Eviction by military police in Marabá

Thugs set houses on fire to evict peasants in Eldorado

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Forced Evictions and Electoral Margins of Victory

Theory I: Opportunities

I investigate why elected officials decide to outsource violence. I advance a theory of violence outsourcing based on economic opportunities and electoral costs.

First, an incumbent must have clear incentives to coerce a particular constituency in order to obtain personal gains in the form of rents. These kind of incentives are the result of shocks that offer extraordinary opportunities to amass rents—e.g., discovering petroleum underneath a village in a time of booming oil prices. To extract rents before oil prices go down, the incumbent will consider displacing inhabitants from the area utilizing physical force.

Theory II: Electoral Costs

Politicians administer a ‘portfolio’ of physical violence. Electoral competition shapes the type of violence the incumbent will select to collect rents—

- When electoral competition is low (i.e., low probability of losing office), it is less risky to send the police to repress. A large mass of voters can help the incumbent to deal with unpopular decisions.
- When electoral competition is high, he will likely renounce to the monopoly physical violence and subcontract non-state entrepreneurs.
- Police repression signals state involvement and may provoke popular outcries leading to electoral sanctions. Subcontracting private actors such as paramilitaries or thugs allows the incumbent to avoid direct blame for irresponsible decisions and circumvent institutional checks that restrain the use of public force.

Preliminary Finding:

There seems to be a greater presence of non-state agents (most of them hired gunmen) conducting forced evictions in municipalities where the governor’s coalition won by a small margin in mayoral elections.

State of Pará, 2002-2014

I test my theory in Pará, Brazil’s second largest state. Located in the Amazonian hinterland, Pará is the country’s new agrarian frontier. Rising agricultural prices since the early 2000s and vast tracts of arable land have made Pará a highly attractive terrain for investors interested in large-scale farming, particularly for those cultivating soybeans. Soybean monoculture drastically revalued the price of state vacant lands, exerting pressures on family farming and forcibly displacing traditional rural populations from their lands—most of them, landless farmers.

Methods

- Three-month archival work and data cleaning at the CPT (Land Pastoral Commission) headquarters in Goiás and local offices in Pará.
- ~25 semi-structured interviews with local bureaucrats, landowners, church leaders, and members of landless social movements.
- Observation of public behavior in events of interest such as hearings or street marches.

Figure 1: Eviction by military police in Marabá

Figure 2: Forced Evictions and Electoral Margins of Victory

Figure 3: Thugs set houses on fire to evict peasants in Eldorado

Descriptive Evidence

A preliminary examination of processed data on 45 occurrences of forced evictions from the CPT, between 2002 and 2010, reveals the following:

The x-axis exhibits categories for electoral margin of victory of the winning candidates from the governor’s coalition that ran for mayor. The y-axis plots episodes in which non-state agents (i.e., no identified police forces) forcibly removed rural populations from state public lands. There seems to be a correlation between electoral competition and the intervention of private gunmen in evictions.

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