

Disaster Politics

Why Natural Disasters Rock Democracies Less

By [Alastair Smith](#) and [Alejandro Quiroz Flores](#)

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2010-07-15/disaster-politics>

On January 12, 2010, Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, was struck by a 7.0-magnitude earthquake that caused widespread destruction and killed approximately 222,000 people. The next month, Chile was hit by an 8.8-magnitude earthquake -- approximately 500 times stronger than that in Haiti -- but only 500 people died.

Why the disparity? For one, Chile rigorously enforces strict building codes, so there was less immediate damage to the infrastructure near the earthquake's epicenter. The government of President Michelle Bachelet was also quick to act once the earthquake hit. It immediately began to coordinate international and domestic relief efforts to get supplies and shelter to those in need. In contrast, there is no national building code in Haiti, and the country's government was barely functional even before the earthquake, let alone after. In the weeks that followed the quake, many officials seemed less interested in helping the hundreds of thousands of newly homeless than in enriching themselves. Several government officials have been accused of stealing international aid, and, even worse, some aid distributors have been charged with demanding sexual favors or cash in return for food and shelter. Dissatisfaction ran so high that police were breaking up violent protests by May 2010.

Governments cannot prevent earthquakes and other natural disasters, but they can prepare for them and ameliorate their effects. Measures to do so are well known. That so many countries in earthquake-prone regions of the world fail to adequately regulate construction, for example, seems to defy logic. Yet when faced with a choice to insist on the use of reliable cement in construction projects or to award contracts to cronies who are less inclined to use safe materials, politicians too often choose the latter, with disastrous consequences. In 2003, an earthquake in Bam, Iran, killed at least 30,000. China is plagued by such disasters, which can leave hundreds of thousands dead. Similar earthquakes in Chile, Japan, and the United States have killed far fewer. The difference is in the preparation: Chile, Japan, and the United States have implemented policies that keep acts of nature from becoming massive human tragedies; Iran and China have not.

It is tempting to suggest that a country's ability to prepare is a matter of money. After all, the United States and Japan are extremely wealthy. However, although wealth certainly matters, politics are more important. Four decades ago, a 7.9-magnitude quake struck Peru, killing about 66,000 people. In 2001, an even stronger earthquake hit but killed less than 150 people.

Admittedly, the population density in the area of the first earthquake was about twice that in the second. But that alone does not account for the huge disparity in casualties. Neither does income. Peru's per capita income was virtually identical in real terms at both points. The big difference was political. In 2001, Peru was a democracy, whereas in 1970 it was not. The 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, one of the worst in U.S. history, killed more than three thousand people. The United States' GDP per capita at the time was comparable to nondemocratic Mexico's in 1985 -- the year a similarly sized earthquake struck Mexico City, killing three times as many. And whereas a 2001 earthquake in democratic India killed more than 20,000 people, a slightly smaller 2005 earthquake in nondemocratic (and then slightly wealthier) Pakistan killed more than 80,000.

In a democracy, leaders must maintain the confidence of large portions of the population in order to stay in power. To do so, they need to protect the people from natural disasters by enforcing building codes and ensuring that bureaucracies are run by competent administrators. When politicians fail to deliver -- by, for example, letting too many die in disasters -- they lose their jobs. On average, 39 percent of democracies experience anti-government protests within any two-year period. The rate almost doubles after a major earthquake (defined as one that results in more than 200 casualties). And whereas 40 percent of democratic nations replace their leader in any two-year period, between 1976 and 2007, 91 percent of them did so following a major earthquake.

The story of Turkey is instructive. In 1999, the country experienced two large earthquakes in the course of three months, in August and November. The death toll from the first reached 17,000. Public anger over shoddily constructed housing almost cost the newly elected prime minister, Bülent Ecevit, his job. When the second earthquake struck, the government was much better prepared. In contrast to its sluggish and uncoordinated efforts following August's quake, by November the government had created a crisis center to coordinate domestic and international aid and was able to rapidly deploy its armed forces to deliver assistance in affected areas. The death toll from the November earthquake was below one thousand, and the government was widely praised for its actions.

Democracies need to prepare for other types of disasters as well. One reason why the Republicans lost congressional seats in 2006 and 2008 may well have been the Bush administration's poor performance after Hurricane Katrina slammed the Gulf Coast states in 2005. President Barack Obama now faces his own Gulf crisis: the BP oil spill. The country will judge him on his management of the disaster, and so far, he has dedicated significant resources to fixing the problem. This stands in contrast to the way nondemocratic Nigerian politicians, for example, have handled oil spills in the Niger Delta. They allow oil companies to pollute the area with impunity. Easily fixed pipes are allowed to leak for months for want of political will.

Indeed, a lack of political will to confront disasters plagues nondemocratic regimes, which, unlike democratic governments, do not rely on popular support. As in democracies, the rate of anti-government protests almost doubles after major earthquakes, but the rate at which the governments are deposed does not increase by nearly as much -- from 22 percent over any two-year period to 24 percent following a major earthquake. Democratically elected leaders are

highly sensitive to casualties from natural disasters, but nondemocratic leaders are not. And, indeed, the latter do a poor job of protecting their citizens from Mother Nature.

In 2008, Cyclone Nargis hit the coast of Myanmar (also called Burma). The death toll was 138,000. Not only did the military regime do virtually nothing to help the communities worst affected it also blocked the arrival of international aid. The casualties were two orders of magnitude greater than those from Hurricane Katrina, but Myanmar's military regime remains firmly entrenched.

For those living in nondemocratic countries, the safest place to endure natural disasters is in important economic or political centers, where politicians may fear citizen uprisings. Myanmar's peasants were essentially unable to take political advantage of Cyclone Nargis because they were dispersed over remote regions. Indeed, they did not even protest in the wake of the disaster. In China, the government only half-heartedly assisted the remote province of Qinghai after an earthquake in 2010 and suffered few political consequences for its inaction. But when an earthquake hit Sichuan in 2008, the Chinese government -- wary of protest in this politically and economically powerful center -- undertook relief operations that won the approval of much of the international community.

Earthquakes in politically sensitive areas such as the capital may threaten autocrats, but high-casualty events elsewhere do not; politicians respond to the desires of their immediate constituents and regard the needs of others as far less salient. It matters little that the means exist to mitigate the effects of disasters if politicians are not incentivized to implement them. Despite high casualties, autocrats can expect to keep their thrones. On the other hand, democratic leaders who fail to prevent natural disasters from causing calamity are replaced. As such, democrats plan and react to natural disasters, while autocrats do not.

The recent earthquakes in Chile and Haiti are illustrations of this dynamic. Given the extremely high magnitude of the earthquake in democratic Chile, the resulting 500 casualties were relatively few, and the government has been rightly praised for its effective response. Though Bachelet was nearing her term limit at the time of the earthquake, her management of the crisis helped her party and is expected to benefit her if she runs for reelection in 2014. On the other hand, the more autocratic Haitian government has failed to provide even basic recovery services for the 230,000 victims buried in rubble. Elections in Haiti are notoriously corrupt, and the regime has already used the earthquake as an excuse to postpone even these half-hearted contests. Although there have been a few protests, the regime seems likely to endure despite its abject failure to help its people.

Political survival lies at the heart of disaster politics. Unless politicians are beholden to the people, they have little motivation to spend resources to protect their citizens from Mother Nature, especially when these resources could otherwise be earmarked for themselves and their small cadre of supporters. What is worse, the casualty count after a disaster is a major determinant of the amount of international assistance a country receives. Relief funds can even enhance a nondemocrat's hold on power if they are used to buy off supporting elites. Given such incentives, autocrats' indifference to disaster-related deaths will continue. The fix can only be

political -- leaders will not use the policies already available to mitigate the effects of natural disasters until they have the incentives to do so.