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Not My Fault: Natural disasters and political consequences

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An aerial view of Islahiye in south-central Turkey shows damage after the 7.8 and 7.7 magnitude earthquakes. Many of the collapsed structures had been built in the past 20 years. (Photo Voice of America)

There are many reasons natural disasters are of interest. Personal safety requires being aware of the hazards where you live, work, or travel to. Disasters can have more profound impacts than shaking, burning, or flooding your home and community. In some cases, they have changed the course of history.

Climate changes have had the most profound impacts. Prolonged droughts led to the fall of the Pharaohs in Egypt and Bronze Age civilizations 3200 years ago and Mesoamerican Mayan civilizations about 1200 years ago. But geohazards have left their mark as well. The volcanic unrest of Santorini, associated earthquakes, tsunami, and cataclysmic eruptions contributed to the downfall of the Minoan civilization in the Mediterranean roughly 3600 years ago.

Even in the modern world the indirect tentacles of disasters can have wide-spread economic and political consequences. The 1994 Kobe, Japan earthquake in 1994 affected the global economy through trade disruption and the failure of banks and the 2011 Japan tsunami caused a shortage of critical parts for global manufacturing. Every Californian paid extra taxes after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake to pay for the recovery.

How a government is perceived to have prepared for or respond to a disaster can have unexpected consequences as well. The Nicaraguan President Anastasio Somoza Debayle was in power in 1972 when a magnitude 6.3 earthquake struck beneath the capital city of Managua. Nearly 10,000 people died and 300,000 were left homeless. The Somoza government received millions of dollars in aid from the United States and other countries, but graft was rampant. Somoza owned the country's cement plant, and 'Somoza Cement' became the catchword for Somoza's pocketing of funds and profiting from reconstruction.

The poor response and corruption exposés consolidated Nicaraguan opposition groups leading to civil war that ultimately toppled Somoza in 1979. Civil unrest delayed reconstruction of Managua for nearly two decades. When the Sandinistas emerged victorious, it set the stage for the Sandinista – Contra conflict that embroiled the U.S. in the Reagan era.

The 1972 Managua earthquake is still producing political aftershocks today. Economic hardship and chilly relations with much of the world in the Sandinista era have spurred record high emigration. Unauthorized Nicaraguan migrants at the U.S. border increased 52-fold in 2022 over 2020, putting them in the sixth place for country of origin in the current U.S. migrant crisis.

Disasters can elevate as well as topple regimes. Argentina experienced its worst earthquake in the summer of 1944. The January 15 magnitude 6.9 earthquake was centered close to the city of San Juan near the Chile border. The Peru-Chile trench parallels the west coast of South America and Chile bears the brunt of the continent's seismic activity. But the tectonics affect neighboring Argentina as well.

Most large earthquakes in Argentina are deep, several hundred miles below the surface near the bottom of the Peru-Chile subduction zone. The great depth mutes shaking at the surface. But the 1944 earthquake was shallow and only 4 miles away from the city of San Juan, with more than 100,000 residents at the time. The earthquake killed ten percent of the population, destroyed 90% of the buildings, and is acknowledged as Argentina's deadliest natural disaster.

At the time Colonel Juan Perón held the relatively insignificant post of Labor Department head under the military dictatorship of General Rawson. A populist, Perón pushed through a series of progressive social reforms and gained support from Argentine labor unions before the quake. Afterwards, Perón grabbed the spotlight by mobilizing earthquake relief efforts and international fundraising. The earthquake provided him the platform to expand his influence and eventually propel him to head of state. It was during an earthquake fundraiser that Perón met Eva Duarte who would later become his wife. If you have seen the musical *Evita*, you have also been touched by the 1944 earthquake.

General elections were held last week in Turkey. The elections pitted incumbent president Recep Erdoğan against Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and two other minor party candidates. Prior to the February 6 M7.8 and M7.7 earthquakes of this year, there was little thought that opposition parties could mount a significant threat to Erdoğan's tenure. But, like past tremors, the earthquakes shook not only buildings but the power structure.

The two earthquakes struck South Central Turkey and Northern Syria, killing nearly 60,000 people, and costing almost 120 billion (US dollars) in losses. As the dust settled, two problems dogged Erdoğan. The first was the perceived slow pace of relief efforts. All great disasters

overwhelm the capacity of local and regional governments to respond. Conditions were exacerbated by the scale of the event - the double quakes expanding the area of very strong ground shaking, the frigid winter weather, and the refugee crisis due to the Syrian civil war.

Three problems stand out in the government response: inadequacy of planning, coordination of response, and politicizing the disaster. Turkey is no stranger to earthquakes and had instituted a number of response/resilience programs after the 1999 Izmit, Turkey earthquake. Response officials had recently planned for and practiced response to a M7.5 earthquake in the region. But the damages in 2023 were far more massive and the Turkish military, the only organization with the capacity to respond to an event of this scale, had not been included in any of the plans and exercises.

The second problem for Erdoğan was the damage itself. The President had encouraged rapid development in the region, using construction to drive economic growth over the past two decades. But many of these newer, supposedly earthquake proof structures collapsed in the earthquake while a number of older buildings were relatively untouched. The finger has been pointed to shoddy construction practices, poor oversight, and corruption.

Last week's election ended up in a virtual tie with both Erdoğan and Kılıçdaroğlu receiving less than 50% of the vote, forcing a runoff in a week. Erdoğan's performance was stronger than many had predicted even in the hardest hit earthquake areas. The earthquake has changed the landscape in Turkey but it remains to be seen if the 2023 earthquakes will end up in the regime change column (New York Times <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/18/opinion/turkey-election-erdogan.html>).

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