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Assassination of political leaders: The role of social conflict

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ABSTRACT

Given human aggression and warfare are often described as the most pressing behavioral problems of our time, we focus on a related phenomenon, with large-scale social, political, and economic consequences: assassination of political leaders. We explore the role of social conflict as a predictor of political assassination and use historiometric methods and an extensive archival dataset to identify and code for contextual factors associated with social conflict and political homicide. Our results indicate an increase in social conflict increases the likelihood of assassination; moreover, environmental constraints and traditional culture predict leader assassination through social conflict. We discuss implications of these findings and suggest future research on contextual factors, assassination of political leaders, and their collective-level impact.

Introduction

In an era when human aggression is ubiquitous, research on warfare but also on violence in general has real-world implications (Segall, Ember, & Ember, 1997). From this backdrop and given the large-scale social, political, and economic consequences, the assassination of political leaders is an extremely important, but generally neglected area within leadership research (Steffens, Peters, Haslam, & van Dick, 2017). The work of Yammarino, Mumford, Serban, and Shirreffs (2013) began to address this void in the literature by examining whether leadership, using a combination of leadership power orientation (personalized or socialized power) and style of outstanding leadership (charismatic, ideological, or pragmatic), is related to assassination and assassination attempts for leaders in a variety of political arenas.

These authors found that socialized pragmatic and socialized ideological leaders were most frequently victims of assassinations, and personalized pragmatic and personalized ideological leaders were most frequently targets of assassination attempts. Simonton (1981, 2013, 2014) has revealed the importance of both individual differences and of contextual factors in the study of political leadership and has emphasized, among other factors, personal traits and experiences, but also the

number of unsuccessful assassination attempts, war years, and the administration's political and economic milieu as important predictors of political leadership. Continuing work on antecedents and outcomes of political leadership, the current study uses historiometric methods and large-scale archival data to examine whether the context in which a leader exercises power is associated with his/her assassination.

We base our study of the potential association of contextual factors with political homicide (i.e., assassination) on the long-standing frustration-aggression hypothesis set forth by Dollard, Miller, Doob, Mowrer, and Sears (1939). Since their initial formulation, a growing stream of research has suggested that frustrating experiences increase the likelihood of all types of aggression (Berkowitz, Corwin, & Heironimus, 1963). In their historiometric study of the sources of ideological as compared to non-ideological leader violence, Mumford et al. (2007) suggest that environmental variables that legitimize violent acts (e.g., corruption, group insularity) are expected to strongly influence the amount and severity of violence associated with destructive leadership. We build on their list of contextual or environmental variables (e.g., corruption, strong cultural traditions, social conflict) and argue that such environmental variables could also influence retaliation behaviors on the part of individuals under the

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leader's authority, the most severe form of retaliation and violence resulting in the assassination of political leaders.

Biology has been a primary domain for research on aggression. Whereas most of the studies have been done with animals, some have involved human subjects as well, and have mostly taken place in clinical and laboratory settings (Segall et al., 1997). Nachshon (1982) highlights that biological theories of deviant behavior had gained popularity in the nineteenth century, but are now mostly rejected in favor of sociological approaches, which place the emphasis on socio-cultural factors instead as a source of aggression. Other research suggests that since the "Seville Statement on Violence" (Adams, 1989), which treats violence and war as the "most pressing behavioral problems of our society" (p. 849), there has been a shift from biology to psychology in terms of research interest on aggression (Segall et al., 1997). Whereas Nachshon (1982) suggests an integration of biological, psychological, and sociological approaches to studying violence would be most beneficial, given the nature of our research/data (collection) and past criticism against biological theories, we will focus on the latter two approaches in studying violence in the form of political homicide.

Specifically, we focus on the relationship between social conflict and leader assassination; we consider several contextual factors, established in prior work and developed below, as antecedents of social conflict within a nation. These factors include environmental constraints, traditional culture, religion, level of democracy, political corruption, and civil liberties and rule of law. Additionally, we account for the effects of several variables, which we used as statistical controls including at the individual (e.g., leader gender) and country level (e.g., climate, level of socio-economic development) of analysis. Our predictors are operationalized through subjective as well as objective measures. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study where historiometric coder ratings and more objective, archival data, have been employed in conjunction in this area of work, in an attempt to avoid common-method or common-source bias and also check for convergence of different types of measures for a construct. We have based our selection of the potential antecedents of leader assassination on the integrated set of environmental variables identified by Mumford et al. (2007), which we have distilled and extended, based on other relevant literature on social conflict and violence.

Violence and warfare are a category of research with real-world implications (Segall et al., 1997) and have been described as the most pressing behavioral problems of our time. Within this context, we chose to analyze assassination of political leaders, a related phenomenon with large-scale economic, political and social consequences. Using historiometric methods, we examine the physical and social circumstances in which aggression occurs, so as to understand why individuals engage in extreme aggression against leaders and how to set the stage for identifying better or enhanced means of preventing leader assassination when this would benefit their nations and larger collectives. Our empirical contribution is also strengthened by our use of econometric methods to purge the predictor variable, social conflict, from possible endogeneity bias. As such, we showcase how the use of instrumental variables can help identify causal effects in cases where randomization of predictors is obviously not possible.

We believe that studying assassination of leaders is an important topic for investigation because of the tremendous impact leader assassination can have on larger collectives (e.g., nations, societies). Moreover, empirical studies aimed at identifying antecedents of leader assassination, involving multiple leaders through several historical periods, are exceptionally rare. Most prior work consists of biographies or case studies of a particular leader, which makes it difficult if not impossible to understand the full set of potential causes that explain the phenomenon. As such, the intended contribution of our work is to enhance our understanding of what contextual factors drive extreme aggression towards the leader. Systematic efforts to study the role of environmental factors on leader assassination are generally not available in the leadership realm (see Bass, 2008).

Assassination

Yammarino et al. (2013) define assassination as the killing of a public or private figure for political reasons and suggest the aim of such an act is usually large-scale political, economic, and social change or upheaval. As such, rather than being treated as random events, assassinations should be regarded as instrumental behavior. Whereas leaders who are perceived as contributing to or enhancing the self-worth of others attract followers, those who violate rights or denigrate others create non-followers (Dansereau, 1995; Yammarino et al., 2013). However, Vertical Dyad Linkage theory (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975) highlights that the same leader can and will act very differently towards different individuals (in-group vs. out-group). As such, regardless of whether he/she is anointed, appointed, or elected, a leader will not be universally followed (Bass, 2008). These same leadership notions, while often focused on direct or close leader-follower relationships, may also apply to more indirect or distant leader-follower relationships (see, for example, Yammarino, 1994; Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Bass, 2008). In this regard, Yammarino et al. (2013) argue that, in extreme cases, (some) followers, whether close or distant, can love the leader to the point of becoming fanatics, whereas (some) non-followers, whether close or distant, can hate the leader to the point of becoming assassins.

Especially in the case of heads of state, assassinations can have a tremendous impact not only on the leader and immediate followers, but also on the larger collective (e.g., nation, society), politically, economically, and socially. These are extremely powerful events that can trigger "flashbulb memories" for large numbers of individuals and enhance a leader's post-mortem reputation and greatness rating (Simonton, 2002; Steffens et al., 2017). In turn, these (collateral) effects can impact the type of leadership succession (e.g., constitutional vs. hereditary), enhance political turmoil and its manifestations (e.g., social protests against the government, civil war), and influence the levels of subsequent follower repression (Iqbal & Zorn, 2006).

Yammarino et al. (2013) argue that political assassinations can have devastating consequences and it is important to study them in an attempt to identify antecedents and make relevant policy implications for countries. Building on their study, we look beyond leadership style and power orientation to examine contextual variables that can attract non-followers in general and extreme non-followers in particular. We treat these environmental factors as the driving force for ultimate forms of violence against political leaders.

Social conflict as predictor of political assassination

Within a nation, intergroup relations can represent a source of hostility and overt conflict (Segall et al., 1997). In realistic group conflict theory, Campbell (1965) has provided an etiology of intergroup hostility as well as a theory of competition, viewed as realistic and instrumental in nature and motivated mostly by extrinsic rewards. Through competition over scarce resources, conflicting interests are enhanced and translate into overt social conflict.

Social psychological research on intergroup relations has focused on constructs and processes such as categorization and group identification (Hewstone & Cairns, 2001; Livingstone & Haslam, 2008). Pivotal research on group identification stems from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), which assumes a direct relationship between social group identification and tendencies towards bias, discrimination, and intergroup conflict. Authors have argued that higher levels of identification will lead to greater intergroup hostility (e.g., DeRidder & Tripathi, 1992).

Tajfel and Turner (1979) argue that intergroup conflict is obvious in stratified societies and institutions. Social stratification is based on unequal division or distribution of scarce resources (e.g., wealth, power, prestige) between social groups. As such, there are different forms of political, economic (e.g., social status), and social (e.g.,

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