

Ethnic stacking keeps dictators in power

November 24 2021

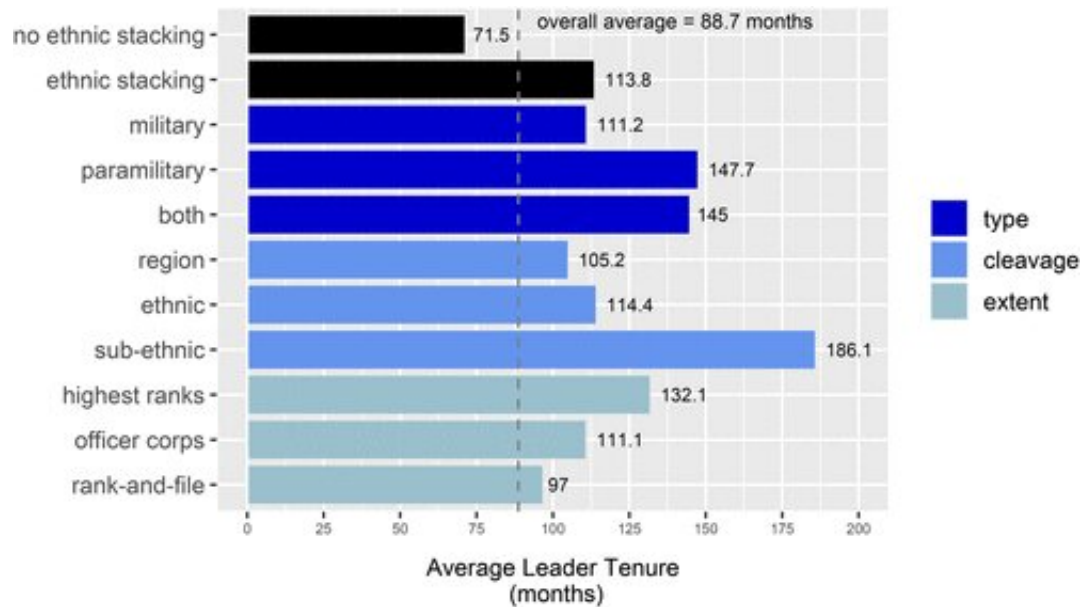


Figure 1. Leader tenure by ethnic stacking practices. Credit: DOI: 10.1177/07388942211044999

New research led by the University of St Andrews reveals how ethnic stacking in African countries helps keep authoritarian leaders in power.

The study, led by researchers from the School of International Relations and published in the journal *Conflict Management and Peace Science* (Wednesday 17 November), reveals, using statistical data collected over 70 years, the extent of how coethnics has played a core role in the construction of African security institutions.

It has long been asserted that authoritarian leaders depend on ethnicity in their military regimes as a shortcut for loyalty often excluding [rival groups](#) from service. Groups considered too politically unreliable or rebellious have throughout history been barred from military service, setting a precedent for widespread ethnic exclusion across Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Many leaders have continued to rely on the recruitment and promotion of coethnics to control the military and ensure its loyalty.

Such dependence on ethnicity as a shortcut for loyalty, known as ethnic stacking, has profound consequences for a range of important political and social processes such as government stability, authoritarian power consolidation, processes of democratization, rebellion, and military behavior during mass protests.

For the first time there is now [statistical data](#) collected over 70 years revealing the extent of ethnic stacking and the military in Africa. The Ethnic Stacking in Africa Dataset (ESAD) covers all of Africa, including North Africa and the surrounding island states, from decolonisation to 2018. Most African countries decolonised between the late 1950s (Ghana, Guinea and Sudan) and early 1960s.

ESAD reveals that among leaders who stacked the regular military, the extent of that stacking varied considerably:

- 5 percent only recruited coethnics into the highest ranks of the officer corps
- 6 percent stacked the entire officer corps
- 1 percent manipulated ethnicity down to the rank-and-file.

While stacking almost always involved the leader's broad ethnic group (89 percent of cases), many also relied on regional identity (39.6 percent), or sub-ethnic group identity (15.1 percent) as a basis for

loyalty.

Lead researcher Dr. Kristen Harkness from the School of International Relations at the University of St Andrews said: "For the first time we have been able to show, using data collected over 70 years, the true scale and impact of ethnic stacking in African countries. How leaders ethnically stack shapes their ability to stay in power.

"Practices to ensure ethnic stacking range from ethnically manipulating the highest ranks of the command hierarchy, to creating elite coethnic paramilitary units, to conditioning all service on shared ethnicity.

"The data reveals that almost no ethnic stacking occurs under leaders of more consolidated electoral democracies. This suggests that ethnic stacking is largely a tool of autocratic power consolidation."

How leaders ethnically stack also shapes their ability to stay in power. Leaders who create and personally control coethnic paramilitary units ruled, on average, for 147.7 months compared to 111.2 months for those who only stack the military and 71.5 months for those who refrain from stacking.

Leaders who leverage sub-ethnic cleavages to stack also survive significantly longer than others, an impressive average of 186.1 months.

The data reveals that ethnic stacking most successfully protects leaders when they deploy it minimally. Leaders ruled for an average of 132.1 months when they only ethnically manipulated the highest ranks of the military, compared to 111.1 months when stacking permeated the whole officer corps, and only 97.0 months when it extended to the rank-and-file.

The data reveals that only 32.1 percent of African leaders have stacked

their security institutions, reflecting both the decline in ethnic stacking with democratization and the fact that ethnicity has never been a driving force in the politics of many African countries.

Dr. Harkness added: "Excluding [ethnic groups](#) from such an important state institution as the military could also inspire mass unrest, from protests and riots to insurgency and terrorism, mirroring findings on how exclusion from executive power motivates ethnic rebellion.

"This new data will facilitate a much richer empirical analysis of African militaries, their behavior and capabilities, and how the ethnic manipulation of security institutions impacts broader politics."

The paper, "The Ethnic Stacking in Africa Dataset: When Leaders Use Ascriptive Identity to Build Military Loyalty," is published in the journal *Conflict Management and Peace Science*.

More information: Kristen A. Harkness, The Ethnic Stacking in Africa Dataset: When leaders use ascriptive identity to build military loyalty, *Conflict Management and Peace Science* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/07388942211044999](#)

Provided by University of St Andrews

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