

Disaster aid helps fund rise of 'storm autocrats' in island nations

New global research shows serious storm events lead to the deterioration of democracy in small island nations as political agents seize window of opportunity.

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EINPresswire.com/ -- Island nations are more vulnerable to acts of government oppression in the wake of major storms, with foreign disaster aid playing a concerning role in financing what researchers have dubbed 'storm autocracies'.

New internationally collaborative research, [published in the Journal of Development Economics](#), shows serious storm events – such as cyclones, typhoons, and hurricanes – lead to the deterioration of democracy in island nations as political agents seize a window of opportunity that is a breeding ground for autocracy.

Professor Mehmet Ulubasoglu, Director of Deakin University's Centre for Disaster Resilience and Recovery, said after a storm international aid increased, political rights were restricted and government checks and balances were reduced.

"By giving financial and material support to people in times of hardship the government effectively buys a social license to oppress them," Professor Ulubasoglu said.

"In this way international disaster aid is essentially used as a funding mechanism to oppress citizens, helping to extend the grip of what we call 'storm autocrats'."



Professor Mehmet Ulubasoglu

The logo for Deakin University, featuring a circular emblem with a stylized 'D' and the text 'DEAKIN UNIVERSITY' to its right.

Professor Ulubasoglu worked with research colleagues Professor Nejat Anbarci and Dr Muhammed Habibur Rahman, from Durham University and Curtin University, to analyse data between 1950 and 2020, finding strong links between the timing and frequency of storms affecting island nations and acts of government oppression.

They used data from the Polity Score, an international political analysis tool that places governing authorities on a scale from full autocracy to consolidated democracy.

They found on average an island nation's Polity Score dropped by about 4.25 per cent in the year following a significant storm event and continued to reduce over the next six-to seven-year period.

The same effect was not found in landlocked or coastal countries.

“Island countries are more fully exposed to the damage of serious storm events, and this danger will only increase with the changing climate as damaging weather events become more frequent and intense,” Professor Ulubasoglu said.

“Such developments increasingly empower storm autocrats because they can declare emergencies in disaster-hit zones to provide instant relief and support, only to turn into dictators later—a phenomenon of which Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic is an early example.

“Also, the military are often deployed in post-disaster situations to accelerate the emergency response and recovery activities. Storm autocrats then seem to elevate this ‘disaster militarism’ to the level of political repression.”

Islands states in Latin America and the Caribbean such as Haiti, Cuba and the Dominican Republic have fallen into autocratic forms of government following major storm events, and this is also being replicated in the Asia Pacific region, with the Philippines and Fiji and to a smaller extent, the Solomon Islands.

Dr Rahman said the research showed this negative democratic effect aligned with the delivery of disaster aid, but not with other official development assistance to these countries.

“General development funding does not cause oppression; it actually has a positive effect on democracy,” he said.

“That’s because this type of funding is often tied to countries making commitments to strengthening their democratic processes. But disaster aid has no such restrictions. The recipient government can use the money with much more flexibility.

“As natural disasters make the typical citizen feel economically and politically more vulnerable,

politicians can take steps towards autocracy by buying off their citizens through populist economic and political means.”

Professor Anbarci said the team’s research showed disaster aid should be reconsidered in a wider context.

“Many of these countries are still at the start of their journey as nations, places like Fiji, the Philippines and Papua New Guinea only got their independence relatively recently,” he said.

“The international community must influence and support these countries to come up with solid constitutions. Once democratic rights and responsibilities are entrenched in a country’s constitution, natural disasters are less likely to result in autocracy.”

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