



Droughts, state-citizen relations and support for political violence in Sub-Saharan Africa: A micro-level analysis



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 November 2016

Received in revised form

15 June 2017

Accepted 10 July 2017

Keywords:

Drought

Political violence

Micro-level analysis

Political attitudes

Africa

Afrobarometer

ABSTRACT

Droughts are unlikely to influence support for political violence unless they coincide with unfavourable social and political conditions. In this article I suggest that support for violence in times of drought depends on people's relationship with their government and the way in which this relationship determines their vulnerability to adverse climatic shocks. Droughts impose serious economic pressures on affected people, especially in Sub-Saharan countries, where access to alternative sources of water is often limited. People who enjoy good relations with the sitting regime and who benefit from a wide range of public services are more likely to overcome these pressures. On the other hand, politically neglected, marginalised and disaffected people have many more difficulties in coping with drought and are likely to blame their government for it. This, in turn, can pave the way for endorsing more radical attitudes and even violence against the government and its (presumed) political supporters. The results of my analysis partly confirm this idea. Exposure to drought per se does not seem to influence attitudes towards political violence in a statistically significant way. However, I find both people who are politically discriminated against and people who do not trust their head of state to be more inclined to endorse political violence when hit by severe drought. These findings, which are consistent across a number of alternative model specifications, show that fragile state-citizen relations play an important part in the processes linking drought exposure and support for political violence.

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Introduction

As global warming receives increasing attention from researchers and politicians, evidence suggests that many parts of the world are likely to experience more extreme weather in the near future (IPCC, 2013). This pertains especially to Sub-Saharan Africa, where the frequency and intensity of droughts already show an increasing trend over the last 50 years (Masih, Maskey, Mussá, & Trambauer, 2014). The consequences for the many African farmers and pastoralists, who directly depend on rain to sustain their livelihoods, are disastrous and accounts of famines and mass displacements in drought-stricken regions in the Sahel and East Africa have received much attention in the media (e.g. BBC, 2011; Gaultier, 2012). Given their destructive potential and their wider social implications, droughts, and in particular droughts in Sub-Saharan Africa, are also at the centre of debates about the possible security implications of climate change and climate

variability. Indeed, a growing number of studies investigate possible linkages between extreme dry spells and different forms of violent conflict in Africa and elsewhere (e.g. Couttenier & Soubeyran, 2014; O'Loughlin et al., 2014).

Excessive rainfall shortages are unlikely to be a deterministic cause of violent conflict, although it is conceivable that they could lead to armed violence in combination with unfavourable social and political conditions (Buhaug, 2015; Linke et al., 2015; Maystadt & Ecker, 2014; Theisen, Gleditsch, & Buhaug, 2013). This idea is now widely accepted in climate-conflict research. Yet there is overall little indication as to what specific social and political conditions could facilitate the emergence of violence in connection with drought. In particular, the circumstances that motivate drought-stricken people to support the use of violence for political purposes remain largely unknown.

More radical political attitudes, including support for political violence, can emerge in the face of major distress (see Canetti, Elad-Strenger, Lavi, Guy, & Bar-Tal, 2017). Presumably this also applies to situations where serious drought conditions pose a severe risk to the lives and livelihoods of affected people. On the other hand, a

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number of scholars stress that climatic shocks can just as well lead to increased cooperation and stronger ties between state and society. According to these scholars, the political fallout from such events would largely depend on the commitment of responsible authorities to protect and help adversely affected people (see [Le Billon & Waizenegger, 2007](#); [Olson & Gawronski, 2010](#); [Pelling & Dill, 2010](#); [Slettebak, 2012](#)). Whereas drought-affected people will most certainly resent a blatantly neglectful government, they are just as likely to praise a more attentive and proactive one that manages to put them out of harm's way. This, in turn, could translate into a higher or lower risk of endorsing violent actions against this government and its (presumed) political supporters. More specifically, I expect people lacking access to essential services, politically excluded people, as well as people that doubt the commitment of their government to be more susceptible to approving of political violence when facing serious drought conditions.

To test these hypotheses, I rely on extensive data from the second, third and fifth round of the Afrobarometer survey ([Afrobarometer, 2016](#); [Beard, 2006](#); [Carter, 2008](#); [Park, 2015](#)), which cover a broad range of attitudinal and socioeconomic variables for more than 69,500 respondents in 23 African countries between 2002 and 2013. This regional emphasis is in line with frequently voiced concerns about droughts and their possible implications for the political stability of Sub-Saharan countries (e.g. [Boko et al., 2007](#); [Gleditsch, 2011](#); [Hendrix & Glaser, 2007](#); [Masih et al., 2014](#); [Niang et al., 2014](#)).

The remainder of the article is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews previous research on drought and conflict risk and highlights this article's contribution to this literature. Section 3 further develops my theoretical argument in view of formulating testable hypotheses. Section 4 presents the utilised data. Section 5 presents and discusses the results of the empirical analysis. Section 6 concludes.

Previous research

In recent years, droughts have received increasing scholarly attention as potential drivers of violent conflict and political instability. Some researchers have suggested that drought-induced shortages of water and arable land could lead to violent competition between people who depend on these resources for their livelihoods (see [Benjaminsen, Alinon, Buhaug, & Buseeth, 2012](#); [Mureithi & Opiyo, 2010](#); [Opiyo, Wasonga, Schilling, & Mureithi, 2012](#)). There are also concerns that economic losses and distress migration in the wake of severe climatic shocks would send destitute people into the arms of criminal or extremist groups that offer food, money and protection to their followers ([Maystadt & Ecker, 2014](#); [Nillesen & Verwimp, 2010](#); [Schilling, Akuno, Scheffran, & Weinzierl, 2012](#); [Schomerus et al., 2010](#)). In a similar vein, extreme weather events and their knock-on effects on agricultural productivity and food prices have been associated with a higher risk of riots in food import-dependent countries ([Berazneva & Lee, 2013](#); [Raleigh, Choi, & Kniveton, 2015](#); [Werrell, Femia, & Sternberg, 2015](#); see also; [Hendrix & Brinkman, 2013](#)), as well as more generally with overburdened states and political instability ([Hendrix & Salehyan, 2012](#); see also [Wischnath & Buhaug, 2014: 711f](#)).

A major part of extant research on drought and conflict focuses on Sub-Saharan Africa, which, due to difficult climatic and socio-economic conditions, is often assumed to be particularly vulnerable to adverse weather and political violence ([Gleditsch, 2011](#); [Hendrix & Glaser, 2007](#); [Niang et al., 2014](#)). Yet despite the frequency of unexpected precipitation shortages in Africa, violent conflicts coincide only rarely with such events, suggesting that, where they

appear, drought-conflict linkages cannot be reduced to their environmental dimension alone, but should rather be seen as the result of the interaction of environmental pressures with unfavourable social and political conditions.

Indeed, there is a growing body of research that supports the notion of moderating social and political factors that influence the relationship between drought and conflict risk. For instance, [Raleigh \(2010\)](#) argues that there is a higher risk of drought-related violence among marginalised groups that live in peripheral areas of African states. These are not only disproportionately affected by environmental hazards, but also less likely to receive help from their government. A case in point are the Tuareg in northern Mali and Niger, who have not only suffered from frequent droughts but also from pervasive government neglect and the embezzlement of development aid by southern elites ([Benjaminsen, 2008](#)). Such a situation can translate into violent self-help strategies, like fighting for access to scarce water resources, but also into a higher risk of illicit activities and political radicalisation (see [Bakrania, 2013](#); [Schomerus et al., 2010](#)). This is partly supported by statistical evidence. Parts of African states that harbour a politically excluded ethnic group have been found to have a higher risk of communal conflicts in connection with drought ([Fjelde & Von Uexkull, 2012](#)). Similarly, [von Uexkull, Croicu, Fjelde, and Buhaug \(2016\)](#) find that politically excluded minorities in African and Asian countries have a higher risk than other groups of becoming involved in insurgencies when exposed to prolonged drought conditions. Investigating the moderating role of ethnic identities, but not specifically the role of group-based political discriminations, [Schleussner, Donges, Donner, and Schellnhuber \(2016\)](#) also observe that a high number of conflict outbreaks that coincide with climate-related disasters such as droughts occur in ethnically fractionalized countries. On the other hand, [Theisen, Holtermann, and Buhaug \(2011/2012\)](#) find no concluding evidence for a systematic link between drought exposure, political exclusion of ethnic minorities and the risk of civil conflicts in Africa.

Other analyses focus on the moderating role of climate-vulnerability, based on the premise that droughts are more likely to influence the attitudes and the behaviour of those most seriously affected by them (see [Barnett & Adger, 2007](#)). This line of research draws upon a rich literature that highlights differences in the way climatic shocks are experienced, depending among other things on the livelihoods and economic opportunities of affected people and communities (see [Adger, Brooks, Bentham, Agnew, & Eriksen, 2004](#); [Füssel & Klein, 2006](#); [de Sherbinin, 2014](#)). For instance, [von Uexkull \(2014\)](#) shows that the risk of drought-related insurgent violence in Sub-Saharan Africa is higher in regions which are economically dependent on rain-fed agriculture. Rural communities that are particularly vulnerable to climate variability, she argues, would be more inclined to join rebel groups in exchange for pecuniary rewards. Given their often marginal status in society, these communities would also be more likely to hold their government responsible for not providing them with better protection against unforeseen climatic shocks, and hence more likely to support a revolutionary agenda ([von Uexkull, 2014](#); see also [von Uexkull et al., 2016](#) for a similar result). In contrast, [Buhaug, Benjaminsen, Sjaastad, and Theisen \(2015\)](#) find that drought-related conflict risks in Africa are not necessarily higher in countries that are highly dependent on rain-fed agriculture.

Closely related to this literature, a number of studies also point to the role of ineffective institutions in facilitating drought-related conflicts. Analysing farmer-herder conflicts in the Niger Delta of Mali, [Benjaminsen et al. \(2012\)](#) conclude that these can occur in a context where pastoralists have to adjust to drier conditions – i.e. by moving their herds closer to perennial water sources, and thus also to cultivated areas – but cannot be attributed to climatic

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