

# Famine Mortality, Rational Political Inactivity, and International Food Aid

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**Summary.** — Famine mortality is preventable by government action and yet some famines kill. We develop a political theory of famine mortality based on the selectorate theory of Bueno de Mesquita *et al.* [Bueno de Mesquita, B. B., Morrow, J. M., Siverson, R. M., & Smith, A. (2002). Political institutions, policy choice and the survival of leaders. *British Journal of Political Science*, 32(4), 559–590, Bueno de Mesquita, B. B., Smith, A., Siverson, R. M., & Morrow, J. M. (2003). *The logic of political survival*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press]. We argue that it can be politically rational for a government, democratic or not, to remain inactive in the face of severe famine threat. We derive the testable hypotheses that famine mortality is possible in democracies, but likely to be lower than in autocracies. Moreover, a larger share of people being affected by famine relative to population size together with large quantities of international food aid being available will lower the mortality in both regime types, but more so in democracies. © 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Food prices have soared. (...) We should start by helping those whose needs are immediate. The UN's World Food Program requires at least \$500 million of additional food supplies to meet emergency calls.

Zoellick (2008), President of the World Bank.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Modern famine scholarship regards famine mortality as entirely preventable by governments. If so, the question is why in the 20th century alone between 70 and 80 million people may have died in famines (Devereux, 2000, p. 7). In this article, we study why governments sometimes fail to prevent excess mortality from famines. Amartya Sen has famously argued that democratic governments always prevent substantial famine mortality.<sup>1</sup> Yet, this can neither account for why some countries have experienced some famine mortality despite democratic government, nor can it explain under which conditions even autocratic governments prevent famine mortality (De Waal, 2000; Keen, 1994a; Woo-Cumings, 2002). In this article, we take up the challenge of tackling these unsolved questions.

Based on the selectorate theory by Bueno de Mesquita, Morrow, Siverson, and Smith (2002, 2003), we develop a political theory of famine mortality, which suggests that governmental inaction in the face of a severe famine threat can be the rational outcome of a political support maximization calculus. Governments may rationally fail to act against famines when the political costs of action are higher than the political costs of inaction. Importantly, our argument is that both democracies and autocracies face this trade-off, which explains why some famine mortality is possible in democra-

cies as well. Differences in the amount of famine mortality between democracies and autocracies stem from different kinds of policies used in response to this trade-off. Democracies are more likely to use policies that benefit all affected people, not just targeted transfers for the benefit of a small elite (Hausken, Martin, & Plümp, 2004; Plümp & Martin, 2003). Both democracies and autocracies can employ international food aid to lower the political costs of government action, because people affected by the famine can be helped without major (short-run) costs to those unaffected. However, democracies are more likely to channel international food aid to all affected people, whereas autocracies are likely to appropriate large parts of the aid to the private benefit of the small elite, leaving those outside the elite again vulnerable to the mortal impact of famine.

Our political theory of famine mortality leads to the expectation that famine mortality in democracies, while likely to be lower than in autocracies, is still possible. Furthermore, democracies act more decisively against famines than autocracies with policies aimed at preventing harm from all people affected by famine: the larger the share of the affected people to the total population, the higher the level of international food aid available. These hypotheses find support in our empirical test of famine mortality in a cross-national time-series analysis of a sample consisting of 130 developing countries over the period 1972–2000.

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## 2. FAMINE MORTALITY AND DEMOCRACY: A REVIEW OF PREVIOUS ARGUMENTS

The field of famine studies is not one of great consensus among the scholars. In fact, there is a widespread disagreement about most relevant issues, including the very definition of what constitutes a famine (Devereux, 1993; Howe, 2002; Howe & Devereux, 2004). Whatever the exact definition, it is important to distinguish famine, which according to Sen (2001, p. 160) involves “a sudden eruption of severe deprivation for a considerable section of the population,” from problems of general malnourishment and endemic hunger.

Putting it bluntly, one can distinguish between famine theorizing before and after Sen. Early explanations treated famines as the inevitable consequence of a sudden decline in food supply (Devereux, 1993, chap. 4). A good example is Brown and Eckholm’s (1974, p. 25) verdict that “a sudden, sharp reduction in the food supply in any particular geographic locale has usually resulted in widespread hunger and famine.” Typically, though not always, the fall in food supply was seen as being caused by persistent droughts, floods, and other natural calamities. Famines had the notion of an unavoidable exogenous shock, an act of nature. Aykroyd (1974, p. 1) portrays a common cause for famine as follows: “two years of poor rainfall may be followed by a third year without any rain at all. It is then that famine makes its appearance. . .”

Second generation explanations contested this implicit claim that famines are beyond human scope. Sen is not the only representative of such theories of course, but the most prominent one (see, e.g., Sen, 1977, 1980, 1981, 1999; Drèze & Sen, 1989, 1990). The famous opening sentences of *Poverty and Famines* proclaim: “Starvation is the characteristic of some people not *having* enough food to eat. It is not the characteristic of there *being* not enough food to eat.” (Sen, 1981, p. 2, emphasis in original). It follows that food shortage may be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the outbreak of famines. What really matters are entitlements (the command over food and non-food commodities), not food availability as such. Famines happen when groups of individuals experience entitlement collapse and are no longer able to buy sufficient amounts of food.

Famine theorizing after Sen has contested many aspects of Sen’s writings. In fact, the recognition and admiration his work has received across the wider social sciences is only rivaled by the criticism, opposition and, at times, fury it has encountered as well (see, e.g., Bowbrick, 1986; De Waal, 1989, 1997; Keen, 1994a, 1994b; Rangasami, 1985). It would be far beyond the scope of this article to survey and critically engage with the detailed controversies.<sup>2</sup> Much of the criticism has concentrated on how Sen’s “entitlement failure” theory is seemingly ill-equipped to explain the modern conflict-related famines of sub-Saharan Africa. In these conflicts entitlement collapse might still apply, but it often occurs through extra-market violent appropriation, what some call “asset transfer” (Duffield, 1994) or “asset-stripping” (De Waal, 1993), whereas Sen stresses entitlement collapse within the rule of law and functioning markets.

These critics do not doubt Sen and Drèze’s contention that “all famines in the modern world are preventable by human action” and that large-scale famine mortality must be due to “some massive social failure” (Drèze & Sen, 1989, p. 47). In other words: public action can reduce or even avoid famine mortality, for example, in the form of free or subsidized provision of food, the creation of (temporary) employment and income opportunities for affected people, the control of epidemics, and the provision of health services. Indeed, Sen

(2001, p. 175) believes that famines are “so easy to prevent that it is amazing that they are allowed to occur at all.” This agrees with the belief advanced by, for example, Von Braun, Teklu, and Webb (1998, p. 2) that “famine is largely a function of institutional, organizational, and policy failure, not just one of generalizable market- and climate-driven production failure” (emphasis in original), with Devereux’s (2000, p. 27) assessment that “famines occur because they are not prevented: they are allowed to happen,” as well as with de Waal’s (2000, p. 18) argument “that any government can, if it so desires, take effective measures to combat famine.”

Yet, social scientists know astonishingly little about the conditions under which governments will prevent famines and when they will fail or abstain from doing so. The best-known argument comes from Sen, who has claimed throughout his work on famine that regime type is what matters for political responsiveness to famine threat and that “there has never been a famine in a functioning multiparty democracy” (Sen, 2001, p. 178). According to Sen, democratic leaders respond to the threat of a famine because they have to win elections and face public criticism. Since political survival of autocrats does not depend—at least not to the same extent—on mass support, autocrats are less likely to respond adequately to the threat of famine mortality. The mechanism that Sen sees at work is that in democracies the government is forced by the public opinion to act: “With a relatively free press, with periodic elections, and with active opposition parties, no government can escape severe penalty if it delays preventive measures and allows a real famine to occur.” (Sen, 1990, p. 50).

However, Sen does not really explain why and to what extent the incentive structure for democratic governments differs from the incentive structure of autocratic regimes. His functional logic of famine prevention—democratic leaders will prevent famines because otherwise they will be severely penalized by the democratic public—is overly optimistic since it presumes that democratic governments can never find it support-maximizing to remain inactive in the face of a famine threat. As Bhagwati (1995, p. 59) has put it: “Sen’s precise argument (. . .) is too simplistic and fails to persuade.” We develop a theory, which explains why and under what conditions democracies and autocracies respond differently to famines and why even democracies may at times remain inactive or respond too late. Before that, however, we will discuss a famine case from India, which illustrates that some small-scale famine mortality is possible in democratic regimes and that democracies can react in rather complex ways to the threat of famine mortality. In democratic India, international food aid was instrumental in containing famine mortality, which we compare and contrast with the failure of such aid to prevent large-scale famine mortality in autocratic North Korea. However, even in democracies such aid need not always prevent substantial famine mortality as our discussion of the Sudanese famine of the late 1980s shows.

## 3. REGIME TYPE, INTERNATIONAL FOOD AID, AND FAMINE: EVIDENCE FROM INDIA, SUDAN, AND NORTH KOREA

“India is an important case study for testing the political economy of responsiveness. It is home to a large vulnerable population (. . .). India is a federal democracy, and popularly elected state governments play a key role in relief activities. There is a relatively free and independent press.” (Besley & Burgess, 2002, p. 1416). Indeed, Sen regards post-independence democratic India as a major piece of evidence in favor

of his claim that no famine ever took place in a democratic country with free press. He insists that India has not suffered a major famine since 1947: "The last major famine in India took place before independence, viz. the Bengal famine of 1943, in which about 3 million people died. Since then there have been a number of threats of severe famine (e.g., in Bihar in 1967, in Maharashtra in 1973, in West Bengal in 1979, and in Gujarat in 1987), but they did not materialize, largely due to public intervention." (Drèze & Sen, 1989, p. 8). Sen thus argues that large-scale famine mortality has been prevented by the intervention of a responsive democratic government.

On closer inspection the devil lies in the detail: Some observers argue that some famine mortality actually did occur during the 1967 Bihar and the 1973 Maharashtra famines (Dyson & Maharatna, 1992). We will concentrate here on the Bihar famine since Drèze (1990) himself in his single-authored contribution to their co-edited volumes on *The Political Economy of Hunger* is much more cautious in his verdict on famine mortality in Bihar than Drèze and Sen (1989). Noting substantial drops in food production, food availability, and calorie consumption, he addresses the issue of excess mortality. He regards officially published data on registered deaths as the least unreliable, particularly for assessing changes in mortality. According to these data, there was an excess mortality of 1 and 3.5 deaths per thousand people in Bihar in 1966 and 1967, respectively. These unimpressively small numbers nevertheless suggest an excess mortality in the famine-ridden years of up to several ten thousand deaths (50,000–175,000), given a population at the time of roughly 50 million. Dyson and Maharatna (1992) regard the official total mortality data as highly deficient, and therefore conclude that substantial excess famine mortality cannot be deducted from these data, but can also not be excluded as a possibility. They regard the registered infant mortality rate as more reliable and find that this mortality increased more in the Bihar districts most affected by the drought, which provides some indirect and tentative evidence for excess mortality. Drèze (1990, p. 59) comes to the conclusion that even if the official mortality data are questionable, "one thing is clear: there is precious little evidence to support the self-congratulatory statements that have commonly been made about the Bihar famine, for example, 'no exceptional mortality was recorded' or 'no one died of starvation'."

Interpreting Bihar as a case of successful famine prevention by a responsive democratic government also appears questionable in the light of the actual responses by the state and central governments. In a detailed study, Brass (1986) shows that democratic response to the Bihar famine has been far from straightforward. Instead of doing everything they can to relieve the famine impact, the relevant political actors "used the crisis to gain advantage or prevent harm in their relations with each other" (Brass, 1986, p. 253). Initially, the central government refused to accept the severity of the crisis and refused to provide assistance, because the state government was regarded as incompetent and out of favor, despite both being run by the Congress party. The state government itself refused to declare a state of famine before the elections in November 1967 and famine was declared only after its election defeat by a new government.

Eventually, food aid was provided to Bihar. Approximately, 2.5 million tons of grain were shipped to the affected regions, which was about half of the amount requested by the regional government. However, rather than the central government redirecting food from unaffected provinces to Bihar, the large bulk of the food shipped to Bihar came as an international food aid from the United States (Brass, 1986, p. 259). Thus,

Bihar not only demonstrates that some famine mortality can happen even in democracies, it also shows that democratic governments do not always act responsively and prevent famines fully. There can be a little doubt that the response to the Bihar famine came too late and was insufficient to prevent famine mortality entirely. It is difficult to say whether the Indian government would have been willing to prevent a potentially much higher number of deaths in the absence of the humanitarian intervention by the United States.

The Bihar famine highlights two problems of democratic response to famine: A famine becomes easily politicized, which can hinder rather than help immediate famine response as politicians get caught up in their politics rather than concentrating on famine relief, and a central government will be reluctant to redistribute domestic resources to famine victims if the affected population represents only a minority of the electorate and is not decisive for general elections. Fortunately for the famine victims in Bihar, the central Indian government could draw upon generous external assistance. This suggests that international food aid can be instrumental in overcoming the internal impasse that even a democratic government might face in confronting an impending famine threat. Thus, while the reaction of the Indian government to the famine in Bihar was everything but straightforward, once the famine was officially declared the government happily accepted large quantities of foreign food aid and allowed staff from foreign donors and international organizations to help in administering and allocating the food aid. With the help of "the dedicated cooperation of the international community" (Mayer, 1974, p. 111) famine mortality was not prevented, but at least limited.

Another case, which also puts doubt on the thesis that democracies will always prevent famine mortality, is provided by the Sudanese famine of the late 1980s. When Sudan experienced a third interlude of democratic government since independence with a fairly free press over the period 1986–89, the expectation following Sen's deterministic claim is that the government would do everything in its power to prevent famine mortality. In fact, the exact opposite was the case. The central government allowed and encouraged cattle and other raids by armed militia on the economically better-off ethnic group of Dinkas in Southern Sudan, which made them vulnerable to famine. Moreover, it allowed the Sudanese military and militia groups to employ famine as a strategy in its warfare against the rebels in Southern Sudan and frustrated and blocked relief efforts.<sup>3</sup> How many people died as the consequence of war-related famine is hard to say. Devereux (2000) states 250,000 people based on Harden's (1993, p. 169) estimate. Devereux (2000, p. 33) himself notes that the estimate is difficult to verify, but Keen's (1994a) detailed and fieldwork-based study, while avoiding estimates of aggregate mortality, leaves little doubt about substantial excess mortality.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, De Waal (1997, p. 93) calls it "the most severe famine in Sudan's modern history."

While there were representatives from the South in the parliament in Khartoum, which raised the famine issue in parliament, it was unable to mobilize public opinion and unite the democratic opposition for its cause. The press was mainly focused on issues and conditions in the North and showed little interest in famine in the South. The government was an extremely concerned to keep food prices low in the North and in and around Khartoum in particular, so as not to upset its voters. In a country marked by ethnic strife, the South simply had no political clout in the North. In addition, the government did all it could to mislead the public about the extent of famine and its efforts to contain it. This was helped by some Southern representatives subscribing to the govern-



mental line and by the counter-productive role that the largest Southern rebel group, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), played by obstructing relief efforts and itself engaging in warfare tactics that exacerbated the famine (African Rights, 1997, p. 98f).

To our knowledge, Sen does not directly engage with this particular famine in Sudan. He is less neglectful of famines during Sudan's non-democratic periods of government. For example, in Sen (2001, p. 183) he writes: "In various ways, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, several of the Sahel countries and others provide glaring examples of how badly things can go wrong without the discipline of opposition parties and the news media." Yet, the Sudanese famine of the late 1980s demonstrates just how badly things can go wrong with and despite the discipline of opposition parties and the news media.

In the case of Sudan, the democratically elected government obstructed international food aid relief efforts. This would appear to be the exception, whereas as a general rule democratic governments happily make use of free international food aid as was the case in Bihar. In autocracies, the misuse of international food aid is the norm rather than the exception. Contrasting the Indian experience of the Bihar famine with that of famine in North Korea in the second part of the 1990s provides a case in point. Starting from the mid- to late-1990s, famine has been a persistent phenomenon in North Korea. A combination of flooding, droughts, and general agricultural mis-management led to severe food shortages during the period 1995–99 and beyond (Noland, Robinson, & Wang, 2001; Woo-Cumings, 2002). The North Korean government only reluctantly accepted the reality of famine and even more reluctantly asked for external help. Once it did, international food aid entered the country in large quantities, but from the start it was hampered by North Korean obstruction and unwillingness to allow the international relief organizations organize and monitor the distribution of food aid. Following evidence of large-scale misuse of food aid—it ended up in the hands of government officials and the military rather than in the hands of civilians, while whole regions deemed to be unimportant for the survival of the regime were entirely cut off from the aid—several relief organizations pulled out in the late 1990s and 2000 (Goodkind & West, 2001; Natsios, 2001).

As with any information about North Korea, reliable estimates about the number of famine deaths are hard to come by. Goodkind and West (2001) estimate between 600,000 and one million famine-related deaths over the period 1995–2000, with more deaths since, if on a lower scale. Other estimates put the number up to 3.5 million (Noland *et al.*, 2001). Even if these figures are over-estimates, at a pre-famine population size of 22 million, the North Korean government spectacularly failed to prevent famine mortality on a very large scale. Admittedly, North Korea is a stark example of a dictatorship. Yet, our theory, spelled out in the next section, suggests that much of North Korean governmental behavior—the diversion of international food aid to the benefit of government officials, the cutting-off of aid to civilians and entire regions deemed unimportant for regime survival, the obstruction of international relief organizations, *etc.*—is typical for autocratic regimes because it follows their logic of political support maximization.

#### 4. INACTIVITY OR FAMINE PREVENTION? A POLITICAL THEORY OF FAMINE MORTALITY

If governments can, but need not, avert famine mortality, then the question is: what induces governments to prevent famines from turning mortal? In this section, we develop a

political theory of famine mortality. Our argument is based on and draws from standard political-economic models of political responsiveness (dubbed the selectorate theory). As Bueno de Mesquita *et al.* (2003, p. 26) have argued: "Political survival is put at risk whenever leaders lack the resources to maintain the support of the essential backers." Accordingly, our theory thus distinguishes between the government of a country, an elite, and the broader population. Political survival depends on a minimum support of both the elite and the non-elite part of the population, where the relative importance of the population increases when countries become more democratic.

In the event of a severe famine threat, only a part of both the elite and the population is directly affected. While the share of the affected members of the elite can of course be substantially different from the share of the affected population, this difference is not important for our argument. More importantly, we assume that the government determines the degree to which it intervenes to assist those affected by famine and that it has two possibilities for this intervention: it can directly assist selected famine-affected individuals by targeted transfers or it can provide assistance in the form of quasi-public goods, which benefit all affected individuals, not just the selected ones.

These assumptions are realistic. First, famines almost never hit entire countries. Second, governments can typically intervene in various ways to help the affected individuals escape the severe famine threat. For example, the government can buy or requisition food from domestic markets in unaffected parts of the country and redistribute it to affected parts. The government can also open up protected domestic food markets to allow food imports. It can provide affected people with the economic means to buy food either by financial transfers or by creating temporary public employment. *Because* famines typically hit only parts of countries, there is normally enough overall food available. Third, governments can be selective in providing assistance, but they do not need to be. Take the example of food aid, perhaps the most direct way of helping affected individuals. Governments can hand out food aid to selected individuals, thus discriminating against others, or they can provide food aid as a quasi-public good by throwing it off lorries or airplanes, which—if they do not discriminate between equally affected regions—is the least selective way of providing food aid.<sup>5</sup> Fourth, and perhaps most strikingly, our assumption that even members of the elite can be affected by a famine is not unrealistic either. By this, we do not mean that members of the elite starve and perhaps die of hunger (they rarely do). Rather, it is plausible to assume that members of the elite own farms, factories, shops, and other businesses in the affected regions. Thus, the profits of the affected elite members may suffer in the event of famine.

In terms of behavioral assumptions, we assume that the government maximizes its political support to stay in power. In democracies, the survival of the government will also depend on the support from the elite, but the wider population plays a crucial role as voters in elections. In autocracies, governments first and foremost have to defend their political influence against potential rival groups from the elite. The autocratic government, in other words, has to satisfy the demands of a relatively small elite and can neglect to some extent the demands of the wider population. A total neglect would be dangerous though since the population can try to topple the elite in a revolution. However, for us it is not important that the elite is also influential in democracies and that the wider population is not entirely without influence in autocracies. Rather, what matters is that the relative influence of these two groups varies with the level of democracy.

Both the people and the members of the elite maximize their individual utility. Food and income enter this utility function positively. The famine death of others lowers individual utility, either because individuals are somewhat altruistic or because they are also affected and fear that death eventually may reach them as well. Even if they are unaffected by the present famine, they may regard famine mortality as a sign of government failure, rendering them less secure in the face of future potential famine (and other) threats in which a government intervention is required. We assume a well-behaved concave utility function. Thus, for example, the marginal utility from food is strictly positive, but diminishes with larger quantities of food. For our argument, it is not important whether individuals are willing to sacrifice food (or money) to save other individuals. If they do so on a large scale, hunger will be rare and famine mortality is unlikely to occur. For the sake of argument and to be consistent with the empirical fact of excess mortality in some famines, we have to assume that in the presence of an external famine shock, a moderate level of "altruism" or "diffuse reciprocity" may be present but does not suffice to prevent excess mortality. In other words, preventing excess mortality typically presupposes governmental intervention.

(a) *The political trade-off of famine prevention*

Consider a country in which a drought or a flood leads to a regional crop failure and as a consequence to a severe famine threat. As noted above, there are multiple ways in which a government can help those affected. If doing so were costless, then all governments would act against all threats of famine mortality at all times.<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, however, whichever way the government takes to help individuals affected by famine, there is always an economic cost to some others unaffected by the famine. If the government buys the food on the domestic market, food prices inevitably rise so that the consumers in the unaffected parts of the country become worse off. Confiscation and opening up protected domestic food markets hurt agricultural producers. Buying food abroad, financial transfers, and creating massive temporary public employment all cost public money, which has to be financed by the higher taxes or public debt. The beneficiaries of the government inactivity are therefore the consumers and tax-payers in the unaffected regions, which would suffer from higher food prices and/or higher taxes, or agricultural producers, which would suffer from opening protected domestic food markets. As a consequence, if the government acts to help people affected by famine, it will inevitably lose some support from either the expropriated owners of food, peasants, farmers, the land oligarchy, or the consumers and tax-payers.

Rational governments, which seek and depend on political support, will therefore face the following trade-off: On the one hand, ignoring a famine that affects a certain share of the population will lead to the loss of political support of those affected plus those who care strongly about the fate of the affected people without being affected themselves.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, taking action to help those affected by famine will lead to the loss of political support by some of those harmed by the government action or, equivalently, by those benefiting from the government inaction. A government will remain rationally inactive if famine prevention leads to more loss of support than failing to prevent famine.

Our theory also extends to extreme situations in which the government's political support function is not only independent from the reaction of the affected population, but in which the government may even gain a strategic advantage from remaining inactive. If the government fights a civil war with

groups from the affected region, and if the unaffected part of the population supports the government in this civil war (e.g., because of an ethnic, cultural, or other social divide), then the incentive to help the famine-affected individuals largely diminishes. The reason is that the government cannot earn much support from that part of the affected population against which the civil war is fought, while the unaffected part of the population may even support governmental inactivity. Accordingly, depending on its location and its political context, civil wars may increase famine mortality without necessarily weakening the position of the government.<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, our theory suggests that the response of the government depends on the relative size of the affected to the total population: the larger the share of the affected individuals, the higher the probability that the government intervenes. The reason is that the more affected individuals there are, the more political support the government stands to lose by remaining inactive: it loses the support of more affected people as well as the support by the unaffected people due to the prospect of a larger number of people dying in the case of government inaction. However, the larger the share of the affected individuals, the more difficult famine mortality prevention becomes since more people need to be assisted.

(b) *Famine prevention in democracy and autocracy*

The basic trade-off that governments face when contemplating acting against famine exists in both democracies and autocracies. This, however, does not mean that both regime types will respond equally to famines—quite to the contrary. We have made only one assumption that distinguishes autocratic governments from their democratic counterparts: autocratic leaders are relatively more responsive to the members of the elite while democratic governments respond more to the demands of the broader population, the voters. Yet, this difference has large effects on governmental action toward famine prevention.

For the sake of argument, but with no loss of generality, let us examine how (non-existing) ideal regime types respond to famine threats.<sup>9</sup> Assume therefore, for simplicity, that autocratic governments solely depended on support from the members of the elite. The government may remain inactive in the face of famine threat, if the share of the elite that is affected is either very small or affected elite members cannot mount a challenge to political leadership of the government. However, the government always has an incentive to compensate famine-affected elite members by targeted and selective transfers (of food, money, etc.), making individuals outside the elite shoulder the costs, as much as this is possible, in order to avoid imposing costs on unaffected elite members. Importantly, those famine-affected individuals outside the elite are left vulnerable to the mortal impact of famine, unless the disutility to elite members from the excess mortality leads to a greater loss of support than the government action to prevent famine mortality among the individuals outside the elite.

The democratic government responds differently. Assume, again for simplicity, that the elite does not matter at all. The democratic government may also remain inactive and allow people to die from famine if inaction is support maximizing. However, if government action is support maximizing, then the larger number of individuals with political influence in need of assistance (namely, all affected people, not just the affected members of a small elite) implies that targeted transfers become infeasible. Government action in democratic regimes is therefore more likely to take the form of policies that have quasi-public good characteristics and benefit all

the affected people, not just those that form part of the elite. Government action will, for example, take the form of general non-discriminatory food aid to affected regions (e.g., throwing abundant food from airplanes over affected regions), rather than the form of targeted compensation to selected elite members.

So far, we have not argued that democratic governments are more likely to respond to the threat of famines than the autocratic governments. In fact, if anything democracies are more severely exposed to the political trade-off that governments face since autocracies in principle can make those outside the small elite pay the costs of government action, whereas it is typically not possible for the democracies to avoid redirecting resources from politically influential individuals. However, the possibly lower likelihood of total inaction in autocracies merely means that affected elite members are unlikely to remain uncompensated by the government. It does not imply that there will be fewer famine deaths outside the elite. Quite the opposite: our theory predicts that democracies, once they respond to a famine threat, do so by providing general food aid and other quasi-public goods, while the autocratic government compensates the affected members of the elite by targeted selective transfers. In other words, autocratic governments respond differently to famine crises than the democratic governments. They dominantly seek to shelter the elite from the adverse consequences of food shortage. Intervention in a famine by a democratic government, on the other hand, is likely to assist all affected individuals.

#### (c) *The role of international food aid*

Up to this point we have ignored a potential exogenous source that can provide governments with a way to mitigate or even solve the political trade-off that governments face: international food aid. Typically provided by international donors in the form of grants, food aid from abroad channeled to famine-stricken regions will prevent loss of support by affected people (and their unaffected supporters) without immediate economic costs to others, thus preventing loss of political support to the government by unaffected people.<sup>10</sup> In other words, food aid allows the government to win a political support from the affected parts of the population and/or the elite without needing to fear a decline in support from the unaffected parts. Simple arithmetic suggests that this effect of international food aid increases the probability that governments will act to significantly reduce famine mortality.

However, even if international food aid means that government inaction becomes less likely, this does not imply that governments will use international food aid responsibly and efficiently to the benefit of the affected individuals (Cohen & Werker, 2007). If the famine has already generated externalities, which threaten the government's popularity in regions unaffected by the famine, governments may direct parts of the additional food supply to the unaffected regions. While this policy may be interpreted as misuse of international food aid, the political logic directly follows from the opportunistic logic of famine prevention discussed above: if governments maximize their political support by mainly focusing on the famine's effect on the unaffected parts of the population, then there is an incentive to use food aid for fighting the political externalities of the famine rather than the famine itself.

Thus, even if the international community provides food aid, governments may still have an incentive to propel the lion's share of the available resources to recipients who do not suffer from under-supply of food.<sup>11</sup> This implies that food aid alone is not sufficient to ensure an immediate and fully

responsible reaction from the government. Only if the availability of resources is accompanied by a political incentive structure that prompts governments to direct resources to the affected, will famine prevention occur on a sufficiently large scale. Thus, international donors rather distrust the government and prefer organizing the transport and the distribution of food aid themselves if the population in the affected region is of marginal importance to the government.

Autocratic governments can be expected to respond differently to the availability of international food aid than democratic governments.<sup>12</sup> Since they have a lower incentive to provide food aid to the affected wider population, they may misuse food, sell it on black markets for the benefit of the elite, or simply let it rot. They will regard foreign food aid and its donors with suspicion despite the relief it can bring. They are more likely to hamper and obstruct foreign aid intervention, and will try to appropriate as much of the rents from food aid for the elite to the detriment of the broader affected populace. Moreover, autocratic governments are also less likely to ask for international food aid in the first place, because they can supply sufficient resources to the affected parts of the elite.<sup>13</sup> Democracies, on the other hand, are more likely to ask for food aid and allow the staff of foreign donors into their country, thus maximizing the chance that food aid will be fairly and efficiently allocated to all affected people instead of being diverted.

#### (d) *Summary and hypotheses*

In sum, we argue that both democratic and autocratic regimes face the trade-off between loss of political support for government action and loss of support for inaction toward famine. Democratic regimes are not immune from a political rationale that might induce governments to remain inactive altogether or for too long, which explains why some famine mortality can happen even in democracies. Our theory of differential famine mortality in democracies and autocracies allows us to formulate three hypotheses to be subjected to an empirical test:

1. Democracies can experience famine mortality, but mortality is likely to be lower the more democratic the country.
2. Famine mortality is lower when international food aid is available and a large share of the population is affected by the famine.
3. Democracies respond more elastically to the simultaneous presence of international food aid and a large share of the population being affected. Thus, the mortality gap between democracies and autocracies increases when both the share of the affected population becomes larger and when more international food aid is available.

## 5. RESEARCH DESIGN

### (a) *Dependent variable*

Famine mortality is notoriously difficult to estimate. To our knowledge, there are only two sources that provide estimates of mortality for all the major famines of the 20th century. One is the Emergency Disasters DataBase (EM-DAT) provided by the World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), which contains information on the occurrence and effects of more natural disasters. According to the CRED, the database is compiled "from various sources, including UN agencies, non-governmental organizations, insurance companies, research



institutes and press agencies” ([www.em-dat.net](http://www.em-dat.net)) and is maintained and continuously updated by its staff. Neumayer and Plümper (2007) provide a general overview of natural disasters covered by EM-DAT. The other source is a compilation of mortality estimates from several mostly academic sources on each individual famine put together by Devereux (2000), a well-known scholar of famines. We use EM-DAT as our main source because Devereux (2000) only lists famines with more than 1,000 people killed, whereas EM-DAT also includes famines of smaller size, and use Devereux (2000) only for the few cases in which EM-DAT refrains from providing a mortality estimate (5 of 35 famines with positive mortality in our dataset). Lack of availability of data on international food aid means that we can only include famines that occurred from 1972 onwards.

EM-DAT formally distinguishes between “famines” and “droughts” since not all famines result from drought, but in EM-DAT droughts merely form a sub-set of the broader famine category. Hence we add drought and famine mortality. Our dependent variable is the number of people killed by both “famines” and “droughts” in a country-year, as reported by EM-DAT, complemented by excess famine mortality estimates reported in Devereux (2000) for famines in which EM-DAT does not provide mortality estimates itself.<sup>14</sup> For simplicity, we refer to this as famine mortality. Data availability on our explanatory variables reduces the number of famines with reported fatalities further to 35. Twenty-three famines in our sample have an estimated famine mortality below 1,000 people, seven famines killed more than 1,000 but less than 100,000 people, and five famines killed 100,000 people or more (Mozambique in 1984, Sudan in 1984 and 1988, Ethiopia in 1985, Bangladesh in 1974).<sup>15</sup> Based upon our definition of democracy from the Polity project (see below), nine famines with positive mortality occurred in democracies with a mean mortality of about 43,000 people and the largest famine in Sudan in 1988 with an estimated mortality of 250,000 people.<sup>16</sup> 26 cases of famine mortality took place in autocracies with a mean mortality of about 82,000 people and the largest famine in Bangladesh in 1974 with an estimated mortality of 1.5 million people. No doubt, fatal famines and particularly so famines with very large fatalities are a rare event. Our dependent variable is thus a count variable, in which the sample variance exceeds the sample mean by more than a factor of 40. Accordingly, a negative binomial model is more appropriate than the Poisson model.

#### (b) *Explanatory variables*

Following our hypotheses, the main variables of interest are democracy, the number of people affected relative to the total population, and international food aid. We use Freedom House data on political rights as well as the polity2 variable from the Polity project, more commonly used in political science, as our measures of democracy.<sup>17</sup> Our theory suggests that democracies respond more elastically to the simultaneous presence of a large share of affected people to total population and international food aid. The number of people affected by a famine is taken from EM-DAT and is defined as “people requiring immediate assistance during a period of emergency.” For the very few cases, in which EM-DAT does not provide an estimate, we consulted the sources listed in Devereux (2000) to establish the number of people affected. The number of people affected was divided by the population data from World Bank (2004) to create the share of people affected relative to population size. International food aid in tons of cereals was taken from FAO (2004). We exclude Northern America, Wes-

tern Europe, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand from the sample since these are food aid donors, not recipients. However, our results are robust to including these countries in the sample as well.

Given our theory, we are interested in the interaction effect between both the variables and specifically whether the coefficient of this interaction effect is higher in democracies than it is in autocracies. Rather than constructing a difficult-to-interpret three-way interaction model with the continuous democracy measures, we condition the interaction effect between the population share affected by famine and international food aid on regime type dummies (democracy *vs.* autocracy). If our theory’s predictions are correct then the coefficients of both interaction effects should be negative and statistically significantly different from zero, but the coefficient of the interaction effect in democratic regimes should be significantly larger in absolute terms than the one in autocratic regimes. In other words, democratic governments respond more elastically than autocratic governments to an increase in the share of affected people for any given level of food aid available (or, conversely, to an increase in available food aid for any given share of affected population). We reverse the political rights measure from Freedom House so that it runs from 1 to 7 and higher values mean more democracy. For the purpose of conditioning the interaction effect between food aid and the affected share of population, we call regimes with a value of 5 or above a democracy (this is consistent with Freedom House’s own categorization of countries as “free”). For polity2, which runs from -10 to 10, we call a regime democratic if it has a value above 6.<sup>18</sup> In both the cases, slightly less than one third of countries are democratic and the two democracy dummies are correlated at  $r = .81$ .

Our theory suggested that, depending on its location and political context, the presence of a civil armed conflict can increase famine mortality since it may provide the government with a strategic incentive to remain inactive if the famine-affected individuals belong to a group in conflict with the government. Importantly, such an incentive is not exclusive to autocracies as the case of the Sudanese famine in the mid-1980s discussed in Section 3 above shows. In addition, a civil conflict can make famine mortality prevention more difficult even if the affected individuals are not part of a group opposing the government, for example, because of damaged infrastructure and the difficulties of organizing relief operations in conflict areas. To account for this, we use a measure of the intensity of civil conflict taking place in a country, relying on the Uppsala/PRIO “Armed Conflict Database” (Gleditsch, Wallensteen, Eriksson, Sollenberg, & Strand, 2002). The variable codes conflict intensity on a scale from zero to three, depending on the number of battle deaths (minimum 25, maximum more than 1,000 annual battle deaths).

We include several control variables. We include measures of rainfall and *per capita* renewable water resource availability relative to withdrawal since abundance of rainfall in a country renders it less likely that the country would ever experience any famine mortality at all. However, some countries can access water via rivers and lakes that are less vulnerable to the lack of domestic rainfall, which is why we additionally include the second measure, which approximates the abundance of available water resources of a country. Average yearly rainfall in millimeters is taken from the climate dataset for political areas described in Mitchell, Hulme, and New (2002). Data on water resources and withdrawal are taken from WRI (2004), the variable measures the ratio of available to withdrawn water.<sup>19</sup> We include three further control variables that can plausibly impact the level of mortality. To start with, we

include population size since countries of larger size might have higher absolute mortality numbers, all other things being equal. We need to log this variable, however, because famines hardly affect entire countries. The larger a country gets, the smaller is the likelihood that the whole country is affected. To capture both the facets of the geography of famines, a log-linearized population variable seems most appropriate. Second, we include population density. Getting food aid to people affected by famine is facilitated by dense populations. Third, we use *per capita* income in constant US\$ as a proxy variable for a country's extent and quality of infrastructure and administrative capacity to deal with famines and prevent mortality. Data are taken from [World Bank \(2004\)](#).

## 6. EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

[Table 1](#) displays our negative binomial regression estimation results. Model 1 reports the results for political rights as the measure of democracy, model 2 uses the Polity variable.

Substantively, [Table 1](#) lends support to our hypotheses. We find that a higher level of democracy reduces famine mortality significantly. This result is robust to whether we operationalize democracy as the *political rights* (model 1) or *polity2* (model 2) continuous variables (hypothesis 1). At the same time, we also find that international food aid reduces famine mortality if the ratio of the affected individuals to the total population differs significantly from zero in both the regime types (hypothesis 2). The larger the ratio of the affected individuals to the total population, the stronger the life-saving effect of international food aid becomes. This result suggests that governments use food aid more effectively, when larger parts of the country are affected. Most importantly for our theory, the interaction effect of international food aid and the share of affected individuals is much stronger in democratic than in autocratic regimes in both the models (hypothesis 3). In fact, the confidence intervals of the two interaction effects never overlap (chi-square tests reject the hypothesis of equality of coefficients at

$p < 0.0001$  in model 1 and  $p < 0.0006$  in model 2). Accordingly, governments in democratic countries are much more likely to effectively fight famine mortality if the famine affects large parts of the population and international food aid is available. To be fair, autocratic governments also respond to famines if the famine is widespread and international food aid is available, but they do so to a much lesser extent. Specifically, our results suggest that everything else being equal, democratic, and autocratic governments reduce famine mortality about equally if the share of the population in the autocratically ruled country affected by famine is roughly six times larger than the share of famine-affected people in a democracy.

The coefficients of our control variables also have the expected signs. While civil wars tend to increase famine mortality, *per capita* income significantly reduces the number of famine deaths. More populous countries tend to have higher famine fatalities, all other things being equal. Higher population density lowers the famine mortality. It might seem surprising that the ratio of the affected people to the total population on its own is positive and significant, and that the food aid variable on its own is insignificant. However, with the interaction effects included, these variables cannot be interpreted in isolation. Instead, what matters is the total effect. [Figure 1](#) clearly depicts the effect of increasing the level of food aid for a given share of affected people in both democratic and autocratic regimes.<sup>20</sup>

Observe, first, that famine mortality tends to be lower in democracies than it is in autocracies. This, of course, mirrors the negative sign of the democracy variable, but our model also predicts significant famine mortality rates in democracies when food aid is absent. While in democracies even moderate levels of food aid prevent substantial famine mortality, autocracies need much more international food aid to prevent famine mortality altogether. Given our results, the relative difference between democracies and autocracies in famine mortality thus is highest when only a moderate amount of food aid is available.

Table 1. *Negative binomial estimate of famine mortality*<sup>a</sup>

	Model 1	Model 2
Political rights	-0.8264 (0.2287)***	
Polity2		-0.0889 (0.0652)
Food aid * affected/population in democracies	-0.1180 (0.0285)***	-0.1189 (0.0332)***
Food aid * affected/population in autocracies	-0.0220 (0.0069)**	-0.0199 (0.0331)**
Food aid	-0.0003 (0.0012)	-0.0004 (0.0009)
Affected/population	72.58 (13.54)***	68.19 (13.80)***
Civil wars	1.4900 (0.4052)***	1.2764 (0.4329)**
<i>Per capita</i> income	-0.0037 (0.0004)***	-0.0042 (0.0005)***
Population (logged)	1.4602 (0.2814)***	1.3797 (0.3042)***
Population density	-0.1763 (0.3955)	-0.4792 (0.4357)
Annual rainfall	-0.0016 (0.0004)***	-0.0015 (0.0004)***
Net water availability	-0.0156 (0.0057)**	-0.0162 (0.0046)***
Intercept	-17.8548 (4.4261)***	-18.0573 (4.4098)***
1/lnalpha	5.6729 (0.1793)***	5.7240 (0.1805)***
Alpha	290.89 (52.14)***	306.14 (55.25)***
Pseudo-likelihood	472.97	474.74
<i>N</i> observations	2399	2304
Wald chi <sup>2</sup>	787.98***	715.35***

<sup>a</sup> Huber-White robust standard errors in brackets, estimates with clustered standard errors give substantively identical levels of significance.

\*  $p < 0.1$ .

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .



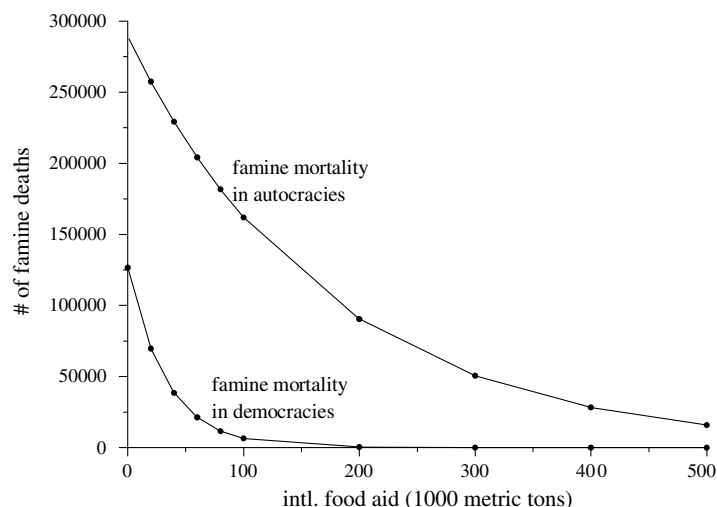


Figure 1. *The conditional effect of food aid on famine mortality in democracies and autocracies (based on a ratio of affected to total population of 25%).*

## 7. MEASUREMENT ERROR

The exact extent to which famines become mortal remains typically unobserved. Therefore, no one actually *knows* the number of famine victims. Rather, the published numbers are *estimated* from either mortality data or from census data, which are collected many years, sometimes decades after the famine took place. Both the procedures give good estimates of famine mortality, but the information we have available is not error-free.

There can thus be no doubt that the estimation results we have reported in the previous section are based on the analysis of noisy data. It is possible that this measurement is correlated with some of the explanatory variables and therefore non-random, which would lead to biased estimations. Random measurement error would merely render estimation less efficient, but lead to asymptotically unbiased and consistent coefficients. However, the asymptotic properties of our estimates are of little relevance since we are dealing with a very rare event. While we certainly have a sufficiently large number of “zeros” in the dataset, the number of “nonzeros” remains fairly small. Even in the case of random measurement error, we should therefore be more interested in the finite sample properties of our model rather than in its asymptotic properties.

With “finite sample econometrics” (Ullah, 2004) still being in its infancy, the most widely used tool to explore the finite sample properties of estimators are Monte Carlo studies. We therefore conducted a Monte Carlo study, which aims at exploring the effect of measurement error on our estimates. Specifically, we re-estimated model 1,500 times. In each re-estimation, we multiplied the value of the dependent variable of approximately 15% of our observations<sup>21</sup> by a uniform random number of the interval  $[0.5 \cdot \cdot 1.5]$ , which mirrors measurement errors of up to 50%. By drawing the measurement error from a uniform distribution, it is *on average* unlikely to be correlated with the explanatory variables. However, the actually drawn measurement error *in each iteration* may well be correlated with some of the regressors even if the average correlation over infinite iterations is zero. If we were just to report the mean coefficient estimates, then the Monte Carlo study would only address unsystematic measurement error. However, by reporting the full range of coefficients from the Monte Carlo study (minimum to maximum), we take each single iteration into consideration, and thus account for some systematic measurement error as well. In other words, the

range of the coefficients that we report offers an appropriate measure of the importance of measurement error. Table 2 reports the summary results from this analysis.

The Monte Carlo analysis reveals that our estimates are moderately sensitive to measurement error. The range in which the coefficients change due to the adding of measurement errors is about as large as the standard error of the estimate. Moreover, the mean of simulated coefficients is very close to the estimated coefficient reported in Table 1. Most importantly, the range of the political rights variable is entirely below zero (suggesting a negative effect of increasing political rights on famine mortality) and the ranges of the elasticities of the interacted food aid and affected population share variable are negative and do not overlap (suggesting that the combination of food aid and affected population has a stronger negative effect in democracies than in autocracies). Clearly, this exercise reveals that the results reported in Table 1 are robust to measurement error.

## 8. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have argued that Amartya Sen’s famous claim—democracies never experience substantial famine mortality—cannot explain either the occurrence of some famine mortality in democracies or the conditions under which even autocracies might prevent famines from turning mortal. Furthermore, our brief discussion of the famines in the Indian state of Bihar and Sudan of the late 1980s has illustrated that the response of democratic governments can be complex and delayed as well as subject to political considerations. It has also highlighted the pivotal role that international food aid can play, which we compared and contrasted with the failure of such aid to prevent large-scale famine mortality in autocratic North Korea.

We have then developed a political theory of famine mortality, in which both democracies and autocracies can experience famine mortality if governments find that inaction is the support-maximizing strategy. The larger relative influence of the wider population in democracies renders it more likely that democratic governments will act with policies that benefit all affected people, whereas the larger relative influence of a small elite in autocracies favors targeted compensating transfers to the selected few, leaving the wider affected population vulnerable to the potentially fatal impact of famine. Higher levels of

Table 2. *Summary statistics of the Monte Carlo analysis testing the importance of measurement error (based on model 1; 500 iterations)*

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Political rights	-0.8261	0.2608	-0.7264	-0.8819
Food aid * affected/population in democracies	-0.1182	0.0462	-0.1021	-0.1323
Food aid * affected/population in autocracies	-0.0220	0.0111	-0.0196	-0.0239
Civil wars	1.4900	0.6252	1.6509	1.2569
<i>Per capita</i> income	-0.0037	0.0009	-0.0035	-0.0037
Population (logged)	1.4604	0.7995	1.5335	1.3911
Food aid	-0.0003	0.0012	0.0003	-0.0008
Affected/population	72.5289	21.9439	76.4454	68.1148
Population density	-0.1748	0.4012	-0.0232	-0.4757
Annual rainfall	-0.0016	0.0011	-0.0014	-0.0017
Water availability	-0.0156	0.0073	-0.0134	-0.0184

international food aid together with a larger share of the affected people to the total population means that both democracies and autocracies are more likely to act and will do more to prevent famine mortality, because such aid mitigates the trade-off which support-maximizing governments face, but democracies will again use food aid more for the benefit of all affected people, whereas autocracies will use it first and foremost for the benefit of the elite.

We have subjected our theory to an empirical test of famine mortality in developing countries over the period for which we have data available (1972–2000). The results lend credence to our theory and are robust to several changes in a model specification. Inevitably, a caveat is in order. We do not claim that our quantitative data analysis is conclusive or should be considered as an exhaustive test of our theory. However, we believe that we cannot get much further with quantitative methods. Future research must analyze in more detail how governments in different countries deal with the threat of famine mortality and act to prevent it. As yet, published evidence is rather sparse, unsystematic, and mainly focuses on the origins and consequences of famines rather than on governments' responses.

Despite this caveat, we believe that our political theory of famine mortality and the empirical evidence presented suggest

two important policy conclusions. First, if governmental inaction can be a support-maximizing strategy of governments, then generous international food aid can be a necessary condition for preventing famine mortality despite abundant aggregate food resources being available in the country. This is because international food aid allows governments to respond without incurring short-term costs on the unaffected parts of the population and thus potentially losing political support. In other words, donors interested in preventing famine mortality should not necessarily shy away from offering food aid to a country experiencing famine even though the country has already abundant food available in the aggregate. Second, international donors need to deal seriously with the fact that democracies react more elastically to international food aid than autocracies for a given share of population being affected by the famine. This does not mean that international food aid should necessarily go preferentially to democracies. Rather, international donors need to find ways to maximize the chances that the international food aid benefits all affected people in autocracies, not just the selected few members of the elite. This is no easy task and provides political scientists with an ample opportunity to study the use of food aid in autocratic regimes and the lessons to be learnt thereof.

## NOTES

1. See, for example, (Sen, 1994, p. 34), which states that "...one of the remarkable facts in the terrible history of famine is that no substantial famine has ever occurred in a country with a democratic form of government and a relatively free press."

2. Others have done so to some extent (see, e.g., Devereux, 2001; Ravallion, 1997).

3. Research suggests that complex interactions between natural disasters in general and famines in particular on the one hand and civil wars on the other are likely to occur (Plümper & Neumayer, 2006; Neumayer & Plümper, 2007). The Sudanese case points into the same direction. However, both famines and civil wars are relatively rare events so that a different research design than the one employed here is needed to investigate these interactions.

4. Prendergast (1991, p. 49) even states more than 300,000 famine deaths in 1988–89.

5. Food is of course not a "public good," but the *provision of food aid* can indeed have some public good characteristics. When governments do not target food transfers to selected recipients, but distribute food aid to the

affected parts of the population without excluding recipients, then indeed food aid (but not the provided food) is not exclusive and only weakly rival (depending on the amount of food aid).

6. Exceptions occur if governments used food as a weapon in a civil conflict (see below).

7. Cole, Healy, and Werker (2008) show that the state governments in India receive electoral support if they act more vigorously against a famine threat, but overall governments are punished for severe weather events beyond their control.

8. The one aspect of conflict-related famines that our theory is not particularly well suited to explain is when a government not only uses an exogenous famine to its strategic advantage, but actively creates a famine by, for example, destroying agricultural plantations. To be sure, the consequence of increased famine mortality is consistent with the predictions from our theory, but our theory is neither able to nor intends to explain the governmental choice of artificially generating a famine.

9. Real-world political regimes can simply be understood as a mix of the two ideal types.

10. We stress the word “immediate,” as it is of course well known by now that even “free” international food aid often comes at a cost in the long run (Barrett, 2002; De Waal, 2000). However, there are two reasons why these costs are unlikely to enter the government’s calculus. First, they pertain more to the effect of continuous dependence on the provision of food aid in the form of what is typically called program and project food aid (Clay & Stokke, 2000) rather than the short-term influx of emergency food aid to prevent famine mortality. Second, the costs are clearly of a more long-term nature, too long indeed for most governments to worry about. In the short term, international food aid provides an easy and cheap way out of the trade-off described above. There is also a moral hazard problem: International aid may induce governments to underinvest in disaster prevention (Cohen & Werker, 2007).

11. The assumption of diminishing marginal utility from higher food supply means that additional food for those parts of the population that have already enough to eat does not increase support for the government by much.

12. Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2007) make a similar point with respect to general aid as we do for international food aid. For a general argument, see also Plümpert and Martin (2003).

13. We know of no study suggesting that foreign donors systematically discriminate against autocracies in the provision of food aid in emergencies (see Lavy, 1992). In fact, food aid is largely driven by donor need (Neumayer, 2005) and even general aid rarely discriminates against autocracies (Neumayer, 2003a, 2003b). Importantly, our argument is that even if an autocracy receives the same amount of international food aid as a democracy, it is likely to reach fewer affected people than in the democratic state, and is thus likely to save fewer lives.

14. For two of the five famine mortality estimates taken from Devereux (2000), he provides a minimum and maximum estimate of excess mortality. We took the mean estimate, but we stress that our results are hardly affected if one takes the minimum or maximum estimate instead.

15. Due to lack of data for explanatory variables, the North Korean famine is not in our sample.

16. See De Waal (2000) and Keen (1994a) for a detailed discussion of this famine under democratic government.

17. <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=15&year=2006> and <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/inscr/polity/polreg.htm>.

18. Our results are robust to using marginally different cut-off points, that is, either one point below or one point above the chosen cut-off points.

19. Due to lack of time-series data, this variable is purely cross-sectional. We also included additional variables such as annual changes in the available food-stock and the ratio of hot deserts to the total size of the country. Again, the results proved to be robust.

20. We display a representative example of these conditional effects, in which the affected population is fitted at 25% of the total population. Since the interaction effect between affected population and food aid is conditioned on democracy and autocracy dummies, the conditioned effects cover the entire spectrum of democracies (political rights 5 and above) and autocracies (political rights 4 and below), but for the political rights variable as such we choose values of 5 and 4, respectively, such that the graphs capture almost exclusively the conditional effects on famine mortality. The values for all other variables are as follows: civil war = 2, *per capita* income = 1000\$, population = 15 million, annual rainfall = 1000 mm/m<sup>2</sup>, available to withdrawn water ratio = 300 and population density = 100 people per square kilometer. Results are substantively identical (but numerically different) if we start with different values.

21. To determine the “subsample with measurement error” we drew a second continuous uniform random variable of the interval (0–1) and changed only those observations for which the randomly drawn parameter exceeded 0.85. Thus, on average, we changed the dependent variable of about 15% of the “nonzeros” in each iteration of the MC.

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