

Surviving the Killing Fields: The Cultural and Political Heritage of the Khmer Rouge*

Mathias Iwanowsky[†] Andreas Madestam[‡]

October 29, 2017

Abstract

Do experiences of political violence lead people to embrace authoritarian values and strong leaders or do they induce anti-authoritarian, individualistic sentiments that favor political competition? We examine this question in present-day Cambodia, studying the effects of the violent Khmer Rouge regime on political behavior and authoritarian beliefs four decades later. During their reign, Khmer Rouge displaced large parts of the population to collective farms to increase rice production. The labor camps became known as *Killing Fields*, where people died from outright execution, starvation, and overwork. We investigate how the atrocities affect the local population of today. To identify a causal effect, we rely on the Khmer Rouge's desire to create an agricultural empire, moving forced labor to areas experiencing higher agricultural productivity. Using historic rainfall to generate exogenous variation in rice productivity shows that more people died in the productive communes. We find that communes with higher productivity and more killings during Khmer Rouge experience larger turnout and greater support for liberal opposition parties compared to the authoritarian incumbent 40 years later. People in these communes are less likely to embrace authoritarian values, more politically informed, and more politically tolerant – effects that persist across generations of Cambodians. Policy making is also affected, as increased political competition reduced the long-term incumbent's ability to extract rents in terms of selling out natural resources to private interests, with less deforestation and fewer land concessions granted for mining purposes in areas with more killings.

*We are grateful to Gerard Padró i Miquel, Nathan Nunn, Stelios Michalopolous, and seminar participants at Barcelona GSE Summer Forum 2016 – Advances in Micro Development Economics, European University Institute (Florence), Universitat Pompeu Fabra (Barcelona), MIT, Brown University, University of Bergen, Goethe University (Frankfurt), The Economic History Association Meeting for valuable comments.

[†]Institute for International Economic Studies, Stockholm University, email: mathias.iwanowsky@iies.su.se.

[‡]Department of Economics, Stockholm University, email: andreas.madestam@ne.su.se.