Repression without Resistance: Disaster Responses in Authoritarian Low-Intensity Conflict Settings

Abstract

Responding to disasters triggered by natural hazards is a deeply political process, but it is usually presented by practitioners, and sometimes even by scholars, as an apolitical endeavour. This is problematic, especially when the disaster unfolds in authoritarian low-intensity conflict (LIC) settings, which are marked by lower levels of physical violence but high levels of political and societal polarisation, structural and cultural violence, and humanitarianism–sovereignty tensions. Bringing together knowledge from disaster, humanitarian and conflict studies, this thesis confronts the uneasy relationship that disaster response actors have with politics, and contributes to an improved understanding of the conflict–disaster nexus. It asks:

> When a disaster unfolds in authoritarian LIC settings, how do state, civil society and international humanitarian actors engage with the politics of disaster response, and with which implications?

Existing disaster–conflict research tends to comprise either single case studies, or studies of a variety of contexts that group all types of conflict together. This PhD study takes a middle-ground approach. It focuses on one specific type of conflict, authoritarian LIC, and analyses disaster response in three country contexts showing relevant commonalities: the 2016 drought response in Ethiopia, marked by protests and a State of Emergency; the 2015 response to cyclone Komen in Myanmar, characterised by explosive identity politics; and the 2016/2019 drought responses in Zimbabwe, in the context of deepening socio-economic and political crises. It draws on secondary sources and four months of qualitative fieldwork in each country, including formal exchanges with 271 actors engaged in organisations as diverse as community-based collectives, United Nations agencies and federal governments.

For each of the three disaster response processes, the study identifies how resources, legitimacy and power were distributed across actors in the humanitarian arena, the challenges non-state disaster responders faced and the strategies they developed to overcome these challenges, with which ethical and practical implications. Yet, different core dynamics are highlighted in each case. The thesis thus presents the case of the Ethiopian humanitarian theatre, with disaster response actors wearing,

dropping or even forgetting their 'masks'; the case of non-state disaster responders socially navigating the sea of political, social and humanitarian transitions and tensions in Myanmar to get relief to ethnic and religious minorities; and the case of powerful actors strategically or routinely depoliticising disaster response in Zimbabwe, with less powerful actors rather coerced to do the same, and the least powerful—community members—bearing the impacts with their bodies and their minds.

The thesis concludes that in authoritarian LIC settings, disaster responders engage with the politics of disaster in four major ways. First, the state instrumentalises disaster response to further political goals in the interests of a few. Power and violence are primarily exerted in 'subtle' ways, involving bureaucratic restrictions, a monopoly on and political influencing of data collection and analysis processes, and the instilling of uncertainty and fear. Second, state and non-state disaster response actors fear the politics of disaster response, afraid particularly of being framed as having ulterior political motives. They navigate a minefield of perceptions and accusations rather than a minefield of actual physical danger. This particularly applies to non-state actors. Third, it follows that non-state disaster response actors prefer to socially navigate around or conceal politically sensitive issues, rather than to openly confront them. The overwhelming majority self-censor in words, in actions and in 'knowing', i.e., reinterpreting their mandate or the humanitarian principles. Fourth, there are indications that non-state actors tend to 'internalise' a depoliticised approach. Depoliticisation efforts do not always come across as being strategically reflected upon.

Scholars have noted humanitarians' increasingly varied engagement with politics, most notably with the emergence of human rights-based humanitarianism that displays defiance towards those causing suffering, and solidarity with the marginalised. The thesis nuances this observation, arguing instead that authoritarian LIC settings present a homogenisation of political engagements, at both a discursive and operational level. Even non-state disaster responders with more confrontational mandates and approaches employ self-censorship, for three main reasons: (i) to strategically safeguard cordial actor relations, acceptance and humanitarian access; (ii) because they feel coerced to do so, fearing physical or legal repercussions, or the loss of international funding; (iii) because they routinely apply an overtly apolitical and technocratic disaster response paradigm.

This thesis identifies the potentially far-reaching implications of depoliticising disaster response, impacting people's physical and psychological well-being, social cohesion within and beyond communities, state–aid–society relations, and the way in which humanitarian operations can be carried out in the future. Systematically depoliticising disaster response has profound ethical and practical implications; it ultimately constitutes another engagement with politics. For instance, when

politically sensitive issues such as the marginalisation of certain minority groups in the disaster response are not talked of, they cannot be taken care of. While the thesis highlights how ostensibly depoliticised disaster practices carry the danger of reinforcing power imbalances, it also acknowledges that not all actors have the mandate, or are able to take the risk of adopting more confrontational approaches, especially civil society actors.

By way of recommendations for policy and practice, this thesis stresses the importance of strategic and diverse engagements with the politics of disaster response, and of a division of labour between civil society and international humanitarian organisations. Donors have a crucial role to play in supporting this process, and disaster policy must refer to multiple conflict dynamics and multiple roles of the state. The thesis also reminds disaster scholars that the task of identifying and understanding power relations and processes of domination and marginalisation demands a constant and conscious effort, especially in authoritarian LIC settings. Conceptual tools such as the humanitarian arena, everyday politics and structural and cultural violence can open up the more 'subtle' and 'system-embedded' mechanisms of repression and exclusion that permeate disaster response.

Keywords: authoritarianism; conflict; disaster response; Ethiopia; governance; humanitarianism; Myanmar; politics; Zimbabwe.