



# Sons of the Soil Conflict in Africa: Institutional Determinants of Ethnic Conflict Over Land

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**Summary.** — Can the political science literature on sons-of-the-soil (SoS) conflict and civil war explain patterns of ethnic conflict over land in sub-Saharan Africa? Sons-of-the-soil terminology, developed with reference to conflicts in South Asia, has been used to describe some of Africa's most violent or enduring conflicts, including those in eastern DRC, northern Uganda, the Casamance Region of Senegal, and southwestern Côte d'Ivoire. Is Africa becoming more like South Asia, where land scarcity has often fueled conflicts between indigenous land owners and in-migrants? This paper argues that political science theories that focus on rural migration and land scarcity alone to explain outbreaks of SoS conflict in Asia fall short in Africa because they are underdetermining. The paper proposes a model of structure and variation in land tenure institutions in sub-Saharan Africa, and argues that these factors are critical in explaining the presence or absence of SoS conflict over land. This conceptualization of the problem highlights the strong role of the state in structuring relations of land use and access, and suggests that the character of local state-backed land institutions goes far in accounting for the presence or absence, scale, location, and triggering of large-scale SoS land conflict in zones of smallholder agriculture. A meta-study of 24 subnational cases of land conflict (1990–2014), drawn from secondary and primary sources and field observations, generates case-based support for the argument. The study suggests that omission of land-tenure institution variables enfeebls earlier political science theory, and may inadvertently lead policy makers and practitioners to the erroneous conclusion that in rural Africa, primordial groups compete for land in an anarchic state of nature.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Can the political science literature on sons-of-the-soil (SoS) conflict and civil war explain patterns of ethnic conflict over land in sub-Saharan Africa? Scholars of Africa increasingly draw analogies between African land conflicts and the conflicts in South Asia that inspired SoS theories. Bates (2008) drew this analogy when he identified clashes between indigenous landholders and in-migrants over land as a factor in the collapse of political order in several African states. Many others have used sons-of-the-soil terminology to describe some of Africa's most violent or enduring conflicts, including those in eastern DRC, northern Uganda, the Casamance Region of Senegal, and southwestern Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>1</sup> Some structural and processual aspects of land-related conflict in Africa do indeed mirror South Asian-style sons-of-the-soil conflicts. In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) today, rural population densities and levels of land inequality are approaching those prevailing in rural South Asia in the 1950s and 1960s. Land hunger, shrinking farm sizes, and patterns of agricultural involution reminiscent of parts of Asia can now be found in the densely settled regions of most African countries.<sup>2</sup> These socio-demographic realities shatter old assumptions or stereotypes about Africa's land abundance and the "social safety valve" that open land frontiers could provide. Moreover, as in South Asia, rising land competition in Africa often heightens tension between sons-of-the-soil and in-migrants who have settled in their homelands, sometimes fueling localized ethnic violence or contributing to larger political conflagrations. This intertwining of land competition and ethnic conflict is what suggests analogies to the South Asian struggles that inspired political science theorizing on SoS conflict.

This paper asks how far political science theory on the outbreak and escalation of SoS conflict in South Asia can go in explaining patterns of SoS conflict in SSA. It focuses one of

the most-cited political science theories of SoS conflict, Fearon and Laitin's (2011) SoS conflict escalation model, which was illustrated with an account of land conflict in Sri Lanka. Fearon and Laitin's theory links land competition to civil war through an ethnic conflict trigger mechanism. Their findings present Africa scholars with a puzzle. Classic sons-of-soil civil war appears to be surprisingly rare in Africa, given sub-Saharan Africa's high levels of ethnic heterogeneity and the high prevalence of civil war.<sup>3</sup> In SSA's densely settled, ethnically heterogeneous zones, even SoS conflict on scales of magnitude and intensity that fall well below F&L's operational definition of civil war (1,000+ battle deaths) is rare.<sup>4</sup> When ethnic tensions over land do mount, they rarely escalate, *contra* the predictions of F&L's model. Instead, conflicts tend to be contained at the local level, rarely reaching a scale that would garner attention in the international press, much less the scale required for inclusion in civil war data sets. We are confronted with a thorny analytic problem: What explains the *rarity* of SoS conflict in Africa, even in densely settled, ethnically heterogeneous zones, and the localized *scale* of most

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land conflict? And can the same explanation help account for the location and timing of the occasional, ferocious outbreaks that do scale-up to civil war proportions?

This paper argues that the theoretical solution lies in a variable that is omitted in F&L's SoS conflict model: land tenure institutions. In smallholder farming regions of SSA, national rulers have created and enforced land tenure institutions that structure local ethnic hierarchies around land. The analysis suggests that variations across time and space in how land tenure institutions enforce ethnic hierarchy offer great leverage in explaining patterns of SoS conflict over land in African countries.<sup>5</sup>

The conceptual work begins with Part 2, which reviews classic SoS theories from South Asia and their offspring, including the work invoked above, framing insights and puzzles they pose for Africa scholars. Part 3 reviews existing work on land scarcity and migration-induced ethnic heterogeneity in SSA. Although systematic statistical evidence is lacking, fragmentary country data and the secondary literature show clearly that although the F&L's hypothesized structural preconditions for SoS conflict over land are widely present, SoS land conflict is not. Part 4 defines land tenure systems in SSA as "institutions" which vary subnationally, offers a conceptualization of how they vary, and conceptualizes mechanisms that produce stability and instability in SoS-migrant relations across institutional types. Moving to the task of theory-generating, Part 5 derives hypotheses about how institutional differences may predict the presence (absence), scale, location, and triggering of large-scale SoS land conflict. It presents a structured comparison of 23 subnational cases (most of them from 1990–2014), based upon secondary and primary sources and field observations, to argue that differences in land tenure institutions are associated with different types of land conflict.<sup>6</sup> The case studies bolster the plausibility of the paper's arguments about the salience of institutional variation in explaining conflict patterns, although more rigorous tests await the creation of extensive new bodies of data and causally motivated research designs. To further probe the plausibility of the institutional argument proposed in this study, Part 6 leverages the historical, conceptual, and case-based material presented in earlier sections to take on an important rival argument: the demographic determinism hypothesis. The conclusion is a discussion that underscores flaws in political science's earlier, "institutionless" theories of SoS conflict over land.

## 2. THE CLASSIC SOS LITERATURE

Myron Weiner's (1978) classic work on SoS conflict in India identified ethnic in-migration (migration across India's internal ethnic borders) and livelihood competition as a combustible combination. Weiner focused on states undergoing rapid economic modernization, where growth "pulls in" migrants from less dynamic regions. His concern was with the response of autochthonous "sons-of-the-soil" groups to the arrival of in-migrants. Weiner suggested that where livelihood options are abundant and cooperative *economic* relations between autochthones and migrants prevail, political and social relations between the two groups are likely to be peaceful. Conversely, in settings with few employment and livelihood options, and with limited prospects for rewarding outmigration by the SoS, competition between SoS and in-migrants increases likelihood of political conflict. Weiner's students and others have developed this perspective in an

impressive case study literature (Bhavnani & Lacina, 2015; Jha, 2014; Katzenstein, 1979; Varshney, 2003).

Fearon and Laitin's (F&L) (2011) influential study of civil war suggested and sustained in-migration to farming regions and rising land scarcity could ignite SoS conflict in the ways that Weiner anticipated. In their model of developing countries, internal migration produces ethnic heterogeneity and rising population densities on the agrarian frontier, where the presence of the state is weak. As population density rises, SoS eventually become frustrated that migrants have occupied so much of their land. The co-presence of these factors—economic competition and ethnic heterogeneity due to in-migration—creates the structural conditions in which the random spark of an interpersonal dispute between SoS and migrants (a theft, rape, or insult), perhaps aided by the provocation of a local political entrepreneur, may escalate into spontaneous ethnic clashes. Figure 1 illustrates this model to underscore its analytic parsimony.

For F&L, the structural conditions identified above are a combustible combination. Whether the spark of localized violence escalates into civil war depends on how the state enters the scene to restore order. In response to clashes, the police then the army (if need be) will intervene to restore order. If the state supports the SoS, the defenseless migrants are likely to return to their home areas because if they do not, they may face uncontrolled reprisals from indigenes. Peace is likely to be reestablished. If the state favors the migrants, however, there may be trouble. The SoS may challenge the government, and the army may be brought into repress them. Where the SoS fight back, we have the opening salvos in an ethnic rebellion against the state. Sri Lanka serves as a case in point to establish the plausibility of the model.

F&L do not offer a theory of why government partisanship may vary, or of temporal dynamics, suggesting only that in developing countries, *raison d'état* often militates in favor of supporting migration-fueled economic development. A more recent contribution "brings the state in," refining the model's predictions about state partisanship (Bhavnani and Lacina (2015)).<sup>7</sup>

How far does the model of economic competition and demographic structure go in describing and predicting patterns of SoS land conflict in contemporary Africa? Let us turn to the structural arguments first.

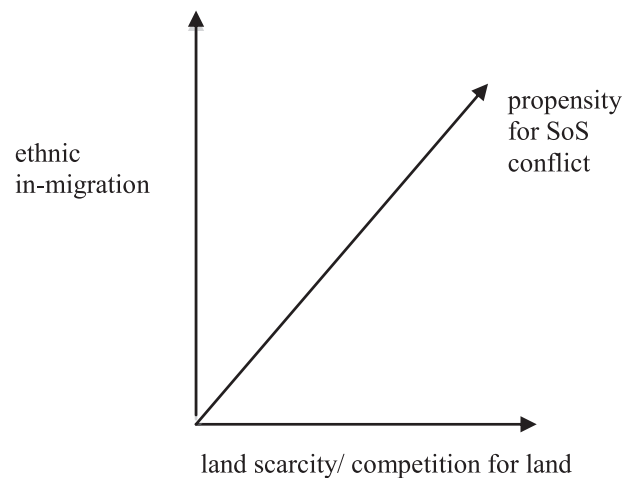


Figure 1. Likelihood of SoS conflict (F&L 2011 model).

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