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Does rentierism have a conditional effect on violence? Regime oil dependency and civil war in Algeria

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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to shed new light on an established debate within the academic literature concerning the role of oil dependency on regime (in)stability and eventually, civil wars. It does so by focusing on the events that led to the Algerian civil war (1988–1992). The core contribution this paper offers stands on the unveiling of a chain of micro-level events through a Process Tracing (PT) approach. Other than assessing the enabling conditions and the explicative factors associated to the onset of a civil war in a rentier state, we present the results of a dynamic interplay between structure and agency.

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1. Introduction

In the mid-1970s, Algeria was regarded as one of the most successful stories in economic development among oil exporter countries. Less than twenty years later the state was engulfed in a bloody civil war that lasted around one decade (1992–2002) and costed more than 200,000 lives. What can account for this trajectory? Was violence really inevitable?

Many scholars see the Algerian events as a critical confirmation of the links between (a) being a rentier state and authoritarianism; and (b) being a rentier state and the clash of civil war. Algeria largely vindicated both these two perspectives, finding itself at an interesting and largely unique intersection between an arrested process of democratization and civil war.

This article aims to shed new light by applying a different theoretical perspective on this long-studied conundrum (Mortimer, 1996; Cavatorta, 2009; Aït-Aoudia, 2015). It offers qualitative empirical insights on the Algerian case to assess the circumstances under which being a rentier state can lead the way to large-scale violence. It will be stressed that state configuration matters not only for the official decisions and activities it supports, but also because doing so, certain political movements and collective behaviour are more probable than others. The attempt to

analyse the relationship between regime dependence on hydrocarbons and the violent mobilization of opponent non-state actors is pursued through a *via media* between structure and agency, allowing a fruitful dialogue between these two levels of analysis. In particular, by applying a narrative variation of Process Tracing (PT), a reconstruction of the micro-chain of the events based on triangulated historical observations is proposed. However, this paper is not simply interested in establishing whether there is a relationship between rentierism and political violence. The analysis also intends to unveil the mechanism between an external shock on rentier states and the clash of civil wars, given certain contextual and enabling conditions.

After reviewing the main approaches to oil regime stability and the onset of political violence, a theoretical conceptualization of the hypothesized mechanism will be established. Next, in line with the methodological requirements of PT, the paper will set the context – and *contextual condition* – of the Algerian political-economic setting prior to the outburst of contestations. Consequently, two *scope conditions* under which the mechanism is expected to be activated are presented: a) discriminations in the educational and labour systems; and b) the presence of a strong alternative political actor – in the Algerian context, by the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS).

The final part of the paper will instead focus on in-depth empirical reconstruction of the mechanism leading to instability and, eventually, civil war. The emphasis is placed on a series of micro-events during the critical phase of 1988–1992. Arguments will be supported through the analysing of relevant crucial

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historical scholarships emphasising the relative role of multiple events caused by the shock of oil price downfall. The ambition is to reconstruct the *secret connection* (Beach and Pedersen, 2016) between X and Y and to do so by focusing on the process that actually contributed to the production of the outcome. In fact, we present the argument on the outcome as made possible by state's repressive approach, given a specific framework of decades of social, economic, and identity *disequilibrium* directly generated by rentierism, which also favoured the existence of a viable political alternative.

2. The oil curse revisited: from deterministic assessments to conditional ones

After the two oil-price booms in the 1970s, in some specific cases, state wealth and authoritarianism – in sharp contrast to the modernization argument made by Lipset (1959) – started going hand in hand. The attempt to solve this puzzle has compelled scholars to investigate the causal relationship between resource abundance and relevant political-economic outcomes, developing the so-called resource curse. According to this branch of research, when a country's wealth is almost entirely the product of oil rents, it tends to generate economic stagnation, authoritarianism, and heightened vulnerability to civil war (Ross, 2012).

In his seminal large-N statistical study, Ross (2001) discovers that oil and mineral wealth are associated with significantly lower levels of democracy. According to the author, there are three main mechanisms that account for this: a) the 'rentier effect'; b) the 'repression effect'; c) the 'modernization effect'. Subsequent research strongly supports this hypothesis (Jensen and Wantchekon, 2004; Ulfelder, 2007). Similarly, Smith's (2004) conclusion that oil is a cause of the *resilience* rather than of the *origin* of authoritarian regimes remains broadly consistent with the statement that 'oil hinders democracy'. Contrary to all these results, a much smaller literature diverges from this hypothesis (Herb, 2005), and even argues that, 'wealth generated through oil receipts is a catalyst for opposition to the state' (Okruhlik, 1999: 297). More recently, covering 168 countries from 1800 to present days, Haber and Menaldo (2011: 25) conclude 'oil and mineral reliance does not promote dictatorship over the long run. If anything, the opposite is true.' Between these two antithetical positions, an interesting viewpoint has been proposed by those scholars who have assumed the effect of resource rents on political outcome as mediated by other factors. Dunning (2008: 5), for instance, arguing that 'the effect of resource rents is a *conditional one*', has pointed out in an apparently contradictory way that when inequality is low, oil dependence may hinder democracy, but when it is high, oil dependence may foster democracy. In a rather similar vein, Smith (2007: 6) has shown how timing and sequencing mediate the impact of oil wealth, arguing against a "single set of effects".

Other scholars, on the contrary, have investigated the relationship between the dependency from natural resources and civil wars. Even in this case, previous findings point to the greater likelihood of civil war in primary commodities-rich countries (Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Ross, 2004). Following the literature, three major causal mechanisms are at stake: a) the 'honeypot effect'; b) the 'exclusion effect'; c) the 'weak state effect'.

These findings have been sharply criticized for several reasons. To begin with, the link between natural resource endowments and the onset of civil wars is so weak that an "embarrassment of mechanisms" has been expressed (Humphreys, 2005: 510). Secondly, although a part of the literature in the post-Cold War has been focusing on the materialistic inputs for groups to take arms against the state (Keen 1998; Reno, 1998; Berdal and Malone,

2000) a quite small pool of literature locates a positive effect of oil dependence on internal peace (Smith, 2004). Finally, the monotonic relation between resources wealth and civil war has been criticized, suggesting that an inverted U is actually at stake – that is, as the value of rents increases, the risk of conflict rises for a while, before falling when a very high level is reached and thus a stabilizing effect unfolds (Ross, 2015). By starting from the idea of a mediated relation, a growing number of studies have argued that the effects of oil on civil wars are *conditional*. According to Basedau and Richter (2014), for instance, specific conditions of oil production and how they structure state-society relations matter, determining that the concomitant presence of high dependence and low abundance of oil constitutes a particularly risky combination. Similarly, several scholars have emphasized that a civil war is much more likely in case of *relative deprivation* (Cramer, 2006) or where a clear discrimination against ethnic groups exists (Hunziker and Cederman, 2012; Ross, 2015). More specifically, as stated by Brown and Stewart (2007: 222): 'when cultural differences coincide with economic and political differences between groups, this can cause deep resentment that may lead to violent struggles.' Other scholars, on the contrary, have analysed the likelihood of the outbreak of civil war in resource-rich countries in relation to state capacity. Pointing out the multidimensional character of state capacity, it has been proved that in cases where the latter is high, the likelihood of civil war is lower, the duration of conflict shorter, and the implementation of peace agreements more stable (Hendrix, 2010; DeRouen and Sobek, 2016).

To conclude, the two most studied effects of the resource curse have been increasingly analysed in recent times as mediated by other factors, producing more nuanced and less deterministic explanations. Nevertheless, some key questions remain unanswered. First of all, the 'oil hinders democracy' and the 'oil causes civil war' traditions have been largely developed separately, thus producing contradictory statements. Focusing, then, on a country in which the failure of the democratic experiment led implicitly to civil war serves as a fine starting point to create stronger bridges between these two strands of research. Secondly, and even more crucially, despite the new emphasis on contingent factors, *politics* has largely remained absent from the overall picture. This has been the case due to an overemphasis on structural factors. Though certainly important, they do not operate in a *vacuum*. Rather, structural factors should be understood in their interaction with social and political actorhood. Working on these two main shortcomings, this article offers a new perspective to bring back into the academic debate the relational interplay between structure and agency.

3. A process-tracing reconstruction of the Algerian civil war: theoretical mechanism and method

This article contends that the mechanism linking the occurrence of an external shock for rentier states to the outburst of civil wars is a transformational one (Fig. 1). Although methodologists in political science tend to be sceptical about single case study (Achen and Snidal, 1989; King et al., 1994), several seminal analyses have demonstrated the importance of such an approach (Dahl, 1961; Lijphart, 1968; Lowi, 2009). With this respect, we present an in-depth analysis of a single unit (Gerring, 2004), over a time frame of nearly fifteen years – from early eighties to mid-nineties.

Specifically, by adopting a process-oriented perspective on civil wars (Young, 2016), we identify a process whereby individuals, through their actions and interactions, generate intended and unintended outcomes at the macro-level. More specifically, through a Process Tracing approach (Beach and Pedersen, 2013, 2016; Bennett and Checkel, 2015), we propose a theoretical mechanism to understand the way the *outcome* under

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