

Natural disasters are creating oppressive governments

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Natural disasters, such as tornadoes, cyclones and hurricanes, are causing governments to become more oppressive, according to research from Durham University Business School, in partnership with Deakin Business School and Monash School of Business Malaysia.

The researchers, Nejat Anbarci, a Professor of Economics at Durham University Business School, and Professor Mehmet Ulubasoglu and Dr Muhammad Habibur Rahman, reviewed data from the years 1950-2009, which measured every single country's polity score – an international analysis tool which evaluates the strength of a country's democratic system, from autocracy to democracy.

The researchers reviewed the changes in country's polity score both at the time of extreme weather conditions, and in the years afterwards. They found that after a substantial natural disaster, there was a rise in the autocracy of the affected country's government.

In fact, the researchers found that storms deteriorate democratic conditions in island countries by 3.46 per cent in the following year and 10.1 per cent over the subsequent five years. Additionally these governments increase their level of political oppression by around 2.5 per cent per year following storm-related disasters.

Professor Anbarci says,

"It's likely that the disruption that severe storms cause to communities, including the breakdown of day-to-day business and routines, as well as the need for government intervention to support storm recovery, provide an opportunity for governments to tighten their control over citizens, taking advantage of a period of vulnerability. Citizens are less inclined to revolt against the tightening of these political regimes, as they become more accepting after a natural disaster of the fact that autocratic governments are much more efficient in decision-making during crises."

The researchers found that it was small islands in particular that were impacted by this rise of autocracy, with landlocked countries and coastal countries not experiencing as much of an impact on their government system.

Dr Rahman says,

"Storms often put our physical environment in peril, but its aftermath dampens democratic conditions in island countries. We observe that the incumbents in islands tend to secure their citizens' supports through providing post-disaster relief expenditure. Frequent storms offer more opportunities to the governments in allocating relief assistance that they generally do in exchange of restricting their citizens' democratic rights; the ultimate outcome turns out to be authoritarian populism".

Professor Ulubasoglu says,

"The rise of authoritarian regimes in countries such as Haiti, Fiji and the Philippines are examples of

countries where frequent severe storm events could have been a contributor to why these countries governments have remained autocratic over longer periods of time - these are countries we're now dubbing 'storm autocracies'. With climate change likely to cause more frequent natural disasters in these small islands, it is likely that we will see a greater decline in democracy in these countries".

The authors believe that climate change will only accelerate the likelihood and frequency of natural disasters, meaning their research findings will become increasingly prevalent and impactful, in understanding the impact of climate change on the rise of autocratic governments.

If you would like some information on the research paper, or to speak with Professor Nejat Anbarci about the research findings, please contact Peter Remon at BlueSky PR, peter@bluesky-pr.com - +44 (0)1582 797 956.