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The Role of Civil Wars and Elections in Inducing Political Assassinations

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ABSTRACT

Political assassinations can dramatically impact political and social dynamics, especially in times of violent political conflicts or electoral competition. The current study explores if and how specific social and political events facilitate the occurrence of political assassinations. After an examination of the logic of political assassinations, a theoretical framework is presented, which explains the role of civil wars and electoral processes as facilitators of different types of political assassinations. The theory is tested via a dataset of political assassinations worldwide between the years 1946–2013. The findings confirm that different sets of structural and contextual factors facilitate assassinations against heads of state, legislators, and leaders of opposition movements/parties. In addition, the findings illustrate the tendency of elections, especially in nonliberal settings and in polarized societies, to facilitate political assassinations rather than to calm the political environment. In contrast, civil wars have a more limited impact on the probability of assassinations, and their intensity and endurance mainly enhance the risk of assassinations of legislators.

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> The best government is a benevolent tyranny tempered by an occasional assassination.
>
> —Voltaire[1]

Bill Clinton, the former American president who was the primary sponsor of the Oslo peace process, predicted that if Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin had not been assassinated, peace would have been achieved between Israel and the Palestinian National Authority until the end of the 1990s.[2] While some may be skeptic about President Clinton's prediction, most experts agree that Rabin's assassination had an immense impact on the political landscape in Israel and Palestine. More generally, it illustrates how political assassinations can produce an immediate and substantial impact on political processes and institutions.

The current study aims to explore if and how specific social and political events facilitate the occurrence of political assassinations. After explaining how the logic of political assassinations is related to that of terrorism or insurgency, a theoretical framework will be presented, which explains the role of civil wars and electoral processes as facilitators of

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assassinations against different types of targets. The theory will be tested via a dataset of political assassinations worldwide between the years 1946–2013. The concluding section will summarize the findings' theoretical contribution and illuminate ideas for follow-up studies.

Political Assassinations: Conceptualization

Similarly to other manifestations of political violence, political assassination aims to promote or prevent political processes or policies that relate to a particular collective. Actors may prefer to use the method of assassination because they believe that it is the fastest and/or most effective way to promote desired political goals,[3] since other alternatives are not viable, or because the targeted individual possesses political capital and powers that are related to the political objectives of the perpetrator.[4] Regardless of the exact reason, the perpetrator assumes a causal relationship between the act of assassination and the ability, or potential, to advance a political objective.

Both terrorist and insurgency groups may use political assassinations alongside other tactics. In some cases, assassinations further help terrorist groups to facilitate a sense of terror and fear among the targeted population, and thus it is part of broader psychological warfare that aims to shape public perceptions via symbolic violence. Therefore, political assassination can be seen as a tool within a broader social phenomenon (terrorism or insurgency). In other cases the group's decision to conduct a political assassination may reflect a perception that by eliminating a particular individual who possesses political power, it is possible to promote or prevent political policies without necessarily affecting the mind-set of the public or policymakers, controlling territory or directly challenging the physical power of an existing regime.[5] In such circumstances, it seems that groups are using assassinations because it does not necessitate a significant investment in garnering popular support, or the creation of extensive recruitment mechanisms and operational infrastructure to exploit that support. For that reason, terrorist or insurgent groups, as well as other types of sub-state political actors, that feel as though other tactics have failed or are not effective enough in amassing mass support, and whose resources are dwindling, may resort to political assassinations.[6] As Rapoport emphasizes: "At most assassination involves a conspiracy, terrorism requires a movement."[7]

Based on the discussion above, a definition of political assassination should include three elements. First, the target is an individual who is part of the leadership of a group that operates within the political sphere in order to promote a specific ideology or policies. S/he need not necessarily be an elected official or member of the government (i.e., leaders of opposition organizations or social movements). Second, the perpetrator's goal is a political one; thus the assassination aims at promoting or preventing specific policies, values, practices, or norms pertaining to the collective's way of life. Third, the act includes an actual action that leads to the death of the targeted individual. Hence we can define a political assassination as "an action that leads to the death of an intentionally targeted individual who is active in the political sphere, in order to promote or prevent specific policies, values, practices or norms pertaining to a collective."[8]

Elections, Civil Wars, and Political Assassinations

The limited literature on political assassinations can be roughly divided into three categories. The first includes historical studies that attempt to examine the circumstances of one or a

selected group of assassinations via specific disciplinary lenses.[9] Falk and Ben-Yehuda's historical reviews of assassinations are informed by a sociological framework,[10] while Clarke developed a psychological–mental classification of assassins.[11] The second category of studies looks into the effects of political assassinations on various societal processes. While Berkowitz and Macaulay,[12] and Orren and Peterson[13] studied the effect of Kennedy's assassination on crime rates and political socialization in the United States, Yuchtman-Yaar and Hermann analyzed how the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin shaped Israelis's political participation.[14] Yet probably the most systematic examination of the impact of political assassinations was conducted by Iqbal and Zorn, who used a data set of political assassinations of state leaders in order to identify how they were correlated with various indicators of political instability. They found that countries with unregulated mechanisms of succession are more likely to experience political instability following the assassination of the head of state. [15]

The last category of literature, which is the most relevant to the current study, focuses on the causes of political assassinations. While individual-level explanations put significant emphasis on psychological pathologies of past assassins,[16] macro-level explanations have mostly linked social and political conditions to political assassinations, emphasizing variables related to the structure of the political system, the level of political pluralism, the existence or lack of alternatives (for violent means) to change state leadership, and the ability of state agencies to eliminate or punish groups engaged in assassinations. In general, it was found that oppressive leaders in non-democratic settings, who also have limited executive power are more likely to be assassinated. [17]

The aforementioned studies have been extremely useful in deepening our understanding of the causes and impact of political assassinations. The current study aims to supplement them by testing and further developing two theoretical arguments. The first is that different types of assassinations (i.e., against different targets) are triggered by different sets of structural and motivational factors. For example, I would argue that the considerations that lead a group/individual to assassinate a member of an opposition party are different from the motivations that trigger the assassination of a head of state. Applying a similar logic, assassinating a parliament member will probably generate a different impact than the assassination of a head of state. While most studies so far have disregarded this theoretical assertion and focused on one type of assassination (usually of a head of state), expanding our attention to assassinations against different targets has the potential to further our understanding of the motivations of the perpetrating groups and their related decision-making processes. The second argument tested in this study is that there is an association between societal and political processes and political assassinations. While past studies have examined how the structure of the political system and distribution of power can facilitate political assassinations by shaping cost–benefit considerations of violent groups/individuals, it is also necessary to employ an in-depth investigation of how contextual events impact the probability of different types of political assassinations. Such an exploration can help us gain a more accurate comprehension of how changes in the political and societal landscape may facilitate (or not) political assassinations.

To conclude, the current study aims to provide a nuanced approach to the examination of the causes of political assassinations, one in which the type of target plays an important role. It also examines how external societal and political processes (i.e., electoral processes and domestic violent clashes), may facilitate political assassinations.

Elections and Political Assassinations

Although elections were traditionally perceived as political processes that could decrease political tensions,[18] a more recent body of literature emphasizes the role of elections as potential facilitators of militancy and political violence, especially in polarized societies, fragmented political systems, and young democracies.[19] The main assertion of this literature is that a contentious political environment may encourage less centralized groups to further radicalize in order to distinguish themselves from the "crowd."[20] In addition, since the electoral process may further illustrate the limited ideological appeal of some fringe groups, it may catalyze a perception among these groups that legitimate political mechanisms should be abandoned in favor of more extreme measures of persuasion. Nonliberal democracies seem to be especially vulnerable since elections may enhance existing perceptions regarding corruption in the political system, lack of accountability, and in some cases also concerns regarding the legitimacy of the elections results.[21] The violent mass demonstrations which erupted in Iran following the 2009 presidential elections and in Egypt during 2013 illustrate how elections can eventually trigger violence rather than calm the political environment.

More specific mechanisms, related to operational and political dynamics, may also incentivize assassinations during times of electoral processes. During elections, the leader of a political opposition has more opportunities to elevate his or her status and influence, and become a significant threat to the governing leadership or competing political parties; therefore, he or she may be more vulnerable to assassination by government proxies or political rivals (especially in nonliberal regimes). Additionally, electoral campaigns substantially increase the visibility and exposure of political leaders to the public, making them more convenient targets from an operational perspective. In this context, since legislators and opposition leaders usually enjoy less protection than heads of state, the abovementioned dynamics make them especially vulnerable. Election periods are also times in which political rhetoric and discourse tend to escalate, including de-legitimization of political rivals and ideologies, hence amplifying the perception of zero sum game and the accompanied potential escalation to violence. And since political leaders during elections, more than usual, serve as ideological symbols, they may be more attractive targets than on other occasions. Last, since assassination of a political candidate can alter election results, parties that are expecting electoral loss (i.e., coalition parties), mainly in nonliberal settings, may resort to assassinations. A case in point is the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in 2007, two weeks before the Pakistani elections, where she was the leading candidate (indeed, her party, the Pakistan People Party, eventually received the highest number of seats in the parliament). On the other hand, if the incumbent government is expected to win, the opposition may be more incentivized to try to engage in assassination attempts against the head of state, especially if there are indications that the election procedures are lacking fairness. Based on the above discussion, several possible associations between electoral processes and political assassinations may be considered; these are elaborated via the following hypotheses:

H1. Elections will increase the probability of assassinations in general.

H2. Legislators and opposition leaders are at greater risk of being assassinated than heads of state, mainly in cases of nonliberal democracies or polarized societies, and when there are indications that the incumbent government may lose power.

H3. Heads of state will be at greater risk of being assassinated when the election procedures favor the incumbent government or lack fairness.

Civil War and Political Assassinations

Civil wars and less extreme internal violence are usually associated with changes in the political landscape. One of the side effects is the tendency of new or contending regimes to eliminate potential threats, including members of rival/past political parties/regimes. Antoine Idrissou Meatchi, a former vice president of Togo, was imprisoned and assassinated shortly after Gnassingbé Eyadéma's military regime came to power in 1984, since he was still perceived as a potential political threat.[22] In another example, Hardan Takriti, who was the Iraqi defense minister and premier deputy between 1968 and 1970 (before moving to Kuwait to organize a coup against Ahmed Hassan al-Bakar's government) was assassinated in 1971 by agents of the Iraqi regime.[23] But probably the most brutal example is the assassination of thirty-four Iranian legislators in 1981, when the new Islamic revolutionary regime was consolidating its control over the country. In all these cases, assassinations were utilized by new regimes looking to solidify their control following a violent regime change.[24] In other cases, the tactic of assassinations is used by different sides of internal conflicts as part of their attempt to legitimize their demands while undermining the opposition's legitimacy. The assassination of Sheik Mohammed Ali Osman (a member of the Yemeni Presidential Council) in 1973, the assassination of Hakija Turajlić, the deputy prime minister of Bosnia-Herzegovina, by a Serbian nationalist in 1993, and the assassination of Mihajlo Ljesar, the vice president of Montenegro, that same year, are several illustrations of this dynamic.

But violent internal conflicts are not just about ideological disagreements or simply a struggle for political dominancy. Many internal violent conflicts are a reflection of escalation in relations between ethnic or religious groups. In these circumstances, the ability of minority movements to promote effective struggle depends on the availability of charismatic and competent leaders who can gain support from their constituency and build communal consensus regarding the necessity for a struggle. Therefore, it is not surprising that these kinds of leaders are an especially desired target for political rivals during internal conflicts. The assassination of Shahbaz Bhatt, the leader of the Christian minority in Pakistan in 2011, as well as the assassination of Jean Baptiste Habyariman, a moderate Tutsi governor during the civil war in Rwanda, are two examples of such dynamics.

Similar to periods of electoral process, civil wars or periods of intense internal conflicts also provide some operational and political advantages for those interested in engaging in political assassinations, especially of political leaders who are not senior members of the executive, such as parliament members and leaders of opposition movements. Political actors may feel more comfortable in attacking rival political leaders during civil wars since the chaotic environment that usually characterizes extreme internal conflicts makes it more difficult to attach responsibility for specific attacks to a specific actors. Moreover, the chaos shortens the media news cycle dramatically as multiple issues are usually competing for attention, allowing political actors to avoid long-term scrutiny following such attacks (again, especially when the targets are not senior members of the executive; i.e., heads of state). Finally, it may be easier in the context of civil war to paint acts of assassinations as legitimate warfare and/or acts of self-defense.

Based on the discussion above, several assumptions regarding the association between civil wars and political assassinations can be hypothesized:

H4. Civil wars increase the probability of political assassinations.

H5. The longer and more lethal the war is, the higher the chances that the sides will escalate to use of political assassinations.
H6. During civil wars, opposition leaders and legislators are more vulnerable to political assassinations than other political figures.

The two sets of hypotheses presented above (H1–H6) reflect the necessity for a greater fidelity in the exploration of the causes of political assassinations, and the fact that even if electoral processes and civil wars raise the probability of political assassinations, it is important to identify whether specific political figures are more vulnerable than others, and whether specific "types" or stages of elections or civil wars raise the risks of political assassinations. The following sections will detail the methodological and empirical aspects of such exploration and provide initial answers.

Data and Methods

Two datasets were constructed in order to investigate the association between political assassinations and processes of electoral competition and internal conflicts. The first dataset includes information about political assassinations worldwide from 1946 to early 2013. Using the definition of political assassinations presented above, a variety of resources, including relevant academic books,[25] media sources (especially *LexisNexis* and the *New York Times* archive[26]) and online resources,[27] were utilized in order to identify 758 attacks by 920 perpetrators that resulted in the deaths of 954 political leaders (some attacks led to the death of multiple political leaders). In the next stage, information was gathered regarding the context of the attack (date, time, location, tactic of assassination), target (political role, political/religious affiliation, time in office, sociodemographic background, among others) and perpetrators (e.g., political orientation, religious/ethnic affiliation, stated motivation, nature of affiliation to sub-state or state organization, sociodemographic background).

The second dataset includes country–year information that was extracted from several datasets. From the POLITY IV dataset[28] information was gathered regarding level of democracy, level of competitiveness of the executive branch and of the political system in general, and the state's level of fragmentation; from Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)/Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO) Armed Conflicts Dataset,[29] information was extracted regarding the existence or lack of internal conflict, the duration of the violence and its intensity; the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) Dataset[30] was used in order to track whether the specific country–year was in the midst of elections and if there were specific expectations regarding the election results. The Ethnic Power Relations data set (EPR3)[31] was used in order to measure levels of political polarization and ethnic fractionalization. Last, the information from the assassinations dataset was used in order to code all cases of country–year that experienced assassinations. Thus, the dataset includes both country–year including assassinations, and a control group of all countries–year cases in which assassinations did not occur.[32] The Appendix includes a more detailed description of the variables in the datasets and their operationalization.

The first dataset was used in order to track the major trends in political assassinations, hence helping answer questions such as what is its geographic distribution, who are the common perpetrators, who are the most popular targets and when, and what tactics are more frequent? The second dataset was constructed to directly address and test the hypotheses presented in the theoretical section.

Analyses and Findings

General Trends: When, Where, Common Targets, Perpetrators, and Tactics

Before testing the hypotheses presented above, it is useful to gain a better understanding of the general trends that characterize the political assassination phenomenon. The data reflect that the number of assassinations worldwide per year has remained more or less stable in the last 40 years, usually between 10–20 assassinations, and that political assassinations are not limited to specific regions or timeframes. In fact, the opposite is true. Table 1 illustrates that regions that are considered politically and economically stable and strong (i.e., Western Europe), as well as regions that are considered politically unstable and economically weak (sub-Saharan Africa), experienced similar levels of political assassinations (see Table 1).

Moreover, when looking into the distribution of assassinations by country (see online Appendix), it is clear that while some countries are more vulnerable to political assassinations than others, it cannot be argued that assassinations are clustered in specific countries. Assassinations occurred in 137 different countries; just two of them account for more than 4 percent of assassinations, another ten countries between 2–4 percent, and additional 11 countries between 1–2 percent of assassinations. Overall, 45 countries suffered five or more political assassinations.

The trends in the geographical distribution of assassinations may also indicate a link between regional processes and changes in the volume of assassinations. In South Asia, for example, more than three quarters of the assassinations have been perpetrated since the mid-1980s, possibly a consequence of the growing instability in the Afghanistan–Pakistan (Af-Pak) region during and after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. And more than 85 percent of assassinations in Eastern Europe have been perpetrated after 1995, with the transition to democracy in most Eastern European countries, a process that has been accompanied by growing ethnic tensions and political instability. However, there are no indications that the Cold War impacted the frequency of political assassinations. There is no observable decline in the number of assassinations since the late-1980s, and assassinations seem not to be concentrated in states that can be described as the "battleground states" of the Cold War (except maybe to Afghanistan, and even in that state a large portion of assassinations occurred following the end of the Cold War).

Further reflecting the universal nature of political assassinations is their frequent occurrence both in highly democratic and non-democratic Polities, as well as in different

Table 1. Assassinations between 1946–2013, by region.

Region	No. of attacks
North America	42
Central America & Caribbean	56
South America	66
Southeast/East Asia	41
South Asia	129
Western Europe	106
Eastern Europe	41
Middle East & North Africa	152
Sub-Saharan Africa	98
Russia & the Newly Independent States (NIS)	20
Australasia & Oceania	7

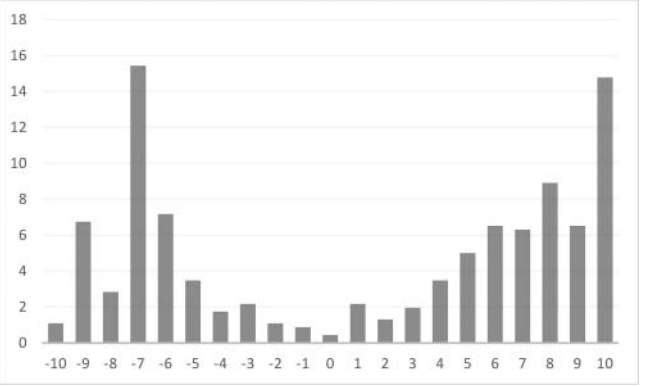

Figure 1. Distribution of assassinations by polity score (percentage).

economic settings. As Figure 1 illustrates, a quarter of assassinations occurred in highly oppressive and totalitarian political systems (Polity score between −10 and −7) while a third of them occurred in what can be described as liberal and pluralistic democracies (Polity score between 7–10). Other significant portions of assassinations occurred in weak democracies and in authoritarian regimes. Thus, we can conclude that political assassinations are not exclusive to a specific regime type. Similarly, assassinations are not exclusive to countries suffering from a declining economy. A model that examined a possible correlation between the occurrence of assassination/s and changes in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1–5 years' prior, was not found statistically significant. Actually, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) confirmed that the average GDP of country–years suffering from assassination is significantly (three times) higher than the average GDP of country–years that did not experience assassinations ($F = 41.836^{***}$). A separate model, which takes into account not just the occurrence of assassination, but also the quantity of assassinations in a country–year, further supports this conclusion (ß $= .05^{***}$).

The data point out that most assassinations target members of parliament (20 percent, 195), opposition leaders (17 percent, 163; leaders who are not members of the executive or legislative branch) and heads of state (17 percent, 160); less frequent targets are ministers (14 percent, 131), diplomats (10 percent, 94), local politicians such as governors or mayors (7 percent, 71) and vice heads of state (3 percent, 28). It is also possible to identify correlations between the nature of the respective political system and type of assassination. For example, parliamentarians and vice heads of state are mostly assassinated in developing countries and polities with weak democratic practices, whereas assassinations of heads of state are distributed more equally.

Similarly, it seems that different types of political systems trigger different actors to engage in political assassinations. While in liberal democracies, close to three quarters of the perpetrators of political assassinations are sub-state groups (around 45 percent are clearly terrorist or insurgency groups and the rest are members of social movements), in the more closed regimes, state proxy involvement in assassinations is more visible. For example, state authorities or their proxies perpetrate more than 40 percent of assassinations in states with a negative POLITY score. Regardless of the exact perpetrator, the data confirm that political assassination is a collective action phenomenon. While "lone wolves," such as Lee Harvey Oswald, James Earl Ray, or Sirhan B. Sirhan, perpetrated some "famous" assassinations,

especially in the American context, these constitute a marginal segment of the political assassination's phenomenon (close to 9 percent).

In terms of the ideological orientation of the perpetrators, the data reveal that all ideological streams engage in political assassinations. Interestingly, however, separatist groups, such as Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) or Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), are responsible for almost one third of the assassinations. This supports the perception that many anticolonial groups in the past, as well as more contemporary "anti-occupation" organizations, invest efforts in targeting political leaders who symbolize the ongoing "occupation." Other ideological streams are distributed less equally over the years, which corresponds to terrorism's general historical trends. For example, assassinations by left-wing groups were common in the 1960s and 1970s in particular, while just about 6 percent of assassinations before 1970 were perpetrated by groups with a religious ideology. As expected, religious groups' involvement in assassinations has increased dramatically in the last 25 years with the proliferation of religious terrorism and the understanding of the leaders of these organizations of the potential utility of political assassinations.[33]

Last, from an operational perspective, firearms were used in 72 percent of assassinations; if we add to that the 15 percent of assassinations that were perpetrated using bombs (including car bombs), we find that the bomb and the gun were used in 87 percent of assassinations.[34] The rest of the attacks were perpetrated using "cold" weapons,[35] suicide bombers, and missiles. It seems that although perpetrators would probably prefer to use weapons that make it possible to minimize risk and maximize success (such as weapons with a high range; for instance, a sniper rifle), these weapons are also more expensive, both financially and in terms of the operational knowledge and experience required to use them. Hence, it is understandable that perpetrators often settle for cheaper weapons, which although less effective in terms of ensuring the death of a target (and demanding greater proximity to a target), still provide a reasonable chance for the perpetrators' survival.

Findings: Regression Analyses

In order to test the hypotheses, three sets of models were analyzed. The first two sets focus on a specific group of hypotheses (H1–H3 and H4–H6). The last set is comprised of catchall models that contain both elections and civil war–related variables. This multiphase analysis is an attempt to avoid loss of important nuance and insights because of the structure of the dataset. In other words, since elections and civil wars are fairly inconsistent phenomena (in some countries they never happen, while in others they can happen frequently), there is a significant variation in terms of the number of country–year observations included in the models. One of the ways to overcome this problem is to supplement the comprehensive models with more focused and parsimonious models, and conduct the analysis in separate stages, as explained above.

In order to test the hypotheses that are related to the association between electoral processes and political assassinations, a series of zero-inflated Poisson (ZIP) regression models were used (see Table 2). The ZIP model was chosen since it is designed to count for cases in which the dependent variable is count data and includes a large portion of zeroes (after all, most countries in most years did not experience an assassination), but not over dispersed (in these cases a zero-inflated negative binomial model is usually preferred). The models include variables that are directly related to the hypotheses. The two first variables indicate whether

Table 2. Zero-inflated Poisson regression: Elections and political assassinations (independent variable: number of political assassinations per country–year). Standard errors in parentheses.

	Model 1: All assassinations	Model 2: Heads of state	Model 3: Legislators	Model 4: Opposition leaders
Elections (year of election)	.546* (.236)	.090 (.560)	1.268[a] (.742)	.123 (.570)
Elections expected (previous year)	.327 (.232)	−.155 (.548)	1.110[a] (.647)	.162 (.569)
Elections that are lacking fairness	.582** (.190)	−.378 (.393)	2.200*** (.539)	.784[a] (.420)
Elections when incumbent expected to win	−.034 (.175)	.369 (.370)	−1.727** (.643)	.157 (.400)
POLITY score[b]	−.024 (.020)	−.030 (.232)	−.142** (.050)	.256 (.163)
Competitiveness of Executive Recruitment (XRCOMP)	.355** (.115)	−.229 (.388)	−.574 (.357)	.901** (.325)
Competitiveness of Political Participation (PARCOMP)	−.133 (.083)	−.015 (.339)	−.202 (.305)	.100 (.207)
Ethnic fractionalization	.832** (.271)	.841 (.542)	4.103* (1.657)	.354 (.552)
Political polarization	−.170 (.302)	−.494 (.612)	−4.149** (1.452)	1.290[a] (.7695)
Model summary	$Chi^2 = 36.87^{***}$ $n = 3{,}023$	$Chi^2 = 5.66$ $n = 3{,}023$	$Chi^2 = 161.64^{***}$ $n = 3{,}023$	$Chi^2 = 16.01^{*}$ $n = 3{,}023$

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$
[a]$p < .1$ [b]Inflated variable

elections were held in that country–year (*Elections*) or in the following year (*Elections expected*). The additional elections related variables indicate whether the elections were fair or not and if the incumbent was expected to win (integrated from the NELDA dataset). The next three variables (integrated from the POLITY IV dataset) help us to determine the political environment, its proximity to accepted democratic norms (*POLITY*), and the level of competition within the executive branch (*XRCOMP*) and in the political system in general (*PARCOMP*). The last two variables measure ethnic factionalism and political polarization (integrated from EPR3 dataset) (see full operationalization in the online appendix).

Table 2 includes four models. While model 1 predicts assassinations in general, models 2–4 predict specific types of assassinations (heads of state, legislators, and opposition leaders). As can be seen, all models except for the one predicting the assassinations of heads of state (Model 2) were significant. A review of the models also reflects that the occurrence of elections facilitates assassinations in general, and particularly of legislators. On the other hand, elections have no impact on the tendency to target heads of state, and a limited effect on the tendency to target opposition leaders.

More specifically, elections contribute to a rise in the tendency to conduct political assassinations in general, especially when the dominant perception is that the elections lack fairness and when there is a high level of ethnic fractionalization, hence supporting H1 (see Model 1). Somewhat surprisingly, the more competitive the recruitment to the executive branch is, the higher the chances for political assassinations in general. The reason for that seems to be explained in the fourth model, which reflects that opposition leaders seem to be more vulnerable when the executive branch is highly competitive, as well as when the political system is highly polarized (although the level of significance is marginal in the last variable). This finding uncovers an important logic. Opposition leaders are "worthy" of assassination only when they have the ability to gain political or executive power. Since this is usually the case just when the selection to the executive branch is indeed open and competitive, the regime will not bother to utilize the method of assassination when there is no open path for opposition leaders to be elected to the executive branch. Moreover, as expected, this dynamic is more likely when the political system is already highly polarized

and loss of executive power to political rivals may seem an unbearable cost (compatible with the tendency to see the situation as a zero sum game, as explained in the theoretical section).

Model 3 indicates that the most vulnerable political figures during election periods are legislators. As elections get closer, the tendency to assassinate legislators grows as well, especially in nonliberal democracies (as the negative significance of the POLITY variable indicate), and when elections lack fairness and take place in highly fragmented societies and polarized political systems. Moreover, the more competitive the elections, assassinations of legislators are more likely. It seems then that nonliberal regimes that face realistic chances of losing power via elections tend to respond by attempting to eliminate rival legislators. And as mentioned above, the factionalism and fragmentation intensify the perception that loss of political power is unacceptable, thus justify extreme and violent political measures.

To conclude, while the results provide significant support for H1 and H2, they lack support for H3. Yet, the fact that different variables are significant in each one of the models, provides support for the rationale to differentiate between different types of targets.

Table 3 presents four ZIP models that try to assess the role of civil wars in the facilitation of political assassinations (H4–H6). While Model 5 predicts assassinations in general, models 6–8 predict specific types of assassinations (heads of state, legislators, and opposition leaders). All the models except Model 8 (opposition leaders) were significant. More specifically, Model 6 confirms that civil wars in general increase the likelihood of political assassinations (H4); nonetheless, the effect is limited in comparison to other variables such as the nonliberal nature of the polity, limited competitiveness of the executive branch, and factionalism and polarization. This may indicate that the actual outbreak of a civil war is not the main factor that facilitates assassinations, but assassinations underline conditions that also facilitate civil wars. Simply put, assassinations are not necessarily the result of civil wars, but another product of the social and political conditions that enable or encourage internal violent clashes, such as limited competitions within the political system and strong political polarization and societal fragmentation.

When looking into specific types of assassinations, both H5 and H6 are partially confirmed. The models illustrate that the more lethal the civil war, the more it will produce assassinations of legislators but not of heads of state or opposition leaders (H5). And while

Table 3. Zero-inflated Poisson regression: Civil wars and political assassinations (independent variable: number of political assassinations per country–year). Standard errors in parentheses.

	Model 5: All assassinations	Model 6: Head of states	Model 7: Legislators	Model 8: Opposition leaders
Civil war	.396[a] (.222)	.470 (.453)	−1.890** (.585)	.491 (.446)
Accumulative intensity of the conflict	.058 (.252)	.099 (.510)	2.178** (.690)	−.342 (.538)
POLITY score[a]	−.039** (.014)	.004 (.038)	−.177*** (.035)	−.017 (.051)
Competitiveness of Executive Recruitment (XRCOMP)	.092 (.073)	−.455** (.174)	−1.285*** (.320)	.209 (.213)
Competitiveness of Political Participation (PARCOMP)	−.149* (.059)	.121 (.158)	−.291 (.275)	−.170 (.133)
Ethnic fractionalization	.568** (.183)	.507 (.382)	4.378*** (.813)	.441 (.360)
Political polarization	−.360** (.215)	−.525 (.462)	−2.410** (.889)	.222 (.454)
Model summary	$Chi^2 = 33.54$*** $n = 6812$	$Chi^2 = 15.37$* $n = 6812$	$Chi^2 = 98.14$*** $n = 6812$	$Chi^2 = 6.61$ $n = 6812$

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$
[a]$p < .1$

the expectation was that both legislators and opposition leaders will be more vulnerable during civil wars than heads of state, the models reflect that this is true just in the case of legislators (H6).

In the last stage of the analysis four catchall ZIP models were examined; each one contained both elections and civil war–related variables, as well as the other relevant variables based on the hypotheses presented above. The findings that are presented in Table 4 show that all models except model 10 (heads of state) were significant. Hence, heads of state represent a particular case of assassinations that seems difficult to explain by looking at the combination of both contextual (internal conflict, elections) and structural characteristics (such as level of political openness or polarization) of the polity.

A closer look at the models strengthens some findings of the above parsimonious models, as well as revealing additional important insights. It seems that the most important contextual facilitator of assassinations is elections (Models 9 and 11), especially when they lack fairness (significant in all three significant models), while civil war has a more limited impact on the likelihood of assassinations (Model 11 and marginally significant in Model 9). Surprisingly, there is no indication that the intensity of the conflict indeed increases the likelihood of assassinations, except in the case of legislators. In terms of structural variables, ethnic fractionalization and an open and competitive executive branch further facilitates assassinations, especially in the case of opposition leaders. This will be further discussed in the concluding section, but it is important to note that it seems that the combination of extreme internal ethnic rivalry and a political environment that is conducive to real and free competition over political power, can be a recipe for escalation and political assassinations. These findings further support a growing perception in the literature that under specific conditions, the fact that the political sphere is open for competition, rather than calm, intensify internal conflicts, especially ethnic ones.

Table 4. Zero-inflated Poisson regression: Civil wars, elections, and political assassinations (independent variable: number of political assassinations per country–year). Standard errors in parentheses.

	Model 9: All assassinations	Model 10: Head of states	Model 11: Legislators	Model 12: Opposition leaders
Elections (year of election)	.553* (.235)	.069 (.555)	1.833* (.784)	.139 (.569)
Elections expected (previous year)	.322 (.231)	−.178 (.543)	1.873** (.704)	.172 (.568)
Elections that are lacking fairness	.588** (.190)	−.343 (.368)	3.752*** (.759)	.755[a] (.423)
Elections when incumbent expected to win	−.017 (.175)	.389 (.359)	−1.153 (.775)	.170 (.400)
Civil war	.551[a] (.325)	−.504 (1.019)	4.224** (1.414)	.860 (.627)
Accumulative intensity of the conflict	−.496 (.385)	.192 (1.125)	3.330** (1.466)	−.781 (.785)
POLITY score[b]	−.026 (.020)	−.765 (.433)	−.141** (.046)	.253 (.163)
Competitiveness of Executive Recruitment (XRCOMP)	.336** (.116)	−.179 (.198)	−.259 (.434)	.879** (.313)
Competitiveness of Political Participation (PARCOMP)	−.119 (.084)	−.117 (.166)	.120 (.343)	.099 (.208)
Ethnic fractionalization	.792** (.274)	.796 (.531)	6.631** (1.940)	.286 (.554)
Political polarization	−.168 (.302)	−.505 (.611)	−6.423** (1.882)	1.340[a] (.701)
Model summary	$Chi^2 = 39.55^{***}$ $n = 3023$	$Chi^2 = 8.56$ $n = 3023$	$Chi^2 = 170.86^{***}$ $n = 3023$	$Chi^2 = 17.54^{a}$ $n = 3023$

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$
[a]$p < .1$ [b]Inflated variable

Model 11 is the strongest, further emphasizing that the most vulnerable political figures during civil wars and elections are actually legislators. As can be seen, both election periods and civil wars are strongly correlated with the assassinations of legislators. Moreover, when the elections lack fairness, the likelihood of a civil war increases, and there is growing ethnic fractionalization and polarization, the risk for legislators seems to rise as well. The ability to explain facilitators of assassination of opposition leaders is more limited, but we can cautiously say that an open and competitive executive branch, combined with a highly polarized society, raises the chances for an opposition leader to be targeted (see Model 12). As mentioned above, the combination of the real possibility that opposition leaders can gain executive power, with the strong animosity that exists in politically polarized systems (that facilitate the perspective of a zero sum game), can push ruling elites to resort to extreme measures to preserve their power, including political assassinations.

Additional Exploration of Assassinations of Legislators

Since the findings presented above provide indications that contextual processes or events are a threat in particular for legislators, it seems worthwhile to try and identify if there are additional risk factors that can facilitate assassinations against them.

To begin with, global events such as the Cold War seem to have limited impact on assassinations of legislators. For example, more than half of the legislators were assassinated after the end of the Cold War, and Cold War battleground states do not seem to suffer unproportionally from assassinations. In contrast, qualitative examination of the sub-sample of assassinations against legislators tends to support the findings of the regression analyses that violent internal conflicts elevate the risks for legislators. To illustrate, during the current struggle between the Afghan government and the Taliban and other militant groups, twelve legislators were assassinated (between 2007–14). More than thirty Iranian legislators were assassinated shortly after the new revolutionary regime was consolidating its control over the country in the early 1980s. Last, thirteen legislators were assassinated in Sri-Lanka during the armed conflict between the LTTE and the Sinhalese government between 1990 and 2009. These observations seem to reject the possibility that legislators are assassinated mainly because of local/regional conflicts, and further support the models' findings that national level events are more effective in explaining their assassination. This conclusion is further supported by the fact that assassinations that had some linkage to local animosity based on particular regional issues ("Hatfields and McCoys" style) where extremely rare (just four such cases where identified), that just eight assassinations against legislators were conducted by "Lone Wolves," and that no case of assassination was found to be justified by regional "economic" reasons.

Another characteristic of assassinations of legislators is their popularity mainly in developing countries, with low GDP (Wald = 565.228^{***}), and limited democratic tradition. To illustrate, just 13 legislators were assassinated in Western Europe and North America. These observations correspond with the models' findings, and may indicate that assassinations of legislators are also related to the growing pains of new democracies, or regimes in transition, which are still struggling to develop strong democratic practices. And since legislators are usually those at the "front lines" of the transition to democracy, they are the most vulnerable.

Discussion

The current study strived to provide further fidelity to our understanding of political assassinations, by expanding the empirical analysis to multiple targets, and looking into both structural and contextual factors that may facilitate the occurrence of political assassinations. The fact that the findings indicate that different sets of factors facilitate assassinations against different types of targets, and that indeed contextual factors play a role in the occurrence of assassinations, provide support to the rationale behind the present study.

The findings provide some important insights into the interaction between contextual and structural factors, and the way they may facilitate political assassinations. To begin with, the findings support existing literature that identifies the tendency of elections, especially in non-liberal settings and in polarized societies, to enhance political extremism and violence rather than to calm the political environment. Hence, while democratization can still be a positive development in terms of the promotion of human and civil rights, some aspects of it, especially the electoral process, should be structured and managed carefully in order to ensure that they can provide a nonviolent path for solving political disputes, rather than intensifying existing ones. Hence, more efforts must be made to ensure that elections do not serve as a breeding ground for de-legitimization of political rivals, and violent discourse. In this context the findings also indicate clearly that elections which lack fairness are especially risky. On the one hand, the electoral processes provide more visibility to the ideological disputes between political rivals, and on the other hand, the lack of fairness in the electoral process, undermines the ability of the elections to act as a mediating mechanism for solving these political disputes.

Civil wars have a more limited impact on the probability of assassinations, and their intensity and endurance mainly enhance the risk of assassination of legislators. How can the fact that elections are more strongly correlated with assassinations than civil wars be explained? One possibility is that assassinations are a tool usually utilized in the earlier stages of an escalation between rival political groups—a process that may be enhanced by holding elections (especially in polarized societies and young democracies)—rather than a tool that is utilized at later stages, when the escalation becomes an all-out violent conflict. In this sense, assassinations should be seen more as predictors of civil wars (and sometimes as instigators) rather than a product of them. A second possible explanation is related to a potential gap in the benefits that assassination can provide in these two distinct situations. Simply put, in the eyes of potential perpetrators, assassination during a civil war provides limited direct dividends, in comparison to assassination during election times. During civil war the fate of the political system is usually dependent on various factors, mostly related to the results of the violent conflicts between the rival sides; thus, assassination may have limited impact and can easily blend in with other acts of violence. In peace time, and especially during electoral processes, the removal of a specific political figure has high potential to reshape the political landscape. Last, it is possible that while during elections, political leaders are consistently more accessible to the public, during civil wars they tend to put more emphasis on their personal security, and hence more difficult to target.

Another important insight is that despite the strong emphasis in the literature on assassinations of heads of state, contextual processes are actually more of a threat to other types of political figures, namely legislators, and on some level also opposition leaders. This can be a reflection of several factors. First, from an operational perspective, these are the least

protected and isolated political figures. Second, it may be a reflection of the asymmetry between the regime and opposition groups. Usually the latter are led by figures from the legislature or leaders who are not affiliated to a specific state institution. In times when the incumbent regime feels threatened (i.e., civil wars or elections), it has significant resources to engage in acts of assassinations, while opposition forces naturally have lesser capabilities. Last, this may be an indication that, in contradiction to acceptable assessments, many assassinations are related to local political disputes. This specific issue probably deserves a separate study that will look into other possible local factors which may facilitate assassinations.

When looking into the role of structural factors, it is clear that some are consistently correlated with the probability of assassinations. As hypothesized in the theoretical section, ethnic factionalism increases the probability of assassinations. It seems that when political factions overlap ethnic factions, political disputes more rapidly can devolve into a zero sum game, in which targeting political rivals become a legitimate course of action.

To conclude, a somewhat counterintuitive finding is the positive correlation between the competitiveness of the executive branch and the probability of assassination, especially of opposition leaders, as countries with limited competition in the executive branch are less prone to political assassinations. This may suggest that the threat perception of incumbent regimes is directly related to the level of openness of the internal mechanisms that are responsible for nominations within an executive branch. The more accessible the executive branch is, the more incentives regimes will have to find alternative ways to block opposition groups' political influence, including the utilization of assassinations.

As hinted above, the current research has also highlighted some important venues for future studies of political assassinations. The role of local political dynamics in the facilitation of political assassinations has not yet been examined and may uncover further possible explanations for some of the findings mentioned above. It is also important to indicate that more work needs to be done regarding the association between leadership style and the chances of being assassinated as well as how involvement in external wars, or the implementation of specific types of policies may impact the probability of a leader to be targeted. Finally, it seems useful to further study how other types of political violence may be correlated with the phenomenon of political assassinations.

Notes

1. This quote is traditionally attributed to Voltaire, however it is important to note that it does not seem to appear officially in any of his writings.
2. See Atilla Shumfalbi, "Bill Clinton: If Rabin Would Have Not Been Assassinated There Would Be Peace Today," YNET news website, 14 September 2009. Available at http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3805013,00.html (Hebrew) (accessed 9 August 2016).
3. For example, Yigal Amir, who assassinated the Israeli prime minister, Itzhak Rabin, revealed at his investigation following the assassination that he believed that killing Rabin was the most effective way to stop implementation of the Oslo accords between Israel and the Palestinians; see A. Pedahzur and A. Perliger, *Jewish Terrorism in Israel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 98–110.
4. See for example the series of assassination attempts against Aleksander Ankva between 2005 and 2010 when he served as the prime minster (basically the second in power) of Abkhazia under the administration of President Sergei Bagapsh. Ankvab was the official responsible for the implementation of significant economic and legal reforms that were supposed to curb the influence of organized crime in the country and reduce the level of corruption in the public administration;

hence, he was target by groups that were supposed to be negatively impacted by these reforms. See "Bagapsh: 'Criminals' Behind PM Assassination Attempt," *Civil Georgia*, 1 March 2005. Available at http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=9213-accessdate=4 (accessed 9 August 2016); "Abkhaz MPs Call Government to Investigate Attack on Ankvab," *Regnum*, 11 July 2007. Available at www.regnum.ru/english/polit/854515.html (accessed 9 August 2016).

5. See, for example, the collapse of the peace process between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization after the assassination of Rabin, or the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981, after which Islamic Jihad in Egypt thought that the assassination would spark a popular rebellion that would then lead to the overthrow of the entire Egyptian regime.
6. See, for example, the Stern Gang assassinations in Palestine, as well as ETA's assassination of Miguel Ángel Blanco Garrido in 1997. In both cases, loss of support and dwindling resources led the organizations to experiment with assassinations.
7. David Rapoport, *Assassinations and Terrorism* (Toronto: Canadian Publication Corporation, 1971), pp. 37–38.
8. Even assassinations that some consider to be revenge attacks (such as Israel's assassinations of Abbas Musawi, the Hezbollah leader, and Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the Hamas leader) are included in this definition, since they are parts of ongoing political conflicts and were aimed to affect the political capabilities of a political actor.
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11. Clarke, *American Assassins*.
12. Leonard Berkowitz and Jacqueline Macaulay, "The Contagion of Criminal Violence," *Sociometry* 34(2) (1971), pp. 238–260.
13. Karen Orren and Paul Peterson, "Presidential Assassination: A Case in the Dynamics of Political Socialization," *Journal of Politics* 29(2) (1967), pp. 388–404.
14. Ephraim Yuchtman-Yaar and Hermann Tamar, "The Latitude of Acceptance: Israeli Attitudes toward Political Protest Before and After the Assassination of Yitzhak Rabin," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42(6) (1998), pp. 721–743.
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20. Erica Chenoweth, "Democratic Competition and Terrorist Activity," *Journal of Politics* 72(1) (2010), pp. 16–30.

21. Erica Chenoweth, "Terrorism and Democracy," *Annual Review of Political Science* 16 (2013), pp. 355–378; E. Thomas Flores and Irfan Nooruddin, "The Effect of Elections on Postconflict Peace and Reconstruction," *Journal of Politics* 74(2) (2012), pp. 558–570.
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26. See, for example, http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/subjects/a/assassinations_and_attempted_assassinations/index.html (accessed 9 August 2016).
27. For example, the GTD dataset available at http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/ and the ICSPSR Data Bank of Assassinations, 1948–1967 available at http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/icpsrweb/RCMD/studies/5208 (accessed 9 August 2016).
28. For more details on the POLITY IV project see http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm (accessed 9 August 2016).
29. For more details on the Armed Conflict Dataset see http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/datasets/ucdp_prio_armed_conflict_dataset/ (accessed 9 August 2016).
30. For more details on the National Elections Across Democracy and Autocracy (NELDA) Dataset see http://hyde.research.yale.edu/nelda/ (accessed 9 August 2016).
31. For more information on the Ethnic Power Relations (3) dataset, see http://www.epr.ucla.edu/ (accessed 9 August 2016).
32. Hence, a combination of a specific year and country is considered a single observation. For example, if zero assassinations occurred in the United States during the year 1990, the case or observation designated as USA-1990 will be coded 0 under the variable no. of assassinations.
33. While the data in this regard are not complete, around three-quarters of Muslim assassins are Sunni and the rest Shi'i.
34. It should be noted that decisions regarding the choice of weapon and tactic may also be influenced by organizational resources. Although this analysis of weapons' costs takes that factor into consideration on some level, it should also be noted that since most of the weapons that are used for assassinations are not overly sophisticated or costly, this factor seems to have a limited impact.
35. Such as knifes, stones, and so on.