On Dangerous Ground: Evidence on the link between land insecurity and violence

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1 Background

Recent explanations for land conflict – especially in Africa – have focused on the role of customary land institutions in channeling violence along ethnic group lines. These property rights institutions grant full access based on membership in ethnic communities.

2 Research Questions

- Why does land conflict fall along ethnic lines in some contexts and not others?
- Which institutional rules are closely associated with conflict, and do any reduce its likelihood?
- What explains variation within customary communities?
- Do landholders respond to land competition by “investing” in their customary identity and community?

3 Theory

- Collective action is costly, and customary leaders are resource-constrained
  - They cannot respond equally to all land claims
- These leaders also have a political incentive to respond to land claims made by committed community members
- Where landholders anticipate land competition, they engage with their customary community before threats appear

4 Data & Key Variables

• Sample: 980 individual survey respondents, data collected November-December 2018
• Dependent variables: ethnic attachment, frequency of contacting clan head in past 3 months
• Controls: age, gender, education, ethnic outsider
• A list experiment: “In the past year, tell me how many of the following activities you have done? Helped a friend or neighbor plant crops; Attended a community meeting; Bought a new piece of land; Traveled outside of Uganda”
  - Treatment includes: “Threatened violence against someone because of a dispute over land”

5 Findings

Figures above show predicted probabilities for the extreme values of ethnic attachment (strongly Ugandan and strongly ethnic group), as well as combined categories of frequency of contacting one's clan chief (never or only once & a few times or often).

6 Discussion

• Institutional theory of ethnic land conflict finds mixed support in the Ugandan context
• Interview evidence suggests that Buliisa District’s history of communal property explains a greater reliance on collective defense of property – and thus, greater likelihood of landholders investing in their customary community
• Interviews also suggest that when customary leaders can effectively monitor their community members, landholders routinely contribute to their community to maintain status, rather than reacting only when land rights are threatened
• This work suggests that while customary land tenure can channel conflict along ethnic lines, this relationship is contingent on the specific rules in place, and in some cases the rules can defuse conflict before it begins

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