 Brazilian municipalities between 1997 and 2010. Findings suggest violence is greater in contexts that are highly competitive – where political actors face credible challenges and have a more tenuous grip on power – and those where power is highly concentrated – where political actors have held power for longer periods or face limited credible challenges. Findings also suggest violence varies depending on whether interactions between state and municipal government are likely to be constrained or cooperative; and are consistent with literatures emphasising the importance of structural explanations of social violence. In light of on-going democratic transitions across the globe, the article highlights the value of understanding links between institutional context, contentious politics and social violence.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Third Wave democratisation sought to increase the openness of competition and citizen participation in politics. While many new democracies are more representative, democratic transitions have paradoxically coincided with increased violence in many countries, both as organised armed conflict (Hegre, Ellingsen, Gates, & Gleditsch, 2001; Mansfield & Snyder, 1995); and interpersonal forms of social violence (Fox & Hoelscher, 2012). Social violence is increasingly acknowledged as a threat to development (World Bank, 2011a, 2011b), eroding social capital; constraining access to employment, education, and health services; deterring public service provision and investment; and encouraging repressive governance or policing policies (Jütersonke, Krause, & Muggah, 2007; Lederman, Menéndez, & Loayza, 2002; Muggah, 2012). This has occurred particularly in Latin America (Holston, 2009b; Koonings, 2001; Zaluar, 2004), where hallmarks of formerly undemocratic

regimes have persisted, and factional conflicts between individuals or groups are often solved through extra-legal means. While greater competition and participation in political and economic arenas has been encouraged, recently formed democracies have often lacked the institutional capacity to prevent transgression of societal norms, and the legal frameworks to constrain the use of force (Karstedt, 2009).

In understanding how political dynamics in new democracies might influence social violence, looking at the national level preclude important sub-national factors. Violence is rarely uniform within a national territory, and the degree of violence, or its causes, can differ between cities, states and regions. In Brazil, for example, state-level homicide rates ranged between 12.9 and 66.8 per 100,000 in 2010, with trends over the previous decade including declines of 70% and increases of 300%. Such intra-country variation reiterates the utility of geographically disaggregated approaches to study violence. Recent work focussing on armed conflict, for example, highlights significant spatial and geographic variation in how, when and why civil violence emerges (Buhaug & Rød, 2006; Verpoorten, 2012; Zhukov, 2012). Despite this, social violence has yet to be rigorously studied using subnational approaches; and

E-mail address: kriho@prio.no.

while the importance of local factors has been emphasised, limited empirical consideration is given to subnational political and governance contexts.

Therefore, while democratising countries are generally more prone to social violence, the reasons underlying this remain unclear. Common narratives suggest the consolidation of autocratic or democratic state power and development of robust institutions are important for resolving conflicts and reducing violence (Bates, 2001, 2008; Chesnai, 1981); and violence emerges where institutions fail to consolidate the rule of law and citizens do not internalise norms of self-control (Eisner, 2001). While highlighting the disruptive nature of political transitions and the utility of political order, such explanations simply point to broad, general theories, with limited consideration of specific links between unconsolidated institutional contexts and violence. This is surprising given the emphasis on the role of institutions in structuring social, economic and political interactions and establishing a modicum of order in societies (North, 1991; North, Weingast, & Wallis, 2009). Moreover, while socio-economic and structural factors are important in explaining rates of violence (e.g. Fajnzylber, Lederman, & Loayza, 2002; LaFree & Drass, 2002), these variables are often poor at explaining variation over time.

In light of this, the current article examines whether *subnational political factors are related to rates of social violence in developing democratic contexts*. It develops a framework suggesting political competition, concentration of power, and cooperation can affect incentives for the use of violence; and empirically tests this using longitudinal data from Brazilian municipalities. The arguments presented here draw on contentious politics literatures (Tilly, 2003; Tilly & Tarrow, 2007) which highlight how political opportunity structures produced by institutional changes can create space for social movements and protests to occur. Central here is that political contestation in weakly institutionalised contexts can create motives for social violence to occur; and weak institutions and limited institutional oversight yield the opportunity and means to do so.

The study addresses three perceived knowledge gaps. First, it identifies possible relationships between political conditions and homicide rates in developing democracies, pointing to potential mechanisms by which political opportunity structures in incompletely institutionalised contexts could engender violent societies. Second, by disaggregating the study of politics and social violence, the paper seeks to understand these dynamics *within* a state in a novel way. Finally, by focussing on unconsolidated institutional contexts, the framework and findings offer insights into how violence may emerge in other countries undergoing democratic transitions.

Findings suggest a political dimension to social violence in Brazil. Violence is greater in contexts that are *highly competitive*, where political actors face credible challenges and have a more tenuous grip on power; and those where power is *highly concentrated*, where political actors have held power for longer periods or they face limited credible challenges. Results also suggest violence may increase or decrease depending on whether state and municipal government interactions are likely to be *constrained or cooperative*. Moreover, results are consistent with literatures emphasising structural covariates of social violence with homicide rates greater in poorer, more unequal, more populous, and more urbanised municipalities.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews theories on social violence and introduces a simple theoretical framework linking political opportunity structures and social violence. Section 3 briefly outlines the context of democratisation and violence in Brazil, Section 4 presents data and results of the empirical analysis, and Section 5 discusses findings and concludes.

The politics of social violence

Social violence refers to pervasive violence without an overt political motive. Typically measured by rates of homicide due to greater rates of reporting, the term includes ‘acts of violence committed by individuals or groups that do not reflect an attempt to contest the authority of a state...including assault, murder, gang violence and communal violence’ (Fox & Hoelscher 2012: 433). Traditionally, research on homicide or social violence has been the mainstay of criminologists. Focussing on North America or Europe, this literature has primarily focused on macro-level structural explanations or individual and community level risk factors such as race, inequality, poverty, and the functioning of welfare systems (e.g. Tcherni, 2011; Krivo, Peterson, & Kuhl 2009; Like, 2011). A growing body of literature has also begun to study homicide and violent crime from a comparative perspective in less developed regions (e.g. Marshall, Marshall, & Ren 2009; Stamatel, 2009; Ouimet, 2010). However, comparative criminologists still tend to emphasise macro-structural factors derived from American or European contexts – such as demographic change, inequality and poverty (see Nivette, 2011 for a review). While partly data-driven, such approaches often overlook differences in political and institutional factors between developed and developing countries and whether this may be important in explaining social violence in less economically and politically developed regions. This is somewhat puzzling given links between hybrid democracy and civil conflict generally (Hegre et al., 2001; Hegre & Sambanis 2006); and democratisation and violence in Latin America (Caldeira & Holston, 1999; Pearce, 2010).

Some studies have examined how institutional conditions and interpersonal violence may be related. These draw in large part on research linking rates of crime with legitimacy and reform of political, social and family institutions in the United States (LaFree, 1998). Other important contributions by Stucky (2003), and Stucky, Heimer, & Lang (2005) show how the local political context is important both in public security and criminal justice outcomes; and mediating the effect of structural conditions. In cross-national literatures, social violence has been linked with hybrid democracies (Fox & Hoelscher, 2012; Neumayer, 2003), modernisation processes (LaFree & Drass, 2002; LaFree & Tselsoni, 2006), and institutional upheaval and rapid democratic transitions (Schutte & Weidmann, 2011). Violence appears lower where there is consolidation of democratic or autocratic state power (Eisner, 2001, 2008) and where democratic norms are widely adopted (Karstedt & LaFree, 2006).

While instructive, these insights are limited in identifying *specific* ways violence emerges during periods of social and political change. Nivette and Eisner (2013) partially address this, outlining how perceived political legitimacy relates to lower homicide rates cross-nationally. Where states cannot legitimately preserve functional social, economic, legal or political institutions, internal (personal) and external (coercive) forms of social control are weakened; alternative forms of conflict resolution and private protection emerge to fill the regulatory roles the state fails to provide; and inequalities arising from a failure of the social contract fuel grievances that promote violence. This reiterates the importance of ‘grievance as motive’, a finding which recurs throughout the homicide literature (Fajnzylber et al., 2002; Krahn, Hartnagel, & Gartrell, 1986).

Particularly in Latin America, political transitions may also signal shifts from political to social violence. Rodgers highlights how the ‘shift from “political” violence to “social” violence... is frequently linked to a broader Latin American “crisis of governance”, whereby... incomplete democratisation... undermined the political authority of states and their ability to command a

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1061908>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1061908>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)