

Definitions of Political Violence, Agents and Event Types

Data collection and event decision rules for ACLED are designed to capture the range, occurrence and intensity of politically violent events occurring within developing states. Coding rules and event decisions reflect the activities of different conflict types, violent actors, and goals. Below is a summary of the definitions used to determine event codes in ACLED; a longer discussion of these decisions can be found in the ACLED codebook, the several short guides catering to various ACLED users, or the on-going working paper series which discusses issues in event coding, including sources, dataset maintenance and oversight, and unidentified armed agents.

What is a 'politically violent event'?

Political violence is the use of force by a group with a political purpose or motivation. ACLED defines political violence through its constituent events, the intent of which is to produce a comprehensive overview of all forms of political conflict within and across states. A politically violent event is a single altercation where often force is used by one or more groups to a political end, although some instances - including protests and non-violent activity - are included in the dataset to capture the potential pre-cursors or critical junctures of a conflict.

ACLED uses an 'atomic' coding framework. This means that it records the 'who' (actors), 'what' (event type), 'where' (location and coordinates) and 'when' (individual day(s)) information for activities between designated actors – e.g. Boko Haram in a battle with Military Forces of Nigeria on January 15th, 2015 in Baga, North-eastern Nigeria.

Every event is coded using the same rules on who, what, where, and when, with the same rules to maximize comparability and valid, thorough information. Additional information, including event ID numbers, precision scores for location and time, notes to give the context of the event, fatality numbers if reported, codes to distinguish between the types of actors, and additional spatial information are also provided in each row of information.

ACLED does not categorize clusters or campaigns of events, largely because political violence and conflict are aggregations of multiple actors, attacks, goals, etc. To classify events as discrete acts in an 'insurgency' or 'terrorism', 'civil war' or 'livelihood conflict' is often a reductive choice, leaving out the complex ways in which conflict creates multiple scales of violence and intended outcomes within a territory. ACLED allows users to select on the type of event, type of actor, type of interaction, named actors, location or time period.

What forms of violence fall into this category?

ACLED collects information on nine distinct events that, together, capture the activity that occurs within political violence. These include three types of battles, violence against civilians, remote violence, rioting (violent demonstrations) and protesting (non-violent demonstrations), and three types of non-violent events. Battle type are distinguished by whether control of a location is unchanged as a consequence of the event; whether a non-state group has assumed control of a location; or whether a government has resumed control of that location. Battles make up approximately one third of the dataset. Violence against civilians comprise another third of the collected data; non-violent headquarter and base establishment is under 1%; non-violent activity including recording incidences of looting, peace talks, high profile arrests, recruitment into non-state groups etc. account for 6%; non-violent takeover of territory is also under 1%, riots assume 7.5% and protests 14%.

What types of actors engage in these events? And what are interaction terms?

ACLED recognizes a range of actors including governments, rebels, militias, ethnic groups, active political organizations, and civilians. In ACLED, politically violent actors include rebels, militias, and organized political groups who interact over issues of political authority (i.e. territorial control, government control, access to resources, etc.).

ACLED uses the given, proper name of violent and non-violent actors when reported by sources. However, in order to classify the types of conflict actors, ACLED employs 'interaction codes'. These codes, both for individual actors and joint actions, categorize events by which type of actors are engaged.

Each group is associated with a code that classifies the type of group it is. For example, all state forces- who are named by their respective regime and country in the dataset- are classified as a '1' as their individual interaction code column. All rebel groups are classified under an individual interaction code '2'. In most cases, two or more actors are involved in an event (i.e. a battle between a rebel and government). In some cases, one group is engaged in an event (e.g. a riot or protest). In either dyadic or singular cases, an interaction code will summarize the altercation using the joined individual actor codes; as in the case between government and rebel forces, a joint interaction of '12' is noted. The codebook contains all the dyadic interaction codes and their exact interaction type. This allows for users to quickly filter data to find the exact type of activity they are interested in.

State forces

Governments are defined as internationally recognized regimes in assumed control of a state. Government actors are defined as a series of separate regimes rather than a uniform body (e.g. Congo/Zaire (1965-1997), Democratic Republic of Congo (1997-2001), and Democratic Republic of Congo (2001-) as opposed to Congo/Zaire (1962-present)). As the strength, capacity and policies of governments can vary widely from one regime to

the next, ACLED designates governments by their leading regimes. This enables researchers to capture the differences in government involvement and reaction to violence. As militaries are a direct arm of the government, these actors are noted as “Military Forces of State, 20xx-20xx”. Mutinies of militaries are coded as “Mutiny of Military Forces of State, 20xx-20xx”. The individual interaction code for state forces is ‘1’.

Rebel groups

Rebel groups are defined as political organizations whose goal is to counter, replace or separate from an established national governing regime through violent acts. Rebel groups have a stated political agenda for national power (either through regime replacement or separatism), are acknowledged beyond the ranks of immediate members, and use violence as their primary means to pursue political goals. Rebel groups often have predecessors and successors due to diverging goals within their membership. ACLED tracks these evolutions by coding the new names of groups and noting its status relative to former groups. The individual interaction code for rebel forces is ‘2’.

Political militias

Political militias are a more diverse set of violent actors, who are often created for a specific purpose or during a specific time period (i.e. Janjaweed) and for the furtherance of a political purpose by violence. These organizations are not seeking the removal of a national power, but are typically supported, armed by, or allied with a political elite and act towards a goal defined by these elites or larger political movements. Militias operate in conjunction, or in alliance, with a recognized government, governor, military leader, rebel organization or opposition group. Whereas opposition parties will often have a militia arm, groups such as the Sudanese Janjaweed or Serbian Tigers work as supplements to government power. These groups are not subsumed within the category of government or opposition, but are noted as an armed, distinct, yet associated, wing. Militias are recorded by their stated name. The individual interaction code for political militias is ‘3’.

Communal Militias

ACLED includes a broad category of “identity militias” where armed and violent groups organize around a collective, common feature including community, ethnicity, region, religion or, in exceptional cases, livelihood. An armed group claiming to operate on behalf of a larger identity community may be associated with that community, but not represent it (i.e. Luo Ethnic Militia in Kenya). Identity militias may have a noted role in the community, such as the long-term policing units common among Somali clans. Events involving ‘identity militias’ are referred to as ‘communal violence’ as these

violent groups often act locally, in the pursuance of local goals, resources, power, and retribution. ACLED coders distinguish between active identity militias involved in communal violence, identity militias involved in an act with another violent group type, or these groups attacking civilians of a distinct identity (e.g. Pokot Ethnic Group in Kenya). The individual interaction code for communal militias is ‘4’.

Demonstrators

Rioters and protesters involve spontaneous demonstrations that may, or may not, continue beyond a discrete event. Demonstrations can be against government institutions, businesses or other private institutions. A protest describes a non-violent, group public demonstration, often against a government institution. Rioting is a violent form of demonstration.

Rioters

Rioters are individuals who participate in either violent demonstrations or spontaneous acts of disorganised violence. The individuals who engage in violent demonstrations or spontaneous acts of disorganised violence are noted by a general category of Rioters (Country), and if a group is affiliated or leading an event (e.g. ZANU-PF political party), the associated group is named in the ally category. Rioters are by definition violent, and may engage in a wide variety of violence, including in the form of property destruction, engaging with other armed groups (security forces, private security firms, etc.) or in violence against unarmed individuals.

Protesters

Protesters are individuals who participate in non-violent demonstrations. The individuals who engage in demonstrations are noted by a general category of Protesters (Country), and if a group is affiliated or leading an event (e.g. MDC political party), the associated group is named in the ally category. Although protesters are by definition non-violent themselves, they may be the targets of violence by other groups (security institutions; private security firms; or other armed actors).

External Forces

Small categories of ‘other’ actors include hired mercenaries, private security firms and their employees, UN or external forces. Military forces that are operating outside of their home country fall under this category. They are noted by their name and actions.

A note on civilians

Civilians, in whatever number or association, are victims of violent acts within ACLED. They are noted as “Civilians (Country X)”. If necessary, ACLED uses a label for groups of unarmed and non-violent civilians from reports. These are instances where, for

example, political party supporters, labour unions, students, journalists, ethno-regional or religious communities etc. have peacefully organized, or are being targeted. In situations where violence against civilians is directed at a particular group (such as journalists, members of a women's group, Muslims or Christians etc.), or in cases where a particular group has organized a peaceful demonstration, the identity of the group will be provided in the 'Ally Actor' column, to convey the specific association with the demonstration or attack.

Why is there an 'unidentified' actor category?

In some cases, an 'unidentified armed group' perpetrates political violence. There are several reasons why a group action may be perpetrated by an 'unidentified' organization. These include: lack of information or attribution; unclear attribution; or strategic reasons to avoid responsibility. These groups largely function like political militias. Please see the working paper on these organizations.