Anatomy of a Riot:

Why Ordinary People Participate in Ethnic Violence

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Book Title

Anatomy of a Riot: Why Ordinary People Participate in Ethnic Violence

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Overview

In February 2000, Christian-Muslim violence shook the northern Nigerian town of Kaduna, causing more than 3,000 deaths. Less than a year later, rioting between Muslims and Christians killed at least 2,000 people in the nearby town of Jos. In addition to the death toll, dozens of churches and mosques, and several entire neighborhoods were burned to the ground during these riots. In the past decade alone, at least 8,000 Nigerians have been killed, and thousands more displaced, in the course of more than 50 communal clashes across the country.

The scale of the fatalities and destruction wrought by ethnic rioting raises the question of why ordinary people would participate in such risky acts of violence. The potential costs of participation are high in most places where riots occur, while the benefits are highly uncertain. Communal riots often occur in localities with relatively balanced ethnic populations. As a result, it is unclear which side will prevail in battles on the street, and the risk of death to participants is very real. On the benefits side, in Nigeria and elsewhere, selective incentives for individual participants are rare and group-level benefits are unclear. The question: “why join a riot?” is thus genuinely puzzling for theorists of collective action.

In spite of this puzzle, the literature on ethnic conflict remains largely silent on the question of mass participation in violence (Gagnon 1995, Hardin 1995, Snyder 2000, Wilkinson 2004). Existing studies focus heavily on top-down, elite-centered processes, pinpointing a range of elite motivations to “foment” or instigate violence. But these studies often rely on the assumption that elites are highly strategic, while masses are non-strategic and easily manipulated. In doing so, they leave us with few answers as to why ordinary people would follow their leaders and voluntarily engage in actions fraught with extreme risk.

Anatomy of a Riot explores this question from close range, using the microscope as much as the wide-angle lens to uncover patterns of communal violence within Africa’s largest country. The book offers a novel explanation for riot participation that focuses both on individual motivations to fight and local conditions that enable high-risk collective action.
The argument begins with the observation that, in many places where ethnic riots occur, the state is too weak to provide even basic protection for citizens. Contexts where state institutions like the police cannot respond effectively to violence produce conditions akin to the classic security dilemma (Herz 1951, Jervis 1978). Once a riot begins, many people will find themselves in the position of having to organize in order to defend themselves, their property and their neighborhood from attack.

But not everyone will be vulnerable to attack once a riot breaks out. Poor people will be especially vulnerable once a riot begins. Unlike wealthier people, who have access to private security measures, poor people find themselves dangerously exposed during the chaos of an ongoing riot. Conditions of poverty serve as a powerful motivation to fight before one’s livelihood and one’s neighborhood is attacked by members of the other group.

Given the risks involved in joining a riot, one might still prefer to stay home, while others defend the neighborhood from attack. This collective action problem is overcome by social ties at the grassroots level, which play a crucial role in transforming potential into actual rioters. Networks of informal social ties within neighborhoods pull rioters out onto the streets through a variety of channels, including peer pressure. Together, the motivating “push” of poverty and the “pull” of local social ties make an explosive combination.

The book introduces a wealth of new data and uses multiple methods to evaluate this argument. The main empirical approach draws on an original survey of 800 respondents who chose to (or chose not to) participate in deadly Christian-Muslim riots in the northern Nigerian cities of Kaduna and Jos. These cities continue to make headlines as hotbeds of ethnic violence today. To locate rioters, protect their anonymity and obtain truthful responses to sensitive questions about violence, I made a number of novel survey design choices that are described in the manuscript. Evidence from dozens of in-depth interviews with riot participants is used to contextualize the survey results and bolster the quantitative evidence in the book.

The argument advanced in the book also draws supporting evidence from a number of unique data sources, including nationally representative Nigerian public opinion surveys, household economic data, an original survey of all 70 neighborhood chiefs in Kaduna and Jos, and an original dataset of communal riots across the country that draws on archival materials collected by the author during 8 months of field research in Nigeria. *Anatomy of a Riot* offers the first in-depth yet systematic look at the behavior and motivations of riot participants in the developing world and thus offers new insights into the dynamics of mass participation in localized violence.
Outline of Chapters

Part I: Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Chapter 1. The Puzzle of Participation

The book opens with a vignette that follows the decisions of two young men living in the central Nigerian city of Jos in 2001, during one of the deadliest Christian-Muslim riots in the country’s history. In spite of their many similarities, one of these men would actively participate in the fighting, while the other would not. This narrative illustrates the book’s central questions about ethnic violence: who are the people who take to the streets and why do they ultimately decide to riot? Most contemporary studies of ethnic conflict overlook these questions and focus instead on the incentives elites may face to instigate violence. They struggle to explain why ordinary people would choose to accept the risks and potential costs involved in carrying out violence on a local scale. How and why people come to participate in such risky collective behavior is the central puzzle of this book.

Chapter 2. Vulnerability and the Problem of Collective Defense

This chapter introduces the book’s core argument – that the vulnerability of poor citizens to attack and the power of neighborhood social ties work together to produce a critical mass of “defensive” rioters once a communal clash has begun. The chapter then contrasts this argument with two major competing explanations from the violence literature: (1) that rioters take to the streets out of frustration or anger over economic and political conditions, and (2) that rioters are motivated primarily by the lure of direct material benefits, such as goods from looting. The distinct, testable implications of each alternative explanation are highlighted. A concluding historical background section describes the sources of vulnerability and the social organizations that structure daily life in the slums of northern Nigeria’s multi-ethnic cities.

Part II. Testing the Argument

Chapter 3. Rioting under the Security Dilemma

This chapter uses qualitative and quantitative information on large-scale riots that took place in the Nigerian cities of Kaduna and Jos in 2000 and 2001 in order to convince the reader that the ethnic riots described in this study really are analogous to security dilemmas around the
problem of collective defense. Descriptive evidence from surveys helps to build this case by showing patterns of riot behavior that are more consistent with defensive than predatory rioting. In addition to the quantitative evidence, riot narratives from eye-witnesses and participants trace in rich detail the process by which ordinary people were drawn into the fighting in anticipation of attack.

Chapter 4. Explaining Riot Participation: Evidence from Kaduna and Jos

Chapter 4 offers the first set of tests of the book’s argument about the motivating “push” of poverty and the “pull” of local social ties. The chapter first briefly describes the design and implementation of a survey of 800 residents of Kaduna and Jos. Statistical analysis of the survey data shows in test after test that people who were both poor and embedded in certain types of neighborhood social networks were more likely to riot than others. The results are presented in easy-to-interpret graphs and tables for general readers. The chapter includes brief appendices highlighting key innovations in sampling and questionnaire design.

Chapter 5. Poverty and the Motivation to Fight

In order to convince the reader that my interpretation of the relationship between poverty and rioting is correct, Chapter 5 draws on a combination of data from the riot participation survey described above and a set of 40 semi-structured interviews with riot participants and eyewitnesses in Kaduna and Jos. Interview subjects were recruited from a diverse set of neighborhoods, in order to build a fine-grained picture of riot events as they unfolded in different neighborhoods across the two research cities. This evidence is used to show that poverty matters for rioting through the channel of vulnerability to attack, rather than through competing causal stories.

Chapter 6. “Rioting Together”: Riot Recruitment within Neighborhoods

Chapter 6 focuses on the importance of neighborhood-level social ties in mobilizing both willing and less willing rioters to fight. This chapter is largely qualitative, and uses interviewees’ stories to uncover important details about the way riot recruitment worked on the ground in both the early and later stages of the riots. This chapter uses multiple sources of evidence to suggest that particular types of local social networks were used to exert peer pressure and overcome problems of collective action in organizing neighborhood defense. Together with the evidence from Chapter 5, this discussion moves from a discussion of who riots to a deeper exploration of why ordinary people made the decision to fight or stay on the sidelines.
Part III. Broader Implications

Chapter 7. Beyond Kaduna and Jos

Chapter 7 takes a step back and explores the question of riot participation through a broader empirical lens. This chapter provides an additional test for the book’s central hypotheses, with the help of an original, Nigeria-wide dataset on communal riots. Individual involvement in localized violence is explored using household economic data, self-reported participation in violence in a nationally representative public opinion survey, and a dataset of local government characteristics from a random sample of nearly 100 municipalities across Nigeria that have experienced communal violence in the past fifteen years. Strong support is found linking poverty, centrality in local social networks and participation in violence, suggesting that the book’s argument travels beyond Kaduna and Jos.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

After reviewing the main findings, the book concludes with a discussion of the scope of the argument. The chapter considers how three features of the central Nigerian research context: the weakness of state institutions, the relative balance in size between the ethnic groups in conflict, and the segregation in residence patterns of ethnic groups inform the generalizability of the book’s theory. I probe these claims about scope with a discussion of secondary literature on riots outside of Nigeria, drawn from varying geographic regions and time periods.

A complete draft manuscript is available at: