

## Preface

Researchers in the field of oil politics are quite often asked the question whether “There is any truly democratic oil rich country”. One could go for the easy answer: “Yes: the United States”, still the third oil producer in the world after Russia and Saudi Arabia. Then, one might mention Norway (actually rich in gas) and, for some period in its history, the United Kingdom. Yet, there is also a rather more complicated answer, concerning those oil rich states unlucky enough to discover oil (or gas) before having become a democracy.

In the latter case, the rainfall of oil money seems somehow to hinder the creation of representative forms of government. Oil money fuels the interests of elites, that pay out clusters of people defending their privileges: such has been the case of Suharto in Indonesia with the military, or of the Shah of Iran and his set of fifty “privileged families” responsible for the management of peculiar “Bonyad” foundations.

Moreover, the presence of oil does not only affect the political situation of countries. Historical evidence demonstrates that there is a correlation between oil and civil conflict. Oil money increases the motivation of rebels to seize the state as the institution controlling the flow of petrodollar: the outcome of rebellion is higher. Oil fueled wars are also lengthier: the central state can finance its military operations through hydrocarbons exports. Rebels may often enjoy other forms of financing, such as contributions from abroad: the GAM secession of Aceh in the 1970s was funded by Acehnese expatriates, and it was customary for the Cold War blocs to pay for the bills of rivaling factions in third world countries. In one of the most pernicious cases, that of Angola, the central state could enjoy oil money, and the rebels exported diamonds – as both had some form of assistance by either the US or the USSR.

Yet, we shall still not commit the mistake of being too deterministic in facing this issue. As there is a correlation between oil and lack of democratic development, and there is another one linking oil and conflict, this does not mean that oil automatically leads to predatory autocracies and widespread violence. The egregious academic work carried on so far has defined the correlation, but relatively few has been said concerning the casual mechanisms linking the presence of hydrocarbons to the problems outlined so far.

In particular, this book explores those cases where oil and gas are linked to secession attempts. In some cases, hydrocarbon reserves in a specific territory ignite lengthy civil conflicts that are often solved only when the reserves are depleted. In other cases, oil money is leveraged for a sustainable and sound development strategy of the territory, in full harmony and agreement with the central state. It is evident that economic factors alone are not enough to explain such a difference in outcomes, and the choice has been that of leveraging a “holistic” approach to include different factors, ranging from society, to politics, to history.

The defining issue seems to be that of “nationalism”, intended as the desire of a particular population to make political boundaries coherent with the cultural ones. The presence of oil and gas rents is a strong motivation to set such borders, as it may lead to a rise in the actual or expected local income. If any cultural difference between the producing country and the central state is present, the discovery of oil invariably leads to the formation of a local nationalist sentiment. Once this sentiment is formed, opposing it means engaging into a civil conflict. Therefore, given that repression is not a solution – but some words will be spent on the issue – a sound policy shall accept and appease the growth of local political sentiments.

This research for this book, my Ph.D. dissertation presented in 2010 at Potsdam University in Germany, has been mentored by Prof. Harald Fuhr. I am thankful to him for the time he spent in conveying his precious experience as an academic and a specialist at the World Bank. His suggestion to invest some time in field research in Bolivia and Indonesia has proven key to unlock the mechanism of oil related secession conflicts.

I am also grateful to family, my parents Lorenzo and Nadina, and my brother Michele; their moral support has always been precious during a challenging period – and made us possible to overcome the distance with sentiment.

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