

A Foundation of Dust: Analyzing the Relationship between Famine and  
Political Stability in Developing States

By:

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**Abstract:**

Despite a modern agricultural surplus relative to humanity's food needs and established means of transport, famine remains a threat for several states around the world. It would seem obvious that famine would be a strong destabilizing force, but this has not always been the case. This study compares several prominent famines in Ethiopia (1970-74, 1980-85), India (1966-67, 1971-1973) and Bangladesh (1974) in order to determine what factors resulting from famine actually cause political instability by analyzing historical events through the stability criteria of the World Bank. This research will demonstrate that while famine is economically destructive and often results in political instability, the primary driver of stability or instability after a famine is the relative degree of government intervention for positive or negative effect. This adds to our understanding of government's role in influencing the effects of food shortage upon society and overall stability of the state.

# A Foundation of Dust: Analyzing the Relationship between Famine and Political Stability in Developing States

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## INTRODUCTION:

Famine has existed as a nearly constant haunting specter in agricultural societies around the world and is the natural companion for an agricultural society. Subsistence farming rendered humanity dependent upon the predictable nature of the seasons, rains, temperatures and stable environmental circumstances in order to have reliable access to food. When these factors become unstable, resulting in droughts, flood or other environmental disasters, famine can occur as a result and tends to cause substantial disruptions in political order (Carlson 1982).

The population explosion which accompanied the Industrial Revolution in Europe brought on enormous worry that agricultural production would not be able to meet the increasing demand for food which inspired the Thomas Malthus to write his famous *Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1798. His work predicted widespread warfare, spread of disease and famine based primarily on the idea that for linear population growth to continue an exponential increase in resources would be required. His works have inspired generations of Malthusians to discuss the potentially devastating consequences of a planet with insufficient resources to support humanity (Malthus 1798).

What Malthus did not anticipate were the ever-more innovative agricultural practices that have permitted a global surplus of food and the gradual reduction in its real cost over time. This, along with the flexible and established trade lines that have come with increased globalization,

has reduced the impact of natural disasters and the other original causes of famine. Yet famine persists. Political turmoil, war and economic factors can occasionally still prevent substantial populations from receiving food in a regular manner causing hoarding, panic and overall social chaos. Often famine conditions present themselves in states that are still highly reliant on subsistence agriculture and are not accustomed to importing large quantities of food. This, according to Devereux (1993), is the new face of famine: not a creature of nature but of markets and availability.

Famines are now generally considered to be primarily economic and social events, exposing weakness in the economic system. If a famine affects enough of the population or economic base, this can cause disruption in the overall political stability of the state itself. With a collapse in overall economic conditions, wages or government order with accompanying price shocks can lead to widespread protests, riots or even violent overthrow of governments. This is hardly surprising when one considers the importance of bread riots in revolutions from France in the 1790s to Russia and Germany in the late 1910s (Collier 2007).

But even in some cases where there are substantial food crises, there is not accompanying political destabilization and in other states there are surprisingly high levels of instability that result from the disruption of famine and drought. The primary factor that intervenes between the two is government intervention, or the lack thereof, with either positive or negative consequences for the society as a whole. This work investigates one of those potential consequences of this modern famine: the effects of famine on political stability and how governments intervene in developing states to cope with it.

For the purposes of this study political stability indicators will be roughly based on those used by the World Bank in terms of violence; violent uprisings, civil unrest and state violence as

well as economic instability factors which have been widely acknowledged (World Bank 2011). By examining the cases of famine in Ethiopia, India and Bangladesh, this work hopes to address how famine directly interacts with these factors to affect government stability in varying ways. Each famine is examined to determine the forces which led up to their unique situations and the particular political, civil or economic events which took place in each country prior to, during and after the famine. This is supplemented with analysis of information on political stability from the World Bank to provide additional perspective on the events.

## LITERATURE REVIEW:

### *Historical Understandings of Famine:*

Traditionally famine has been understood to be due to a sudden loss of food or ability to produce food, a situation referred to as Food Availability Decline (FAD). Pre-modern famines would result from “natural” causes such as a population growth, drought, floods or changing environmental conditions that outpaced society’s ability to adapt or maintain sufficient stores. Much of this stems from Thomas Malthus’ famous *Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1798. His work predicted widespread warfare, spread of disease and famine, based primarily on the idea that, for linear population growth to continue, an exponential increase in resources would be required (Malthus 1798).

The mentality of insufficient food being the primary problem of famines remained prevalent in approaching famine through the 1970s which foisted off the responsibility for famine on “uncivilized” peoples. This perspective can be demonstrated in Tawney’s description of famine conditions in China in 1932:

“In the case of famine, ... [in China], consists in the primitive organization, and absence of surplus resources over daily needs, which turn the misfortune of individuals into a general catastrophe... (pg. 77 as quoted in Rahmato 1991, pg. 99)

It is this semi-colonialist perspective that was deeply influential for researchers 1950s and 1960s who saw the primary problem with famine to be lack of agricultural modernization which could be used synonymously with Westernization. Consequently policy prescriptions tended to focus on solving famine by increasing the production of food with rationalized tools of increased agricultural yield, temporary food aid, irrigation projects and the expansion of cultivated land. The so-called “Green Revolution” that resulted from these policies was seen as a cure for famine in finding low cost means of providing greater food supply security and production for developing states, which would ideally fix the problem of famine according to the perspective of FAD (Grada 2007). Unfortunately, famine continued to be prevalent outside of the Western world, even in cases those exporting agricultural products which undermined the reliability of FAD as a means of understanding famines.

Famine theory was revolutionized in the wake of Amartya Sen’s 1981 publication *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. Sen rejects the idea that famine is due to a lack of food, noting through his example of the Great Bengal Famine of 1943 that many individuals starved to death in sight of food. He suggests that food was not the primary issue, but that the peasantry lacked the economic means with which to obtain food, either by having enough funds or by lacking the ability to find work with a wage. With the proliferation of modern agricultural production after the 1950s, there has been sufficient surplus to easily feed the world’s population, but there were still many places where the individuals could not obtain food. Sen points to this economic or physical access to food as the primary issue for those who suffer from famine and consequently recommends that famine will continue



to be a problem until the economic factors are addressed (Sen 1981, Olsson 1987).

*Current Understanding of Famine:*

This change in perspective ushered in a new way of understanding famine in an increasingly industrial and globalized world. Webb and Braun provide a more appropriately nuanced definition of modern famine:

- (1) Extreme, geographically concentrated shortfalls in food consumption that result in chronic loss of body weight and rise in excess mortality (a net increase above average rates)
- (2) Massive social disruption, including community dislocation (increased distress migration and out-migration of entire families), and “abnormal” behavior (increased reliance on foraged foods, conflict among neighbors, increased begging)
- (3) Long-term resource depletion, including the degradation of productive material assets, of the natural resource base, and of human capital (pg. 10-11). (1994)

This allows famine to be separated from generalized hunger, often present even in industrialized states, and be recognized as an unusually severe social and economic situation for a substantial population of individuals over a long enough period of time that it breaks down normal functioning. Currey’s (1981) definition is helpful in understanding the social implications of famine:

Famine might be more effectively defined as the community syndrome which results when social, economic and administrative structures are already under stress and are further triggered by one, or several discrete disruptions which accelerate the incidence of many symptoms, or crisis adjustments, of which one is epidemic malnutrition (pg. 123, 1981)

Given the absolutely essential nature of food as a resource, famine strikes at the structural stability of many social systems, particularly those of the state.

### *Coping With Famine:*

Developed states can frequently avoid the negative conditions of famine because of the economic resources at the disposal of both the relatively affluent citizenry and the government itself. It has been observed that while the U.S. and other Western countries can experience long and devastating droughts, floods or natural disasters, their extensive infrastructure system and financial reserves permit the state and relief agencies to diminish the impact on the overall social structure. Even outside the West, when famines can be accurately predicted, supply chains can be set up and the worst of the situation can be avoided. Developing states frequently do not have the concrete infrastructure or financial resources necessary to weather such a situation and are left particularly vulnerable to wide-scale system collapse and typically bear the full brunt of a severe famine (Olsson 1993).

Given these conditions, famine can have unfortunate and long-lasting effects on the societies that experience it. Famine tends to hit rural areas, and, consequently subsistence-level peasant agriculture, the hardest and have minimal effect on urban areas which have better infrastructure and access to foreign food resources. Developing states often rely on cash crops and a strong agricultural base as a source of revenue both for government budgets and to support fledgling industrial growth. If a famine is sufficiently long or widespread it could potentially cut into economic growth through inflation and loss of revenue which in turn impacts economic growth, a key factor in the stability of states. Less stability and growth also leads to the withdrawal of foreign investment which only further compounds the issue (Alesina et. al. 1992; Feng 1997).

If a famine is sufficiently long or widespread it could also potentially lead to mass migration as people move to find more plentiful food sources which can put a serious strain on

state resources and on the communities that have to house and support these refugees. Often, the nature of the impending refugee crisis alone far outweighs the consequences of what would otherwise be a localized issue. Costs to the state can get to the point where governments will often avoid dealing with the issues of an unexpected famine in the hopes that those affected will solve the problems on their own (Torry 1984). This may be a prudent choice in light of research that indicates the scale of grievance does not correlate with the corresponding levels of rebellion or insurrection, even in the cases oppression or essential resources scarcity such as food, fuel and water (Jenkins and Schock 1992; Collier 2007).

Unfortunately, the presence of serious drought or natural disaster, particularly among troublesome rural populations can be seen by governments as an opportunity by governments to exacerbate the situation in order to punish rebel groups and the populations that provide them with resources. This was horrifically demonstrated in the Soviet Union's (USSR) use of starvation to hamper Ukrainian nationalism in the 1930s, the People's Republic of China (PRC) use of the agricultural disaster following the "Great Leap Forward" to subdue the peasantry from 1958-1962 or the repeated use of engineered famine as a tool against residents of Darfur in Sudan from 1983-2005. Developing states tend to support urban areas over rural areas to decrease chances of organized opposition in high density population areas and focus on the tax base of high value economic production present in cities. While it is rare for famine to be exploited as a weapon like it was for the USSR and PRC, the consequences of its use are devastating when it does happen. (Mishler and Rose 2001)

Famines are regularly associated with a decrease in economic performance and could be seen as possible precipitators of both political and economic instability as a result Paul Collier's *Bottom Billion* provides extensive reading on the effects of economic conditions on relative

political stability. Rather than pointing to particular ideologies or grievances as the cause of uprisings, Collier suggests that economic growth rates are the best indicators of whether or not governments will experience violent uprising. High levels of growth tend to lead to higher rates of employment and consequently lower rates of rebel activity. Low rates of growth tend to lead to population growth outpacing job creation and higher rates of rebel activity. Depending on how governments handle these conditions, this can lead to relatively high or low degrees of political stability (Collier 2007; World Bank 2012).

#### METHODS:

For the purpose of understanding the effects of famine on political stability, I have chosen to use Mill's method of difference with a focus on document analysis of historical accounts of famines supplemented by World Bank data on political stability. This approach permits broad analysis of circumstances relating to the famines discussed which is essential for an event with such a broad impact like the famines studied here. Economic and political factors which famine-affected states hold in common can be demonstrated to be irrelevant if they do not correspond with government instability. Factors that vary in accordance with relative government stability after the famine will be considered as possibly causal variables.

The primary effects I look at are the increase in rebel movements, civil unrest<sup>1</sup>, change in economic conditions (GDP, import/export rates, government consumption and per capita GDP) and government policy pertaining to the famine. Each of these factors address the criteria loosely borrowed from the World Bank and economists like Collier (2007) and are generally accepted to demonstrate the relative strengthening or weakening of the state as a result of famine.

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<sup>1</sup> That is, protests, demonstrations, sit-ins or other forms of non-violent political demonstration.

For the purposes of the study, I ruled out famines that seemed to be intentionally engineered by governments or occupying forces<sup>2</sup> as these states are likely to have intentionally manipulated results that disproportionately an outcome desired by government authorities. I have also ruled out famines where the degree of government involvement in initiating the famine is of significant debate<sup>3</sup> in order to avoid potential bias. Famines that occurred under colonial occupation were also discounted because of the incentive for imperial powers to accidentally begin a famine due to their economic policies<sup>4</sup> and isolate themselves from potential consequences and thus lack incentive to intervene. This leaves only states where either economic or environmental conditions resulted in the initial cause of the famine. All states chosen for study were independent from direct foreign control and colonization or had remained sovereign for some time, mitigating the lingering influence of imperialist power and economic structures which were generally far removed from the consequences of disasters and had substantially different power relations with the populous than those maintained by independent states.

## FINDINGS:

### *Ethiopia (1970-1974)*

Ethiopia is no stranger to famine, having suffered many over its multi-thousand year history, going back to early Egyptian records of massive starvation in the kingdom of Axum. According to Richard Pankhurst, between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, Ethiopia suffered through a famine roughly once a decade. This occurs in part because the Ethiopian agricultural system is based on regular monsoon rains, and a few years of below average rains can cause serious food

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<sup>2</sup> Examples being the Ukrainian famine of 1932-1933 or the Netherlands in 1944.

<sup>3</sup> Examples being China's Cultural Revolution from 1958-1961 or in Sudan in 1998

<sup>4</sup> Such as the Great Bengal Famine of 1943 or the numerous famines that took place in India throughout the 1800s

shortages across the country (Gill 2010; Rahmato 1991). Ethiopian landlords commonly demanded peasants send them 50-75% of their crop as rent, leaving peasants with only enough agricultural product to subsist with little surplus to save for regular drought. This practice left the peasantry exposed in times of shortage, having little by way of stored surplus for hard times. This often resulted in the death of tens or hundreds of thousands of civilians in times of crisis with little emphasis on relief from the elite landowners. Despite the massive casualties resulting from these famines, the landowners tended to take the perspective that there would always be more peasants to work the land and that their lives were not worth preserving at the cost of agricultural production. This devastating cycle of high rents followed by widespread famine continued through the occupation of Ethiopia by Italy in 1936 when the Emperor at the time, Haile Selassie, was forced into exile (Legum 1975).

In 1942, Selassie returned to Ethiopia from exile with a British expeditionary army and forced the occupying Italian army to retreat. From there, Selassie consolidated the country into a semi-feudal state, dividing previously public land into private tracts which were given to aristocratic allies of the regime either for free or at far below market value. Members of the developing middle class were also granted tracts of with the hope that this would tie the financial and political future of the bourgeoisie to the success of the monarchy. In order to maintain this system of privilege for the relatively wealthy, the Selassie government authorized increased taxes on the peasantry (Hancock 1985).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Selassie government did not put a high emphasis on sheltering the peasantry from the mercurial weather patterns of Ethiopia. Hancock (1985) notes that as far back as the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD there is no mention of any widespread policy in Ethiopia to handle recurrent famine beyond some “piecemeal attempts to feed the hungry in lean years (pg

71).” In keeping with this tendency, Selassie’s government failed to put a system in place to prevent the peasantry from recurrent famine. Indeed, when famine later struck, foreign journalists were surprised by officials’ lack of concern for the plight of the peasants. Bureaucrats showed far more concern about possibly upsetting superiors with bad economic news and losing their positions than the needs of the starving peasantry (Gill 2010).

When consistent rains did not fall in 1970-1971 the Selassie administration did not begin any plan of assistance. This disregard for the well-being of the peasantry can be shown via Ethiopian export policies. Through 1973, Ethiopia was still net exporter of agricultural goods, to the point that the government was able to demand increases in cash crops every year, even as the drought increased in intensity (Legum 1975).

This policy of disengagement from the suffering of the peasantry was so pervasive that the crisis in Ethiopia was generally unknown outside of the country from 1970-1972. It was not until 1973 with the production of a British television documentary describing the suffering on the ground, *The Unknown Famine*, that international attention focused on Ethiopia. Ironically, the program was viewed by the British long before many Ethiopians saw it and it was only when expatriates send the film back to Ethiopia that the general public understood the devastation that was taking place (Gill, 2010).

Under the cloak of silence, the Selassie government used the burgeoning famine as a means of punishing rebel movements and the ethnic populations that supported them. Ethiopia has been a multi-ethnic kingdom for decades and in the aftermath of the Italian occupation a number of the subject ethnicities had sought independence. The regions of Eretria, Trigray, Gondar and Ogaden all supported substantial rebel movements that had been quelled periodically by the national government. Given that these ethnically controlled areas had been hit hard by the

drought and ensuing famine, they became easy targets for predatory government action. The province of Wollo, already facing severe shortages of foodstuffs only had the situation aggravated by government blockades of aid and military campaigns to crush weakened rebel movements (Gill 2010). Consequently the famine was worst in Wollo killing tens of thousands, but the government also took action which significantly aggravated the situations in Gondar and Gojjam, Harrarghe and Bale, (Rahmato 1991).

Increasing food prices from the famine led to inflation which was bolstered by the spike in oil prices in the aftermath of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Both of these led to serious discontent and created conditions prime for revolt. Students, educated through Ethiopia's university system, and the urban population of Addis Ababa began sporadic protests in 1972 which became a regular occurrence by early 1974 after *The Unknown Famine* began to be viewed in Ethiopia (Legum 1975; Gill 2010). In addition to the famine and student protests, soldiers became discontented because they had not been receiving regular supplies. Rations were spoiled, water was often hard to come by and the government was becoming more and more irregular in sending soldiers their pay. In January of 1974, the Fourth Division of the army had mutinied which inspired other units to revolt throughout the early part of the year. By April, hundreds of thousands were marching in urban areas in protest on a regular basis. In September, a coalition of military units that referred to themselves as the Dergue overthrew the government, imprisoning or killing the heads of various political organs and finally by arresting Selassie himself on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 1974 (Zewde 2001; Handcock 1985; Gill 2010; Legum 1975; Mengisteab 1990).

By 1975, the drought conditions had subsided, and without the Selassie government's efforts to worsen the crisis for the peasantry, the country began to recover. The official death toll



of the famine, accounted for by the Dergue government after the coup, was between 40,000 and 200,000, but the actual numbers are uncertain due to poor record keeping. UNICEF pegged the deaths in Wollo alone at 50,000-100,000 (Gill 2010). The government suggested that 800,000 were affected by the famine by 1973, but Legum suggests that number was up to 2.4 million given that government tallies did not include that drought conditions began in 1971. Legum estimates that roughly 100,000 people died and that while urban areas may have had conditions return to normal by 1974, that rural areas continued to suffer until the next serious famine in 1980 (Legum 1975; Gill 2010).

### *Ethiopia (1980-1985)*

The Ethiopian famine from 1980-1985 is one of the most intensely studied and discussed famines of the modern era. Given its widespread international attention garnered through the UN and organizations like BandAid, much of the literary and popular focus on modern famine is seen through the lens of this Ethiopian crisis, to the point where the mention of famine still brings up images of starving Ethiopian children covered in flies (Gill 2010).

After the Dergue deposed Emperor Haile Selassie, there was a belief that the various rebellions would die away and tranquility would return to Ethiopia. Unfortunately, within three years of the coup there were active rebel movements in 12 out of the 14 administrative districts in Ethiopia, the worst of these being the Eritrean and Ogaden revolts. Rebellions in Tigre, Wollo and Gondar also demanded precious government resources (Hancock 1985). Citizens in those states expressed to journalists in 1977 that the primary reason for continued rebellions was that the central government had not aided in relief during the 1971-1974 famine. This perception was difficult to shake, given that these ethnicities were still being ruled by an Amharic government

out of the capital of Addis Ababa. While the Dergue went to great lengths to distance themselves from the Selassie government, little changed in terms of the daily life of the Ethiopian peasantry (Carlson 1982).

Beginning in 1979 when another drought began, the ideologically socialist Ethiopian government used the emergency as justification to collectivize agriculture under state control and attempt to encourage the proletarianization of the rural population. It was hoped that this would raise agricultural production with more rationalized techniques while aiding in the fledgling industrialization of the country. Taxes were raised to higher or “punitive” levels to discourage subsistence farming in rural areas and drive citizens from their land. Food prices were set at artificially low levels which only further hampered peasant’s efforts to sell any surplus they might have. Citizen’s movement within the country was restricted, preventing peasants from getting to alternative markets to sell cash crops. At the same time, the government mandated increased production quotas from the peasantry to sell directly to the government at deflated prices. Even at the height of the famine, the Amhara and Tigray regions were exporting grain even while their citizens were starving, not unlike the 1974 famine in Wollo. At the same time, the government was able to either sell food back to the citizenry at increased price or sell it on the international market for a profit (Keneally 2011).

Indirectly, the Ethiopian government made the situation far worse through its collectivized agricultural policies. Collectivized farms were put together haphazardly and did not have the level of production which the Dergue government had expected, compounding the food shortage. Markets were closed in response to peasants seeking to supplement their food on the black market with the government declaring that time spent selling produce was time which was not spent farming and therefore wasted. The Dergue opted to collect food directly from

farms both to enrich the government and cripple any alternative bourgeoisie economic structures. When this did not discourage the peasants from seeking out black market foodstuffs, the Dergue began performing systematic air strikes on markets during harvest. These government efforts were most concentrated in the regions of Tigray and Amhara where the food shortages were the worst, forcing much of the peasantry into starvation or self-exile (Gill 2010, Keneally 2011).

Additionally, the Dergue government took the opportunity the famine presented to resettle large sections of ethnic groups to different parts of the country in a strategy to decrease the resource base of the various rebel movements, force nomads into taxable agricultural production and deal with the growing urban homeless population (Keneally 2011). Deportations were frequently at random amongst the existing populations, taking children from parents and separating husbands from wives. These efforts were often taken under the guise that they would prevent future famine by moving farmers from famine-prone areas to fallow land that would be at less risk of periodic drought. While supposedly voluntary, the resettling was often done by force or fraud. Citizens were told they would receive food, immunizations for their cattle or other supplies, only to be hurried onto buses or aircraft and simply dropped off in another part of the country. People were sometimes picked up at random, simply walking down the road or while attending the market they would be kidnapped by soldiers who had been given a quota for a total number of refugees to take with them (Keneally 2011). Zewde estimates that only a half million were actually successfully transported to a different part of the country, but the original government plan called for over 2.5 million people to be resettled, a full 6% of the population at the time (Hancock 1985; Zewde 2001).

Probably the most devastating aspect of the Dergue's reaction to the famine was the way in which they used starvation to suppress rebel movements, an intensified version of the Selassie

government's policies. Mass deportation not only depleted the reserves of manpower which the rebels depended upon, but as expressed by Mengistus Haile Mariam, the leader of the Dergue, "Food is a major element in our strategy against the secessionists" (Gill 2010:45). Dawit Wolde-Giorgis, who organized the relief efforts during the famine, recalled hearing Mengistu quote Mao Zedong in suggesting that rebels were like fish in the sea, "Without the sea there will be no fish,' he said. 'We have to drain the sea, or if we cannot completely drain it, we must bring it to a level where they will lack room to move at will, and their movements will be easily restricted.'" (Gill 2010:46). For quite some time, Mengistu's strategy of depriving the rebellious regions of food aid was successful, forcing rebels to seek food instead of fighting government forces.

Military efforts by the Dergue against these rebel groups made conditions for farming unstable, often destroying infrastructure, raiding towns or wiping out markets where rebels were thought to be. It has been observed that the drought from 1982-1987 provided a cover for the devastation which active military operations were bringing to Wollo, Tigray, Gondar and Eritrea (Keneally 2011) As markets and agricultural districts were targeted by government forces, rebel soldiers went from obtaining food from the general population to seeking aid in neighboring Sudan. This aid was not present for all rebel groups, and Eritreans, Tigrayans, and other rebel groups were often starved out, decreasing their numbers and hobbling their efforts against the Dergue (Gill 2010; Keneally 2011).

In the meantime, the Dergue purchased increasingly large amounts of weapons to fight the rebels: \$575 million in 1982, \$975 million in 1983 and \$1.2 billion in the famine year of 1984, the final number accounting for 60% of the total government budget for the year as well as additional gifts to pursue the war from the Soviet Union (Gill 2010; Keneally 2011). Hancock surmised that the sheer amount of arms purchased for the sole purpose of putting down rebel

movements hampered efforts toward industrialization and any movement away from cash crop agriculture, particularly given the burden of debt and interest payments that go on long after the initial purchases and military action (Hancock 1985). These massive arms purchases were made with loans which demanded high interest payments. The Dergue government managed these payments by requiring the peasants to focus production on more and more cash crops, particularly coffee, instead of subsistence agriculture, rendering large sections of the country even more dependent on food imports instead of sustenance agriculture. As a side benefit for the Dergue, this made much of the rural peasantry utterly dependent upon them for food (Gill 2010).

By 1984 it was estimated that 500,000 people were directly affected by the famine in Ethiopia (Hancock 1985). Once the famine had finished its course in 1985, Human Rights Watch estimated the total number of dead to be around 400,000 (Gill 2010). Zewde pegs the number of dead closer to 1 million and the number affected closer to 8 million, though the actual number is of some debate due to differing models and incomplete records (Gill 2010; Zewde 2001). Famed Africa expert Alex De Waal specifically noted that many tens of thousands of those deaths were likely caused by direct government action. Through a combination of resettlement efforts, withholding food from ethnic minorities to strike at rebels or military response in rebel sympathetic areas, which he suggested made the famine far more lethal led to the deaths of roughly 50,000 a conclusion supported by a number of other authors who studied the famine (Gill 2010; Hancock 1985).

While the Dergue government was not brought down by the famine itself, and may have benefited during the crisis, once drought conditions improved the Eritrian People's Liberation Front, Tigrayan People's Liberation Front and Oromo Liberation Front used the famine as a rallying cry for government tyranny and eventually began making military progress, forcing

government troops to retreat from strongholds in the north around Afabet 1988. In February of 1989 government forces were also pushed out of Tigray in a decisive battle leading to victory by the rebels in 1991 with the occupation of Addis Ababa and Asmara in May (Zewde 2001).

### *Bangladesh (1974)*

Bangladesh, like Ethiopia, has struggled for hundreds of years with regular famines, many of the due to the circumstances of British colonial policies and the harshness of World War II. After the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, the new government was attempting to consolidate power and gain control after the withdrawal of Pakistani forces. The nationalist upsurge that led to the expulsion of Pakistani troops had been focused under the Awami League, a generally secular, socialist leaning party that was now tasked with leading the country under the 1971 constitution. While they initially enjoyed significant support, Bangladesh began to experience significant economic problems in 1973. Patronage systems began to emerge as the Awami League exercised a high level of control over licenses and permits for building and business creation which led to stagnation in economic development and obvious signs of corruption as permits became increasingly hard to come by and permit holders gained substantial wealth. Intra-party conflict led to some parties breaking away after the 1973 election which precipitated a series of laws to increase in the powers of the central government by the Awami League loyalists; enabling the president to declare a state of emergency and give approval for police to arrest and search without judicial approval (Westergaard 1985).

The economic situation had been deteriorating from the start of liberation with foreign aid becoming a larger and more essential element of the budget as years progressed. Hard line socialists began to leave the government, distressed by the government's unwillingness to adopt self-sufficiency measures. By 1973-1974, prices on necessities had increased 300-400% over

pre-independence costs, and by the middle of 1974 they had spiked to over 800% of 1971 prices. Economically, the country was in a shambles, hardly capable of keeping the government together without substantial foreign aid (Westergaard 1985).

Unfortunately, due to a faster than expected flooding season during harvest in Mymensingh and Ranpu, water levels remained high throughout the summer and prevented the planting of winter crops in 1974. Combined with wavering economic conditions, the double crop failure consumed what little surplus subsistence farmers had been able to accumulate, and suddenly the country was facing a food shortage of nearly 50% of total need (Westergaard 1985). As Stepanek starkly put it, “The price of rice went from 150 takas per maund<sup>5</sup> in January of 1974 to between 300 and 400 takas<sup>6</sup> per maund in places in the northwest during October and November” (Stepanek 1979:65). Unfortunately, due to the suddenly low production of foodstuffs in the primarily agricultural state, the spike in inflation, accompanied by high fuel prices, a massive exchange of foreign reserves the previous year for food and continuing trouble stabilizing the new state, there were limited funds to provide meaningful relief efforts. Wage labor jobs, previously abundant, became difficult to come by as large landowners had neither fields that required farming nor the spare funds to pay laborers. Citizens, now homeless either by selling their land or by the force of rising flood water, with no opportunities for employment either camped out in front of the Land Registry Office or disbursed in hopes of being able to find sustenance or alms (Stepanek 1979).

This was compounded by the growing economic crisis in the country and political instability from lack of funds and the collapsing of the Awami League. Political opposition to the perceived failure of the ruling party’s policies coalesced around Sheikh Mujib, one of the

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<sup>5</sup> Roughly 82.3 pounds in weight.

<sup>6</sup> Approximately \$45.80-\$61.07 for 82.3 pounds of rice, or \$.56-\$.74 per pound. Incidentally, this means two or three pounds of rice often cost more than a laborer could be expected to make in a day

original ideologues of Bangladeshi socialism. Eventually, parliament agreed to elect Sheikh Mujib as the new president, declare emergency rule by the president and then dissolve parliament. A single National Party was formed under Sheikh Mujib, but it was functionally just a reincarnation of the Awami League with a couple of sympathetic parties formally absorbed as well. As the National Party government sought to enforce control with the paramilitary Rakkhi Bahini force, the army became concerned about their potential future and instigated a coup that met with minimal resistance. Over the next year, two more coups would take place within the military ruling system before a civilian puppet government was finally installed that managed to maintain power in the November 7<sup>th</sup> coup in 1975 (Westergaard 1985).

While the government was able to organize international aid to respond to the crisis, open over 5,000 kitchens to feed the poor and offer some “make work” jobs, government response was highly disrupted by the political chaos, and there was never an overall plan or significant funding for relief efforts. In the once prices stabilized and agriculture was able to return to normal, it was estimated that 30,000 people died of starvation, and another 10,000 died of famine-related disease like cholera and dysentery. Over 300,000 people became homeless in the region and it is uncertain just how many of those homeless also perished. By the summer of 1975, the food shortage that had precipitated the famine had ended, and rice prices once again stabilized at 100 taka per maund<sup>7</sup> as food production returned to normal levels. This permitted the traditional agricultural cycle to return to normal and for the peasantry to begin rebuilding their lives (Stepanek 1979).

*India (1966-1967) “Bihar Famine”*

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<sup>7</sup> \$15.27 for 82.3 pounds of rice, or roughly \$.18 per pound, a much more sustainable cost.



India provides a unique case when it comes to its history with famine. India has been facing periodic famine for thousands of years and has put special focus on dealing with its consequences. The British imperial rule of India not only led to several additional devastating famines, as well as detailed documentation of these crises (Indian Famine Commission 1976). The Great Bengal Famine of 1943, which cost between 1.5 and 4 million lives, occurred just prior to the British withdrawal and served as a strong impetus among the Indian National Congress for central governments to take on famine directly to prevent a crisis from getting out of control (Devereux 1993).

After independence in 1948, India did not face another severe famine for 18 years. However, in 1966 the harvest season yielded less than 50% of what was expected due to inadequate rainfall. In response to this sudden shortfall the government declared a famine. While in the cases of Ethiopia and Bangladesh these declarations had simply been a statement of the obvious as the governments flailed for effective policy, the government of India is constitutionally mandated to respond to famine. Upon the declaration of a famine, needs of citizens were identified, resources were committed to those needs and the bureaucratic abilities of the state were brought to bear. The government began to purchase wheat en-masse from other unaffected provinces as well as the international market to provide for the starving, ultimately feeding 2.4 million with supplemental food and an additional 4.5 million with protein rich foodstuffs. Kitchens were opened that explicitly were focused on feeding children less than 10 years of age, expectant and nursing mothers and the elderly. When peasants were unable to pay rent, relief workers used funds to pay their way until regular harvesting could be restored. Work for food programs were organized where unemployed individuals would be paid a wage in flour, granting them enough caloric content to survive in return for their aid in building public works

projects, employing 9.4 million people. The “make work” projects were primarily focused on constructions that would mitigate or prevent future drought in the affected areas, most notably vast reservoirs and wells which continue to serve the communities they were built in through present. All of these works were supervised by relief workers with a total 149,000 state employees overseeing projects at the height of state employment. For the most part, the effort was a resounding success with minimal casualties and no serious outbreaks of disease. By the planting season in 1967, 93.4% of all arable land in Bihar was being cultivated and the famine ended with minimal lasting disruption (Singh 1975).

All of these efforts did not come without serious cost to the government. Income from agricultural products declined drastically from the 1966-1967, and the prevention measures demanded enormous government expenditure to cover. It would be several years before the Indian government recovered from the experience. Regardless of the cost, only about 2,500 Indians died from conditions relating to the famine, a remarkably low number given the tens of millions of individuals who were directly affected by the drought (Singh 1975).

Given the enormous affect size of the famine, actual political disruption was minimal. During the crisis, politicians hyped up the gravity of the situation even as they were solving it, drawing attention of the masses away from other, less fruitful government plans to increase agricultural production. Given that 1967 was a year for General Elections, it became politically advantageous for opposition parties to use the success in warding off the famine against the ruling Indian National Congress which led to the opposition capturing the regional government in Bahir. Otherwise, both the government and national economy returned to normal in about a year (Devereux 1993).

*India (1971-1973) “Maharashtra Drought”*

The second significant famine that India has experienced since independence is notable mainly in that many sources outside of the country did not recognize that the occurrence of the famine until substantially after the drought had subsided. It is also noteworthy in that there were no deaths attributed to the famine itself<sup>8</sup>, largely due to comprehensive implementation of response plans by the Indian government at the time. Massive public works and food aid were again utilized as in the 1966-1967 Bahir famine, now with the benefit of having analyzed the effectiveness of many earlier strategies and having engaged in significant discussion and planning on how to better deal with the next famine (Dyson and Maharanta 1992).

Maharashtra as a region was substantially more developed in terms of infrastructure and industry than Bahir, but that did not render it safe from potential disruption of its economy due to drought. In the summer of 1972, food production dropped to half of what had been harvested in 1967-68 which caused a sudden and serious food shortage (Dyson and Maharatna 1992). While the drought affected Maharashtra the most, it also caused serious difficulty in Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan and parts of Mysore, Prissa and Madhya Pradesh. In addition to crop failures, fodder for animals and clean drinking water were at a premium (Ledejinsky 1973).

By November, the Indian government responded with over 10,500 different famine relief projects which sought to make strides towards soil conservation, irrigation works, canal building, reservoirs and breaking up stones to open up more land for agricultural cultivation, employing 1.7 million volunteers a day in 1972 and over 4 million at its peak in 1973 in Maharashtra alone with hundreds of thousands seeking employment in other drought affected areas. Some protestors and opposition leaders criticized the government for not pursuing more productive irrigation and conservation projects, but that is likely due to the lack of preparation time. The

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<sup>8</sup> At least according to the Indian Government and UNICEF.

Maharashtra Drought came on with particular suddenness and earlier warning signs of drought were not heeded which hampered preparation efforts. Regardless, the effort was generally a success in that it both provided for the citizenry at a time when they were in need of sustenance and focused the state on the idea that the detriment of famine was functionally an issue of employment and not simply of a lack of food (Dyson and Maharanta 1992; Ladejinsky 1973).

While the number of affected Indians remained high with 1.25 million refugees moving from famine-affected areas and 15 million dependent on government assistance, it is remarkable to note that there was no recorded increase in rates of starvation by the Indian government, UNICEF or the WHO. After the famine ran its course, the government petitioned to have the famine reclassified as a drought in order to signify their success in handling it, which is how it is known today. Unfortunately, this was likely motivated as a political move given UNICEF's support for Indian protections for its citizenry at the time and India's desire to demonstrate its competence in the crisis. Several non-government sources indicate that mortality related to illness and infant mortality rates overall did increase significantly during the famine, but it is still noteworthy that in a famine that affected over 15 million people that deaths from starvation were so rare as to be considered non-existent. It is also noteworthy that while there was a substantial increase in protests during the Maharashtra, no violent opposition movements developed and there was no particular increase in rebel activity while the drought took place (Deveruex 1993; Dyson and Maharanta 1992).

#### *Comparison of Cases:*

The figures below represent a portion of the World Bank data covering economic indicators during the times in which the aforementioned famines took place. Each table includes

four major indicators of economic stability which directly connects to the relative political stability of their accompanying states as indicated by Collier (2007), Olson (1993), Feng (1997) and Alesina et. al (1992).

Ethiopia (millions of 2005 US \$s)	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976
GDP	3784.14	3952.16	4251.97	4426.34	4620.99	4769.54	4849.29	4856.05	4909.58
Gov't Consumption	254.93	255.13	268.68	276.43	316.47	332.14	334.38	414.51	465.40
Imports	630.57	649.00	663.78	697.63	706.85	638.36	671.57	848.76	803.62
GDP per capita	134.03	136.23	142.54	144.12	146.03	146.41	145.02	142.04	141.08

Information from the World Bank "Global Economic Prospects" survey data, updated Jan. 17, 2012 (World Bank, 2012)

The above data represents some of the economic indicators surrounding the Ethiopian famine 1970-1974 as well as data prior to famine conditions and data after famine conditions ceased. As noted, GDP, Government consumption and GDP per capita do not show any serious decline, even increasing during famine years. Imports actually decrease during the famine itself which would generally be considered to be a positive for building up reserve currency and making for a secure position in the global financial system. Despite this lack of any real economic issues, Haile Selassie's regime collapsed, which would indicate that it was not likely to be a causal factor.

Ethiopia (millions of 2005 US \$s)	1979	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987
GDP	5440.53	5662.48	5669.05	5720.98	6192.11	6015.76	5345.34	5861.78	6674.20
Gov't Consumption	510.80	553.66	584.67	618.56	717.15	678.86	590.32	598.93	706.63
Imports	951.26	1121.76	1172.26	1279.33	1299.90	1508.33	1462.49	1611.57	1645.20
GDP per capita	149.58	152.47	148.72	145.61	152.48	143.21	123.06	130.60	143.95

Information from the World Bank "Global Economic Prospects" survey data, updated Jan. 17, 2012 (World Bank, 2012)

In contrast to the 1970-1974 famine, the 1980-1985 famine in Ethiopia demonstrates significant economic problems. A substantial decline growth of GDP as well as per capita GDP can be seen from 1984-1986, likely due to the enormous effect of the drought and consequent famine upon the economy as a whole, both of which would be strong indicators for economic instability. Imports, particularly that of weapons rise substantially through the famine years as well as after which would have put significant financial strain on the financial system given that the GDP as a whole was decreasing. Government consumption as part of the budget increased substantially through 1983, but level off afterward. Despite several economic factors being far worse for the 1980-1985 Ethiopian famine, the Dergue government survived the chaos of the drought and famine until 1990. Given the relative strength of economic indicators for the 1980-1985 famine not resulting in government instability, it would seem to indicate that there are other factors influencing the stability of the government.

Bangladesh (in millions of 2005 US \$s)	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976
GDP	17993.19	17035.23	18135.49	18634.56	18781.14
Gov't Consumption	242.72	222.69	267.17	339.01	636.80
Imports	6497.50	4856.71	2726.25	2069.73	2347.11
GDP per capita	245.11	226.38	235.18	235.90	232.20

Information from the World Bank "Global Economic Prospects" survey data, updated Jan. 17, 2012 (World Bank, 2012)

The Bangladesh famine was not as long as either of the Ethiopian famines and did not have as much of an impact on the national economy as a whole. The efforts to make the country self-sufficient in the years prior to the famine can be seen clearly in the substantial drop in imports from 1972-1974. The famine itself did not substantially affect the overall GDP or GDP per capita, but did see some increase in government consumption. Overall, the economic strain

on Bangladesh was not particularly large despite the government overthrow. If this is the case, it is not likely that the famine was directly responsible for any severe economic changes that would have resulted in government instability.

India (millions of 2005 US \$s)	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969
GDP	98063.21	119264.06	119221.45	128558.74	132895.58	141585.97
Gov't Consumption	7223.18	10267.79	10443.64	10724.78	11317.55	12381.70
Imports	5132.84	6800.99	8747.66	8402.83	7195.90	6258.06
GDP per capita	202.73	241.49	236.40	249.59	252.58	263.39

Information from the World Bank "Global Economic Prospects" survey data, updated Jan. 17, 2012 (World Bank, 2012)

The above information catalogues data from the Bihar famine in India from 1966-1967.

Given the sheer size of India, it is impressive that the drought and ensuing famine made an observable impact in 1966 GDP and GDP per capita. It is interesting to note that government consumption does not particularly rise given the herculean efforts to put anti-famine measures in place. Imports, in this case, are the most telling, spiking by more than \$2 billion during the famine as the Indian government struggled to obtain enough food to feed its starving citizenry. This put enormous financial strain on India's financial reserves at the time, but conditions did not seem to be particularly bad in the long run and imports returned to below 1965 levels in 1969.

India (millions of 2005 US \$s)	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974
GDP	141585.97	14884.09	151312.77	150481.91	155476.02	157317.96
Gov't Consumption	12381.70	13551.13	14873.56	15015.54	14994.65	14436.61
Imports	6258.06	7379.10	8709.31	8545.13	9235.12	8056.72
GDP per capita	263.39	271.04	269.51	262.21	264.97	262.18

Information from the World Bank "Global Economic Prospects" survey data, updated Jan. 17, 2012 (World Bank, 2012)

The Maharashtra Drought shows a similar increase in imports to the 1966-1967 Bihar Famine, but it can be seen that the planning and practice of the Indian government paid off in their handling of the Maharashtra Drought. While there is a slight decrease in GDP per capita and overall GDP going from 1971-1972, the spike in imports is less than in 1966-1967 and government consumption rises minimally. While there is certainly a disruption of economic conditions, it is not nearly to the degree of the earlier Ethiopian famines.

	Ethiopia 1971-1974	Ethiopia 1980-1985	Bangladesh 1971	India 1966-1967	India 1971
Pop. During Famine	32,300,000	41,100,000	67,800,000	511,000,000	560,000,000
Total Affected (aprox.)	2,400,000	8,000,000	300,000+	6,900,000+	15,000,000+
Affected as % of population	7.4%	19.5%	.442%	1.35%	2.68%
Total Dead (aprox.)	40,000-200,000	400,000-1,000,000	40,000	2,500	0
Dead as % of Pop.	.0124%-.619%	.973%-2.43%	.00059%	<.0001%	0%
Increase in # of Protests?	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Increased in Violent Activity?	Yes	No	No	No	No
Violent Gov't Change	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Non-Violent Gov't Change	N/A	No	N/A	Yes (local)	No
Type of Gov't Intervention	Negative	Strong Negative	Little/None	Positive	Strong Positive

Information compiled from the various sources throughout the Results section.<sup>9</sup>

The above table is a comparison of the various famines discussed and their relative effect on the countries that dealt with them. As can be seen, the Ethiopian famines had the greatest affect on the countries, topping out with the 1980-1985 Ethiopian famine that affected 19.5% of the country and may have killed as much as a full 2.43% of the entire population. Both of the Indian famines had smaller numbers of affected citizens proportionate to size and the famine in

<sup>9</sup> Population numbers from "Health, Nutrition and Population" (HNP) statistics by the World Bank (World Bank 2011)



Bangladesh had the least overall effect on the population. Bangladesh in 1971 and Ethiopia in 1974 were both overthrown by their militaries and had significant social unrest in the process. Ethiopia in 1985 did not face overthrow and may have actually managed to increase stability for a brief time, though their aggressive measures against rebel movements did lead to their downfall in 1991. Only the Indian cases resulted in limited effect on government stability despite significant economic and political indicators.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION:

Famine, while a disruptive force, does not necessarily have to result in political destabilization such as that which took place in Ethiopia in 1974 and 1985 or in Bangladesh in 1975 as demonstrated by India's successful navigation of the Bihar Famine in 1967-1977 and the Maharashtra Drought. The case of the India suggests that if famine prevention policies are put into place, become an expectation for both the citizenry and the government and are carried out in the case of a famine then the government itself is not necessarily in danger

Economically, each famine had a substantial impact on the economy both through GDP, imports, government consumption and GDP per capita, but clearly this was not a reliable indicator of outcome. Bangladesh had the least impact on their economy of the above indicators, yet they collapsed the most quickly of the cases examined, and had the most chaotic downfall. That said, it is important to note that there were several intervening indicators in the case of Bangladesh and it would be irresponsible to claim that famine alone was responsible for their political collapse. Both the Ethiopian famines were the worst in terms of economic measures, but as noted by de Waal it is likely that government efforts to use the famine as a weapon against rebellious minorities prolonged the famine and caused more financial damage than if they had simply left it alone (Gill 2010). India's famines had mixed results in terms of economic factors,

but both show the enormous lengths to which the central government went in order to feed the masses.

In terms of political stability as it relates to violence, only Ethiopia exhibited a substantial change as a result of the famines, noting a substantial decrease in political violence as the government deprived the various rebel movements of precious resources in the 1980-1985 famine. Bangladesh's 1974 famine, the Bihar famine the Maharashtra Drought of were all without significant violent action by any party, and, though there was violence present, the 1974 Famine in Ethiopia did not exhibit much of a change in the overall level of violence in the state. Admittedly, in Ethiopia and Bangladesh, violent movements did use the famine as a justifying frame for future political violence, but this preceded the actual events of the famine by several years. Given that only one examined case demonstrated an increase in violent activity, it seems unlikely that famine acts as a catalyst for decreased political stability.

Non-violent political unrest was a major factor in the famine in Ethiopia in 1970-1974 and the Maharashtra Drought but was not particularly noteworthy in Ethiopia in 1985, Bangladesh in 1974 or the Bahir famine in 1966-1967. While it could be said that Ethiopia was functionally a military dictatorship in 1985 and Bangladesh was functionally a repressive one-party state, thus preventing organized protest, the Bahir famine is not associated with unusually high levels of political protest. The combined situation of the 1970-1974 Ethiopian famine having protest and resulting in government collapse while the Maharashtra Drought's protests resulted in no meaningful affect on political stability does not seem to indicate that protest was a significant factor in the relative stability or instability of the state as a result of the famine. This finding provides some emphasis on Sen's thesis that democracy *and* freedom to protest against the government are both critical elements in protecting a citizenry from predatory government

behavior (Sen . 2007; Dreze 2007). That said, it does not provide clarification on what effect famines have on political stability.

What does seem to be the clearest indicator of relative stability or instability is the degree of intervention by the state in the situation of the famine. In the case of both Ethiopian famines, particularly the 1980-1985 famine, the government pursued a policy of covering up the situation while using the relative shortage as a weapon on their own people. While it may have yielded short term benefit for Ethiopia in both cases, it ultimately led to serious destabilization that ended in the collapse of the Selassie government in 1974 and seriously weakened the Dergue government by 1985 and led to their downfall in 1991. Bangladesh did little to intervene in their famine, and while they did collapse, I feel that there are too many complicating factors to suggest that their relative lack of effort directly resulted in political instability in collapse. I do feel that the data is sufficient to suggest that the effects of the famine did not make the situation any better.

Both the Bihar Famine and Maharashtra drought provide clear indicators that positive involvement in famine conditions by the government on behalf of the citizenry seemed to end in the best results for the state. The effects on the economy were minimized and there was no significant increase in violent action against the state or substantial change in government except for in local elections. It is likely that the government policy of intervention saved an enormous number of lives and possible survival, though it is difficult to say with any kind of certainty without more data. What this existing data does suggest is that the best predictor of political stability in the aftermath of a famine is the degree and type of government intervention in that famine.

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