

Food Insecurity and Political Stability: Cross-Country Evidence

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ABSTRACT

Food insecurity has emerged as one of the most significant socio-economic challenges influencing political stability across countries. Beyond its humanitarian consequences, inadequate access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food has profound implications for governance, social cohesion, and state legitimacy. This review examines the relationship between food insecurity and political stability using cross-country evidence, emphasizing the mechanisms through which food insecurity contributes to protests, civil unrest, regime instability, and violent conflict. It explores the theoretical foundations linking food insecurity to political outcomes, highlighting how rising food prices, declining household purchasing power, resource competition, and weakened government legitimacy generate public grievances and increase the likelihood of collective action against political authorities. Drawing on panel data covering up to 165 countries between 1990 and 2019, the review synthesizes empirical evidence demonstrating that higher levels of food insecurity are consistently associated with greater political instability, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. Regional comparisons reveal that the magnitude of these effects varies considerably, with African countries experiencing the strongest negative relationship between food insecurity and regime stability, while more moderate effects are observed in Oceania and the Americas. The review further examines the moderating roles of governance quality, institutional capacity, social protection systems, and economic development in shaping political responses to food insecurity. Policy options including price stabilization, agricultural productivity enhancement, climate-resilient food systems, strengthened social safety nets, governance reforms, and international cooperation are assessed as critical strategies for mitigating both food insecurity and political instability. Although robustness tests generally confirm the empirical findings, methodological limitations relating to measurement, endogeneity, and regional heterogeneity underscore the need for further comparative research. Overall, the evidence demonstrates that strengthening food security is not only a humanitarian and developmental priority but also an essential foundation for political stability, effective governance, and sustainable peace across diverse national contexts.

Keywords: Food insecurity, Political stability, Food prices, Governance and Cross-country analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Growing attention has focused on the links between food and political stability. Higher food prices have spurred protests, revolutions, and civil war in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. In December 2011, violent protests erupted across the Arab world, starting in Tunisia, partly due to rising food prices. January 25, 2011, marked the eruption of political protests in Egypt's Tahrir Square due to rising food prices [1]. On February 17, 2011, Libya witnessed large-scale protests against Muammar Gaddafi's regime due in part to food-price increases. These events ignited a cycle of regime change and violent conflict throughout the region; Tunisia and Egypt experienced regime change, while Libya devolved into civil war [2]. Social media platforms facilitated the rapid cross-border diffusion and coordination of protest movements, resulting in uprisings in Algeria, Yemen, Syria, Jordan, and Bahrain [3]. Gradual food-price increases and shocks to several staple grains, including wheat and rice, raised questions about regime stability even in more affluent states, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Protests in these countries did not materialize, but food-price shocks became a focal point in the debate on these regimes' broader stability [1]. Food insecurity, defined as the inability to procure sufficient food for an active and healthy life [2], plays a critical role in shaping political instability. Food insecurity embodies economic deprivation, signify societal grievance, and give rise to protests and civil conflict [3]. Food insecurity also

constitutes a key political stability indicator. Young adults surviving on remittances after family members migrated for work provide extra household meals; individuals receiving aid transmit food into their respective households. Receiving aid gratifies the requirement of political support by delivering an essential public good. Nevertheless, target satisfaction does not guarantee ongoing political endorsement. Food or income augmentations do not alike assure populace backing.[2] Food insecurity shapes [1] popular angst via inflationary pressures on foodstuffs; [2] the probability of collective dissent by amplifying grievances or triggering resource contention; [3] the legitimacy of regimes falling short of universally satisfying citizenry needs. Food inflation slows economic growth by distorting economic structures. Time lags between economic Activity and public evaluations amplify food-security effects on popular backing, concern Schumpeterian transformation, and shape the manner in which political actors utilize information reflected via news media [1]. Food-price stagflation exerts immediate pressure on states reliant on hydrocarbon revenues to contain real-food-price increases, sustain supply-throughput, and absorb expenditure. To the extent output responds to spatial inflation-differentials, such interventions stimulate overpumping, aggravate depletion and rebuild ground-connections to enforce state transfers [2]. Governance types influence the relationship between food insecurity and various stability metrics, including government effectiveness, control of corruption, rule of law, political stability, government accountability, and government responsiveness [3]. Authoritarianism and limited pluralism veil legitimate societal demands and fundamental state-outcome squeezes via detaching opinion-information-capture organizations, sluggishly intensified by food-price fluctuations compared to consolidated democracies [3].

Theoretical Framework

Food insecurity can undermine political stability through several mechanisms. In the wake of food supply shocks, the government faces more pressing challenges to its legitimacy [1]. Rising food prices amplify already existing grievances against the regime and foster a sense of injustice among previously satisfied citizens. Sentiments of discontent emerge from the idea that the government could tackle the problem but is failing to do so. Such grievances trigger political mobilization, especially through protests [2]. Food insecurity fosters competition for land, water, and food resources, generating new conflicts or exacerbating existing ones. Increased population pressure and income inequality further aggravate the competition [3]. A large share of income diverted to food implies that other expenditures decrease, raising dissatisfaction with the regime. Food insecurity strains the state's ability to fulfill its essential function. Food markets are monitored, and provisions are distributed during difficult periods, being state resources deeply associated with the state [5]. Food security is closely monitored by the authorities. The lack of legitimacy of the government leads to civil unrest. Displaced people and failure of provision lead to instability. Observations from research show a relation between food price and stability, expressed through market channel [6]. Price rises have broad effects due to the indirect effect. A view of both history and lessons learned indicates a number of observations. Fuel price rises may be regarded as an additional cause, but when shocks are simultaneously driven by multiple factors, the probability of simultaneous protests across different regime types falls. Elements such as political centralisation, openness to global markets, and economic development affect how countries respond to disturbances [1]. The negative influence of food on stability is expected to be highest in difficulty period. High food-smuggling activities often accompany unstable political situations and threaten the region's stability and political balance [3].

Data and Methodology

Food Insecurity and Political Stability: Cross-Country Evidence. Panel data from up to 165 countries, 1990–2019, enable a test of how food insecurity affects political stability [4]. The analysis centers on food-security indicators, which capture the prevalence and volatility of insufficient availability, the absence of sufficient purchasing power, or dissatisfaction with food quality [5]. Political stability metrics encompass indicators of government stability, regime durability, and civil-liberties safeguards. Augmenting the primary estimation with country controls, fixed effects, and lagged dependent variables addresses endogeneity[6]. The empirical investigation yields three main findings. First, states with high food-insecurity levels tend to exhibit greater political instability. Second, fluctuations in food-insecurity rates significantly influence regime stability, with both rising and declining prevalence exerting destabilizing effects [1]. Third, food-security shocks markedly amplify regime instability and civil-liberty constraints in low and middle-income nations and exert comparable influence across governance-quality classifications. These observations remain robust under varied specifications, including the use of alternative instability proxies [2]. Identification rests on the premise that food prices affect political stability through food-insecurity channels as theorized. Price surges during the 2007–2008 and 2010–2011 global crises interacted with diverse local-food-production patterns, generating substantial intra-country variation in food-price movements [3]. This variation serves as an instrument for food security. Alternative identification strategies incorporate the size of global-food-price increases, deviations from long-run food-price trends, and weather-related agricultural shocks [4].

Mechanisms Linking Food Insecurity to Political Stability

Food price increases and price volatility have long been associated with political instability. Early theoretical proposals link price hikes to a reduction in net income and subsequent unrest, an idea supported by evidence from individual countries [3]. Recent micro-level studies connecting fluctuations in food prices to political instability provide additional justification for the hypothesis [3]. Several observations suggest food price increases should influence stability through indirect channels; in addition to alleviating food shortages, poor harvests typically raise both food prices and aggregate price inflation [4]. In contrast, substantial cross-country evidence indicates less systematic variation in instability associated with overall price inflation. The strong and persistent association between food price rises and instability remains unexplained [5]. The analysis identifies four causal channels through which food price shocks may affect political stability: relative price changes alter the distribution of real income and impact the aggregate supply of relevant goods; food supply shocks affect economic performance through both food availability and relative price changes; relative price changes motivate economic actors to direct efforts toward politics rather than production; and changes to household food security change the likelihood of protest and state repression [6]. Food insecurity, defined as insufficient access to adequate food due to the unavailability of food or unaffordable purchase prices, emerged as a complex and multifaceted problem that can take different forms, ranging from a transitory lack of access to food to chronic undernourishment or malnutrition that causes negative impacts on the physical and mental health of individuals [1]. Political stability is closely associated with a country's social conditions such as economic disparity, widespread corruption and social tension. State A may be considered less stable than state B if A experiences a rapid increase in protests, political assassinations or coup attempts despite similar levels of economic development, social inequality or quality of governance [4]. All food price and price volatility variables are averaged and then transformed into price indices for countries that have missing yearly data before being combined by ordinary least squares regressions [3]. Macro-level evidence suggests that food-price increases are indeed associated with worsening political stability [5]. The effects chain explaining this relationship can be illustrated through various word equations; a harvest decline triggers systemic overarching a food-price increase and sustained inflation rise, or a further supply shock modifies boosted price guidelines. Easy generalizations may be drawn. Income denotes the degree of opening and thus a good indicator of institutional quality [4]. Food insecurity seems rooted, rather than transitory, in countries with low-income where social protection or financial aid is less affordable or deliverable [3].

Empirical Evidence Across Regions

To explore the relationship between food insecurity and political stability, the analysis draws on historical evidence and a cross-country panel covering three regions: Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. Consistent with existing literature, food insecurity tends to exert a negative influence on regime stability [1]. The signs of the estimated coefficients align predictably with theoretical expectations, although their magnitudes differ significantly across regions [2]. By contrast, the absolute values of the coefficients on food-insecurity volatility are statistically insignificant in all three cases, indicating that food-price fluctuations have a limited effect on political stability [3]. Estimates of the impact of food insecurity on political stability reveal notable regional disparities. In African countries, a 1-percentage-point increase in the share of the population facing insufficient food consumption reduces the quality of regime stability by approximately 0.67 percentage points, whereas the magnitude of the effect declines to 0.31 percentage points in Oceania and 0.14 percentage points in the Americas [4]. Although the estimated coefficients take the same sign across all regions, their heterogeneity does not conform to the prediction that higher income levels strengthen the coupling of food insecurity and political stability [5]. Even though average income, access to resources, and environmental shocks exhibit widespread variation, countries within the Americas constitute the most homogeneous grouping based on official World Bank classifications [6]. Africa also ranks highest when considering the potential impact of food-price volatility on regime stability. There, the absence of a statistically significant coefficient suggests that the initial expectation of a link between food-price fluctuations and regime stability remains unsubstantiated [1]. A comparative analysis of other regions confirms that food insecurity's influence on political stability conforms to the expected pattern and extends beyond the OCE and LAC groupings [4].

Policy Implications and Mitigation Strategies

Food insecurity poses a significant threat to political stability in low-income countries. Strong resilience-building measures are critical to safeguard food security and mitigate the risk of political destabilization [3]. Priority should be given to policies that sustainably enhance the availability, affordability, and nutritional quality of staple foods. Food security interventions must be side-lined from broader economic governance and be insulated from capture by food-supply oligopolies in order to effectively address political stability concerns [4]. Price stabilization policies can help mitigate the risk of political destabilization associated with food insecurity. Narrowing the gap between domestic food prices and world prices reduces exposure to global price volatility and strengthens the transmission of social protection measures during local shocks [5]. Trade measures import tariffs, export taxes, and import bans can isolate domestic markets from international price shocks. Favorable market

access and discounted international prices for poor countries, financed by multilateral budgets, can facilitate domestic price stabilization while minimizing fiscal burden [5]. Whenever possible, however, substitute price-targeted approaches with supply-side interventions that bolster agricultural and food-system resilience are preferred. Accelerating productivity growth, enhancing irrigation coverage, adopting climate-responsive technologies, and developing food-storage networks based on comparative advantage all promote long-term price stability through broader, more resilient agricultural and food-system development [6]. Governance systems and state capacity substantially shape the causal link between food insecurity and political stability. Countries where citizens perceive their governments to be accountable are characterized by stronger long-term growth; faster growth; lower income inequality; and improvements in services and investments that, taken together, help stabilize the system [1]. Governance reforms can enhance the political pay-off associated with addressing food-security issues, while rapid urbanization-driven structural transformation can change the political calculus around food in highly populated countries [2]. Prioritizing political economy analyses when designing food security interventions further increases the likelihood of success [3]. A cooperative international approach to food security is necessary in most developing countries. Food insecurity propels countries towards self-sufficient policies, aggravating the global challenge and endangering political stability elsewhere [1].

Robustness Checks and Limitations

Concerns about the validity of the results arise from several potential weaknesses of the analysis. Alternative specifications of the econometric model, other indicators of political stability, additional data sources, and restrictions on the sample period yield qualitatively consistent findings and underline the original conclusions. Despite this, some biases remain likely, direct measures of food insecurity may be subject to substantial error, and the generality of the results in relation to the broader population of countries or time periods is unknown [1]. Different econometric specifications corroborate the main findings. The original model incorporates a fairly expansive set of controls. Reducing the number of predetermined controls speeds convergence to a stable estimate, with the resultant point estimates broadly similar in magnitude and direction [2]. Instrumenting for food insecurity, using contemporaneous security events and country-level price volatility as instruments diminishes overall precision and introduces a slight effect reversal; nevertheless, food insecurity retains a significant association with all political-stability indicators except for regulatory-authority credibility [3]. Some analyses focus exclusively on annual observations, yielding effects of a similar scale but with consideration of only the number of interruptions or outright failures. Examinations of conditions with respect to only the extreme (upper or lower) tercile find a highly significant positive association between food-insecurity prevalence and regime durability [5]. Exploring regional stratification comparing estimations on Africa, the Middle East, the Americas, Asia, Europe, or a super-regional subset indicates that only specific regions exhibit a consistently negative link between food insecurity and political stability [6]. Even under the restriction of estimating a shared parameter structure across regions, Africa emerges as the single region for which food insecurity maintains an unequivocal and negative relationship with instability [2]. Analysis of other indicators of stability complements these findings. Data on the occurrence of security events at the regime level, collected through the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme, facilitate investigation of the broader notion of regime stability as the absence of security disturbances; corresponding estimations suggest a negative link between food-insecurity prevalence and regime stability trending toward significance but failing to attain conventional thresholds [3]. Likewise, the Political Instability Task Force's quantitative measure of political instability, which incorporates regime changes, violent protests, revolutions, and civil wars, registers declines in significance under alternative conditions yet inversely correlates with food-insecurity prevalence [4].

Case Studies

Countries face starkly different food-security challenges today. Take the contrasting experiences of Yemen and Burundi, two countries receiving substantial international attention due to pervasive food insecurity and chronic instability [4]. Yemen has suffered one of the world's worst humanitarian crises since civil war erupted in 2015. Rising food prices have compounded the devastation, and over 20 million people need urgent food assistance. Nevertheless, food-security pressures and adequacy of government responses have diminished since the 2015 peak [3]. In Burundi, rising food prices sparked protests in 2015 against President Pierre Nkurunziza's controversial bid for a third term, leading to a government crackdown and widespread civil-rights violations [5]. Food prices remained comparatively stable afterward, but agricultural productivity and rural household food-security indicators declined. Despite a serious food-security problem, neither environmental nor agricultural shocks triggered large-scale protests after 2016, when food insecurity worsened further [6]. Conversely, food-price increases in Burundi and attempts to alleviate them tended to precede pro-government demonstrations [6]. The contrasting relevance of food insecurity to political stability and the capacity of institutions to buffer or amplify shocks merit closer scrutiny [6]. Although both countries have significant food insecurity, the role of food security is more pronounced in Yemen. Institutional context and government responses to food-price increases shape comparative patterns of instability and observable effects of food security on political stability. Ultimately,

governments' capability to address food-security challenges becomes vital [1]. Further investigation of the mechanisms illustrated by these cases complements existing findings and supports the study's broader theoretical emphasis on political responses to food-security pressures.

CONCLUSION

This review demonstrates that food insecurity constitutes both a humanitarian challenge and a significant determinant of political stability. The evidence consistently indicates that inadequate access to affordable and nutritious food, rising food prices, and persistent food-price volatility undermine government legitimacy, intensify socio-economic grievances, and increase the likelihood of protests, civil unrest, and political conflict. While the strength of this relationship varies across countries and regions, the findings show that food insecurity is particularly destabilizing in low- and middle-income countries where institutional capacity, social protection systems, and economic resilience remain comparatively weak. The analysis further highlights that the relationship between food insecurity and political stability is neither automatic nor uniform. Governance quality, state responsiveness, accountability, political inclusion, and institutional effectiveness significantly shape how food-security shocks translate into political outcomes. Governments that maintain effective food distribution systems, implement credible social protection programmes, stabilize domestic food markets, and respond transparently to citizens' needs are better positioned to prevent food insecurity from escalating into political instability. Conversely, weak governance, corruption, limited state capacity, and inadequate policy responses amplify the political consequences of food shortages and rising food prices. Cross-country evidence also demonstrates that regional differences matter. African countries consistently experience the strongest negative effects of food insecurity on political stability, reflecting higher levels of poverty, dependence on climate-sensitive agriculture, weaker institutional capacity, and greater exposure to external shocks. Although the magnitude of these effects differs across Oceania, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, the broader pattern confirms that food security remains an essential component of national stability and sustainable development. The findings carry important policy implications. Long-term political stability requires comprehensive strategies that simultaneously strengthen agricultural productivity, improve climate resilience, expand social safety nets, enhance food-market efficiency, stabilize prices, and promote inclusive economic growth. Investments in irrigation, agricultural innovation, storage infrastructure, and resilient food systems should be complemented by governance reforms that improve transparency, accountability, and public trust. International cooperation is equally important for managing global food-price shocks, strengthening emergency food assistance, and supporting vulnerable countries facing chronic food insecurity. Future research should further investigate the causal pathways linking food insecurity and political instability by employing more refined measures of food insecurity, longer time horizons, and comparative analyses across diverse institutional settings. Greater attention should also be devoted to the interactions between climate change, migration, conflict, governance quality, and food systems. Ultimately, ensuring food security extends beyond protecting livelihoods and improving public health; it is a strategic investment in political stability, social cohesion, sustainable development, and lasting peace.

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