

Democracy and civil war

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POLICY BRIEF

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Summary

Countries with strong records of respect for democracy and human rights are far less likely to experience civil wars than hybrid regimes.¹ Although intra-state conflicts have become an increasing share of all armed conflict, these wars are more likely to take place in countries with weak or failed governing institutions. Countries with inclusive political processes, on the other hand, offer potential rebels opportunities to resolve their grievances within the political system and raise the costs of rebellion, thereby removing a key incentive for pursuing armed conflict. Nonviolent political action campaigns also tend to improve prospects for democratization if armed conflict does occur.

To lower the risk of internal armed conflict, domestic and international actors should focus on strengthening democratic institutions and respect for human rights and bringing marginalized groups and actors into a legitimate political process. In post-conflict settings, however, inclusive political processes and competitive elections can lead to instability in the short term; priority should be placed, therefore, on power-sharing or other transitional arrangements to promote stability in the short term, while inclusive democratic institutions take root.

About the Project

This policy brief is part of a series of papers on democracy, security, and violent extremism prepared for the Community of Democracies' Democracy and Security Dialogue. The project seeks to foster greater collaboration among democratic governments, donors, civil society and academics to improve security outcomes and create a more conducive environment for the strengthening of democracy around the world. For more on the project and related materials, including the final report, visit www.brookings.edu/democracy-security-dialogue.

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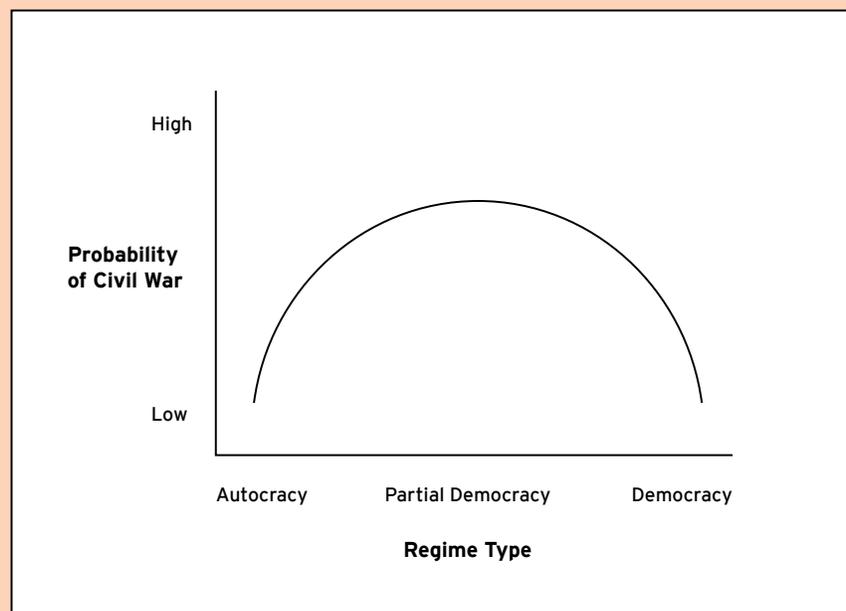
What the evidence tells us

There is strong empirical evidence that the existence of strong democratic institutions and the onset of civil war are negatively related. The evidence is represented clearly in what conflict scholars, and political scientists more broadly, call the “inverted U-shaped curve”: in a plot that moves left-to-right from full autocracy to full democracy, the likelihood of a country entering internal conflict is low initially, and then rises among hybrid regimes at the center of the graph before dropping again for consolidated democracies. Countries that are fully autocratic and fully democratic are likely to remain in a more peaceful condition from one year to the next, while countries whose political institutions are more amorphous—or bear characteristics of both autocracy and democracy—are more likely to see the emergence of civil war.

Significantly, the relationship between consolidated democracy and civil war is robust when examined across different sets of conflict data. The first major test of the

inverted U-shaped curve, by Hegre, Ellingsen, Gates, and Gleditsch,² examined the 1816-1992 period using conflict data from the Correlates of War project³ and democracy data from the Polity III project. After controlling for potential confounding variables, the authors found that “coherent democracies and harshly authoritarian states have few civil wars,” while so-called “intermediate regimes are the most conflict-prone.” Another major study of civil war onset by Fearon and Laitin,⁴ which examined the 1945-99 period using a separate dataset of civil wars and a different manipulation of Polity data, came to a similar conclusion. It showed that countries with strong democratic institutions and legitimate political processes were more capable of narrowing the opportunities for rebellion to take hold. Countries that were neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic, on the other hand, were more likely to experience internal armed conflict; this may be due to their inherent lack of institutional, financial, and political capacity to tackle the conditions that favor insurgencies, e.g., high levels of poverty, political instability, and large populations.

The Inverted U-Shaped Curve: Regime Type & Civil War Onset



While the relationship between strong democracies and a lower risk of triggering civil wars is fairly clear, the relationship between hybrid regimes, including weak democracies emerging from recent episodes of instability, and civil war remains significant but less conclusive. The inverted U-shaped curve suggests that countries in political regime transition are more likely to experience civil war.⁵ In an effort to test the consistency of the coding of several different data sets on civil wars, Sambanis⁶ concluded that the political variables of “anocracy”⁷ and instability only showed a statistical relationship with the onset of civil wars after 1945.⁸ Furthermore, researchers have found it difficult to measure the effects of political regime types in a way that is fully independent of regime strength or state capacity. As a result, measures of “intermediate” or “hybrid” regimes may instead be measuring institutional weaknesses rather than the democratic or autocratic character of those institutions.⁹ Despite these cautions, Goldstone et al. found that hybrid political landscapes were more vulnerable to political instability and conflict, especially those that combined deeply factionalized competition with open electoral contestation (i.e., winner-take-all systems dominated by polarized competing blocs).¹⁰

Research further shows that when autocracies invest in institutional capacity, rather than the elite capture of public revenue, they become more resilient to civil wars (e.g., through excessive capacity for repression).¹¹ Conversely, weak or transitional democracies characterized by the capture of state institutions by traditional ruling elites (as in parts of Latin America or Southeast Asia) are less resilient to civil war onset.¹² It follows, therefore, that democracies’ ability to prevent civil wars depends on both institutional capacity and the democratic and republican quality of their institutions. Although the available data show that strong repressive autocracies and high-quality democracies are both proficient in preventing civil wars, strong state capacity embedded in inclusive political processes with checks and balances and healthy civil societies provides a more positive in-

stitutional framework for minimizing the probability of civil wars.

A related body of research shows that political transitions driven by nonviolent action were significantly more likely to bring about successful democratization than transitions driven by powerholders, and more likely to consolidate democratic gains than transitions that experienced opposition violence.¹³ Based on a sample of 101 regimes between 1945 and 2010, researchers at the Varieties of Democracy Institute concluded that democratic transitions initiated through nonviolent actions experienced significant gains in democratic quality relative to cases without nonviolent actions; this positive effect was largely explained by improvements in freedom of expression.¹⁴

Explanations

Consolidated democratic societies are much less prone to civil war for at least two reasons. First, established democratic institutions incentivize political participation by a wide range of ideological actors at relatively low cost. By contrast, political violence, particularly conventional armed conflict, imposes significant costs on rebel actors.¹⁵ As a result, it is in the best interest of political actors with deep-seated grievances to try to achieve change within the political system than outside of it. Second, armed rebellions and insurgencies rely on the support (willing or forced) of local populations.¹⁶ These populations often provide their support willingly when the rebels are perceived as more legitimate than the state government. By opening the political process to all citizens and giving them a fair shot at power, consolidated democratic regimes enjoy greater legitimacy, and make it significantly harder for rebel actors to attract and mobilize popular support.¹⁷ Hence, policies seeking to include minorities in the democratic process have shown a positive effect on reducing grievances associated with civil wars. Similarly, states that invest in

quality education and literacy reduce the likelihood that grievances will lead to conflict and give people tools to resolve disputes peacefully.¹⁸

There are at least two possible explanations regarding the relationship between hybrid or weak democracies and civil war. One is that hybrid regimes and partial democracies open up enough political space for alternate ideologies and viewpoints to gain legitimacy, but not enough for outside actors to effect change in pursuit of them.¹⁹ If such actors have enough freedom to mobilize and recruit support but not enough to participate fully in the political process, then leveraging support for their cause through armed violence may be more effective to achieve their aims.

A second explanation concerns the institutional capacity of hybrid regimes, rather than the quality of their democratic processes. Countries undergoing transitions to democracy are usually characterized by unsettled domestic politics where elites can more easily reset institutional frameworks for personal gain, instead of addressing broad public concerns—like the threat of civil

war.²⁰ Hence, transitional states may lack the strength and capacity necessary to suppress rebel actors.²¹ In response to such disadvantage, violent political actors may be more willing to risk the costs of mass violence in order to capitalize on political instability and seize greater power and control for themselves.

Research also has shown that countries emerging from recent civil wars are at a higher risk of slipping back into conflict, particularly during the first five years after such wars end, when a state is more vulnerable.²² During this period, the combination of new and untested institutional frameworks, unresolved social conflicts, and a willingness by some segments of the population to stick to wartime objectives, rather than seek compromises, creates an optimal environment for the recurrence of civil wars.²³ On the other hand, nonviolent resistance campaigns that involve popular collective action by large, inclusive, and diverse movements can have a democratizing influence on civic culture that favors compromise and cooperation, which, in turn, engender more enduring democratic transitions.²⁴

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Stable democracies that invite and protect broad political participation by a wide range of political actors and avoid state capture by elites are far less likely to experience civil war. Therefore, in order to prevent the conditions for civil war from materializing and/or recurring, a chief goal of the Community of Democracies should be to help states consolidate democratic gains (including fair electoral processes), improve institutional capacity, widen the social contract, and prevent significant erosions that could motivate factions to take up arms against the state.

The Community of Democracies should consider the following recommendations:

Prioritize support to countries undergoing political reform or emerging from internal conflict, and are committed to the democratic path. This can be done in several ways:

- ➔ Civil society actors committed to nonviolence should receive resources, tools, advice, and protection to push for a broad social contract that benefits all. They should be incentivized to reject violent methods in favor of civic engagement, collective action, cooperation, and capacity-building.
- ➔ Press partially democratic regimes to strengthen their democratic processes and institutions, for example by offering international expertise regarding the design of more inclusive and transparent institutional frameworks and elections that avoid factionalism and winner-take-all scenarios.
- ➔ To avoid the capture of public resources by predatory elites, which are often associated with higher risks of conflict, encourage responsible foreign investment and best practices for addressing corrup-

tion and strengthening accountability.

- ➔ Identify elite factions more amenable to democratic reforms and a broader social contract and support them with resources necessary to consolidate democratic gains.
- ➔ In post-conflict situations, prioritize political stability in the short term while simultaneously strengthening democratic institutions to prepare all sectors of society to accept the results of future elections.
- ➔ The leadership of warring parties may be granted temporary access to legislatures and government positions (e.g., shared power solutions or consociational democracies) to make them feel more secure in positions of power, while the democratic process is consolidated and socialized.²⁵ In the absence of such consolidation, elections should be introduced gradually to avoid hybrid regimes reverting to full autocracies or descending into civil war or election-related violence.²⁶

Help states develop institutional capacity, particularly in the security sector, coupled with mechanisms of transparency and accountability, to prevent civil wars.

- ➔ The Community of Democracies can support security sector reforms by helping conflict-affected states implement security policies in accordance with democratic principles.
- ➔ Ensure that the state's monopoly over the use of force is achieved by democratic means such as civilian control, greater transparency, legislative oversight, and accountability.

- ➔ To avoid relapse into conflict, demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration (DDR) programs in countries emerging from civil wars require adequate and responsible financial planning and resources. These should go hand-in-hand with long-term sustainable development programs that promote inclusion and equality of opportunity for all stakeholders.

Promotion of healthy civil-military relations, based on the principle of democratic civilian control of national military and police forces, can also support democratization efforts, prevent overly hawkish policies, and minimize the risk of coups in countries undergoing democratic transitions.²⁷

- ➔ The Community of Democracies could support an independent commission of experts to provide technical assistance and advice to democratizing countries seeking counsel on the appropriate role of the military in a democratic society.
 - ➔ The Community of Democracies should also support an active role for the media and civil society, including the work of specialized think tanks, as an oversight mechanism to ensure security policies are not undermining democratic rights.
 - ➔ A collective effort to develop security doctrines compatible with democratic and human rights principles would help ensure that counter-insurgency efforts remain lawful and effective.
 - ➔ To achieve this objective, national legislatures should proactively exercise their oversight duties of the security sector decisionmaking responsibilities of the executive branch. In addition, policymakers should solicit advice from external experts, academics, and nongovernmental organizations to ensure security policies reflect democratic and human rights best practices.
- Given that the exclusion of segments of the population can weaken institutions and raise the risk of conflict, the Community of Democracies should help empower civil society and the academic community to gather data and report on the inclusiveness of democratic institutions in individual countries. Timely reports regarding systematic political exclusion can help anticipate the onset of internal conflict.
- ➔ In this regard, states could support the drafting of laws that specify and institutionalize independent monitoring mechanisms to report repressive or exclusionary practices that undermine the democratization process.
 - ➔ Specific institutional reforms could include the creation of local safe spaces for collective deliberation to complement options for direct participation (e.g., elections). Especially in transitioning democracies divided by socio-economic gaps or ethnic cleavages, where early elections can have an adverse effect, the establishment of local councils with citizens' input can help develop a more transparent and less contentious mechanism to resolve disputes.
 - ➔ Given the strong empirical evidence that more gender equal societies experience less conflict, special efforts should be made to support the participation of women in peace processes, conflict resolution mechanisms, and political negotiations.
 - ➔ These efforts should complement others designed to strengthen state institutions focused on the reduction of poverty, improvement of infrastructure, and better quality of law enforcement.



A longer-term objective for the Community of Democracies should be to support educational reforms that promote democratic values like participation, equity, transparency, and human rights. Educational curricula should integrate concepts that address the root causes of conflict and promote civic engagement, social cohesion, and shared values of pluralism and tolerance. Support for local networks of educators and nonprofit organizations to evaluate the quality of education in specific countries and help individual governments design pro-peace educational reform plans tailored to the needs of each society can help to ameliorate the risk of internal conflict in the long run.

Endnotes

- References to the strength or weakness of democratic governance and human rights are derived from quantitative and qualitative assessments contained in three comparable indices of liberal and electoral democracy (V-Dem), civil liberties and political rights (Freedom House), and regime type (Polity IV). The term “hybrid regimes” refers to countries that fall in the category of weak democracy or weak autocracy, without specific regard to current trends forward or backward.
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- This discussion makes two key assumptions: (1) that the non-state actor makes logical choices based on its best interest, and (2) that the actor wants to be included in the political process. More research is needed for situations where neither or both are correct—what if the non-state actors are anti-democratic or anarchical forces?
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