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War, growth, and political activism in Africa

6 July 2011 § 1 Comment

FOLLOWING UP ON MY **PREVIOUS POST** ([HTTP://RACHELSTROHM.COM/2011/03/23/THE-POSTBELLUM-lives-of-child-soldiers/](http://rachelstrohm.com/2011/03/23/the-postbellum-lives-of-child-soldiers/)) about Chris Blattman's work with ex-combatants in Northern Uganda, I came across another **interesting piece** (<http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CBoQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fchrisblattman.com%2Fdocur> [PDF] by him and a **earlier article** (<http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CBoQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.sscnet.ucla.edu%2Fpol6FfyaOqpgyKs2KuxZyakVEbcLQ&sig2=8V4cUgnLw4F8rfhA6pzXcQ&cad=rja>) [PDF] by John Bellows and Edward Miguel about the effects of war on post-conflict political participation. Bellows & Miguel's 2006 piece captures a variety of interesting findings about the medium-term effects of conflict on both consumption and local institutions in Sierra Leone. Using data from 2005, three years after the end of the 1991-2002 civil war, they find that areas experiencing greater amounts of violence during the war did not have lower consumption levels than less-affected areas by 2004. Whilst this result is consistent with the neoclassical assumption that destruction of capital may lead to faster growth converging back to steady state growth, they also supply helpfully specific hypotheses for this return to growth, including the continuing availability of diamond wealth in some of the regions which experienced the highest levels of conflict, the reconstruction work of NGOs, and the fact that soil was allowed to lie fallow in many areas during the war.

More interestingly, however, Bellows & Miguel also find that areas with greater levels of war-related victimization (and not simply greater numbers of battles) have higher attendance at community meetings and higher levels of voter registration in the post-conflict period. These results hold after controlling for the number of NGOs doing reconstruction work in these regions. Contrary to the popular expectation that war destroys the social fabric, these results indicate that in some cases, conflict may actually increase local-level political activism.

In a 2007 publication, Blattman uses his unique dataset from northern Uganda to investigate political activism among returning combatants in the post-conflict period, and finds a similar result: youth who were abducted by the LRA are more likely than non-abducted youth to become community leaders and to vote on national referenda. He suggests that the act of witnessing violence may be the primary motivator behind this increasing political activity, as witnessing

violence was significantly correlated with greater political involvement in ways that perpetrating or receiving violence, or carrying weapons, were not. What's best about this piece, however (and at least from the standpoint of mainstream development economics), is its inclusion of qualitative data. A number of former abductees described their abductions as experiences that left them more mature and worldly, less willing to uncritically accept the political positions of local leaders, and increasingly interested in making something of their lives. This obviously applied to a minority of abductees overall, just as political leadership is inherently a minority trait in any population, but still offers a fascinating bit of insight into a little-discussed aspect of post-conflict reintegration.