Short-term Behavior Effects of Rebel Groups in Weak States: The Setting and the Model

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ABSTRACT
The object of this working paper is to present a new explanation for the behavior of rebel groups in relation to host communities. This study, which represents the main argument and ideas of my forthcoming dissertation, accounts for the change in rebel group behavior, from coercive to contractarian and vice versa. Specifically, this paper explains why current explanations and scholarly literatures are insufficient in their accounting for transformations in rebel group tactics vis-à-vis local populations. I employ a microeconomic approach to the analysis of these groups’ behavior. The model presented herein has implications for the study of contemporary conflicts and provides insight into new forms of state-building. As such, the focus of this project is on rebel groups in weak states, actors that I argue are modern-day state builders. In capsule, my explanation is that rebel group behavior is directly related to the level of dominance the group has over local populations.

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At its inception during the early 1980s, the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA) committed massive human rights abuses against communities on whose behalf it claimed to fight. This included looting, kidnapping children, coercing civilians, summary executions, and the creation of famine conditions in southern Sudan. Yet in 1994, the group significantly transformed its strategy toward noncombatants. It separated its military from its civil administration and established structures of governance, including a legislature, an executive, and a judiciary.

In direct contrast to the SPLA, the FARC had its roots in peasant self-defense organizations, supporting – among other issues – better working conditions for agricultural workers in the Tolima region. On this basis it enjoyed a measure of local support. However, the late 1980s saw the FARC quickly evolve into a more violent and locally coercive guerrilla organization with resources stemming from narco-traffickers and extortion (Safford 2002).

Each transformation in behavior described here occurred within similar international circumstances, in this case the end of the Cold War and rising international pressures on insurgents to respect basic human rights. These groups also appear to shift political strategies against their rational interests in maximizing resources and support. The FARC, for example, could have become involved in drug trafficking much earlier than it did. Moreover, it is baffling as to why insurgencies such as the SPLA do not engage in this kind of kidnapping, for example, as other groups have. Moreover, the FARC turned its back on a viable political strategy that had built up a reservoir of legitimacy through past interactions.

Why did the SPLA transform its coercive recruitment and mobilization tactics to what it labeled a “democratic” approach? During roughly the same time period, why did the FARC abandon its focus on building its legitimacy among its targeted constituents and opt instead for an increasingly predatory strategy? What mechanism for change is most critical in examining rebel group behavior in relation to local communities? Parties that fight a governing regime using both political and violent means to achieve their objectives respond to and are influenced as much by the relations with local populations as they are by the international and national environments. This study maintains that the strategies insurgent groups engage in with relation to local populations reveal a great deal about their strength, longevity, and most importantly their tendency to engage in coercive or contractarian behavior and the transformation from one to the other. This study reveals that, in the end, it is the degree of dominance rebel groups have over local communities that determines the level of violent or coercive behavior.

Insurgent Groups

In recent years, policymakers have identified insurgents as major obstacles to the resolution of wars and the mitigation of violence. Insurgent groups use violence in purposeful ways, it being one of their primary political resources to reformulate or destroy the legitimate foundation of politics in an existing state (O’Neill 1990). Thus it is virtually axiomatic that war is

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1 While much of the civilian devastation that occurred during the SPLA’s early years were the effects of battles between the rebel group and the Government of Sudan (GoS), many observers maintain that struggles against rival factions within the insurgent organization claimed more civilian lives (Human Rights Watch 1994)
a popular form of policy among these non-state organizations. In classic Clausewitzian terms, war is a continuance of policy by other means.

Insurgents and those among whom they operate hold diverse ideas about the violence these groups employ. Insurgents are often referred to as “rebels,” “guerrillas,” “bandits,” “separatists,” and “terrorists,” depending upon the observer’s political viewpoint about the conflicts involving these actors as well as the evolving context of warfare and battle. During the 1950s, Africans fighting against colonial occupiers were referred to as “terrorists” while most Africans considered them to be “nationalists.” Forces in eastern Nigeria during the 1960s were labeled “ethnic separatists,” while the Biafrans referred to their movement as one of “self-determination.” The ruling Portuguese faced what they referred to as “communist insurgents” during the 1970s in Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, Angola and Mozambique, while those who wanted an end to colonial rule called these groups “freedom fighters” (Reno forthcoming).

These varying perceptions of insurgents can leave the observer somewhat confused. What are the ideological and programmatic parameters of insurgent action and what determines how insurgents choose these? Some would argue that insurgents have little choice in respect to the strategies they choose, especially after rival superpower backing ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. This argument is based upon the actions of Cold War era superpowers, which sought to cultivate insurgents as proxies in the struggle for global political and economic influence. In return for military supplies and diplomatic support, insurgents had to take on the ideological trappings of their backers (David 1991). More recently, Kaldor (1999) and others identify what they view as an absence of mobilization around ideological platforms. Scholars identify “new wars” in which insurgents merge with organized crime networks and use coercion or destabilizing tactics in local communities to build criminalized economies that they control (Kaldor 1999).

As opposed to most wars fought before 1945, new wars are not between states, rather they are intrastate conflicts. Between the end of the Second World War and 1995, 77 of the 164 conflicts were internal. That is, armed conflict was not against another state but was fought against the governing authorities or between various armed communities within the state (Holsti 1996). Wars have transformed from being institutionalized – the Clausewitzian eighteenth- and nineteenth-century concept of conflict – to battles that have no fronts, no uniforms and no respect for the territorial limits of the state (Van Creveld 1991). As a result, violence in these “new wars” is targeted largely at civilians instead of rival groups. Vulnerable groups such as women, children and refugees are often the primary targets as insurgents use rape and kidnapping as weapons of war (Allen 1999). Such wars have been noted for their seeming break with an ideological past as well. Holsti claims that what were once considered ideological wars – conflicts fought for universal principles such as socialism or democracy – merely masked social cleavages and other grievances held by communities within states (Holsti 1996).

Post-Ideological Rebels?

Some scholars explain this supposed non-ideological tendency among insurgents in terms of local social structures such as the rise of an urban “lumpen proletariat” that has little in common with the rural peasantry and uses violence as the only way to control them (Mkandawire 2002). For example, politicians in Sierra Leone were culpable in much of the violent behavior of “lumpenised youth” after recruiting thugs and criminals into national security apparatuses, detaching these new “experts in violence” from the social groups in whose name insurgents previously fought (Kandeh 1999). For these scholars, “new wars” are non-ideological because they draw in the rural poor in ways that are much more difficult to mobilize and control.
with programmatic platforms. Snow claims that these “new wars” are absent of a discernible political ideology altogether – something with which the group can justify its activities (Snow 1996). While individual fighters are not bereft of ideas, they either have the wrong ones or they cannot coordinate among themselves. The problem then is one of poor leadership and faulty coordination.

Since the 1980s, there has been a great deal of attention directed at the impact of natural resources on insurgents and the wider conduct and organization of conflict within states. Paul Collier, for example, famously identified insurgent warfare as similar to organized crime (Collier 2000). He and others link the scramble for natural resources to a perceived tendency for insurgents to abuse local community members in favor of exploiting opportunities in the global economy (Keen 1998; Ross 2004; Weinstein 2003). These scholars view the rational choices of insurgents in the context of individual incentives and the availability of easily lootable resources. In this context, insurgents fight largely for personal enrichment obtained through loot they may seize in conflict (Collier and Hoeffler 2001). Material incentives are used to recruit participants in conflict and high levels of civilian abuse are exhibited (Humphreys and Weinstein 2004).

Much of this literature, however, ignores the wider political context of this behavior. While a few scholars such as Collier point to the presence of weak state institutions as contributing to the rise of predatory non-ideological insurgents, in general this particular aspect of the conflict literature discounts the ideological capacity of individual fighters. These two categories see a decline in ideological motivations and expression among insurgents, yet they differ on where they perceive the deficit. For the former, it is the problem of the society and leadership. For the latter, individual fighters do not seem to be capable of articulating ideologies. In fact, this latter perception is rather static. Where, other than outside tutelage and resources, would ideological rebels come from? If everyone is motivated by loot, there should not be any ideology (except getting rich as quickly as possible) anywhere. This fails to explain past phenomena such as insurgents who persisted in ideological mobilization even during the Cold War against incentives that would-be superpowers provided. The Eritrean People’s Liberation Front, for example, was a Marxist insurgency, despite the fact that the Soviet Union aided their ally from 1977 to the USSR’s reevaluation of foreign policy in the late 1980s.

Despite the end of the Cold War, the subsequent termination of support for proxy conflicts, and the so-called end of international ideological battles, several insurgent organizations continue to follow – at least in name – the leftist ideas of this era. The FARC, for example, continues to refer to itself as a “Marxist organization.” Likewise, the Nepalese rebels carry the label “Maoist insurgents,” as do other rebel movement in Southeast Asia. Despite their portrayal as small bands of roving bandits, these groups can consist of large numbers of soldiers, both male and female. This demonstrates that there exists a consistent ideological motivation among insurgent organizations. Yet, like these actors, the ideological motivations are diverse. New war rebels and less coercive groups can exist in poor countries in the same historical period. The Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) claims to represent the poor and dispossessed of this region. Not only did this group have the popular support of much of the indigenous in Chiapas and surrounding regions, it also attracted transnational NGO support for the rebels’ defense of indigenous rights, human rights and social justice (Bob 2005). At the same time, the FARC’s image as a group inflicting terror on locals and participating in narco-trafficking increased during the 1990s. In fact, one can find different kinds of rebels in the same general period of time and the in same region. Rwandan exiles fought in a hierarchical and cohesive Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) up until their victory in 1994. Those they chased out of
Rwanda by 1997 were being studied as “new war” insurgents without ideology. All of these individuals were Rwandan (or at least from that region) and all were post-Cold War insurgents. The point here is that rebels possess agency – they strategize and make choices. This project investigates these choices and the resulting behavior among insurgents that they foster.

Other rebel groups have organized quasi-states (Spears 2004) or states-within-states in areas under their control. It is in such “liberated zones” in this post-Cold War era that insurgent groups such as the SPLA established state-like institutions such as governing councils, courts, tax bureaus and diplomatic offices for foreign travelers. These larger and somewhat more rooted groups are quite distinct from the smaller, more predatory groups of soldiers in countries such as Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Central African Republic. Bands that crossed from Côte d’Ivoire in 1989 joined Sierra Leone’s Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and became “warlords” (Reno 1998, forthcoming). In response to this, many individuals developed “civil defense forces.” Yet what most of these organizations have in common is a state-building objective and because of this they use violence to transform or destroy the politics of a central governing authority. While these insurgents’ specific goals are distinct, they share in a broad desire to change the current system of politics. They are state-builders.

Insurgent ideologies as such are reflective of their relations with local communities. For some, ideology is an optimal way to mobilize and organize people and resources. Insurgents operate in this social context of control over these factors. Historically, state-building projects have often employed ideology as a political tool. Nationalism – collective action which renders boundaries of the nation in sync with those of its governing entity (Hechter 2000) – can is just such an ideological device used to guide individuals to the perspective that they share a common history, a shared culture, and a common homeland (Hechter 2000). Groups such as the Irish Fenians used patriotism for native Ireland to develop the Fenian Movement in both Ireland and the United States. Hungarian and Greek nationalists also used this device during the 19th century to foster state-building. Hence, it is logical that contemporary insurgents will also use ideology to further their state-building objective.

Insurgent Groups as Contemporary State-Builders

The prospect that at least some insurgents are contemporary state-builders provides a springboard into analyzing and explaining their behavior toward noncombatants. Just as the study of contemporary insurgents involves the analysis of the relations between them and local societies, historical state-building also examines the interplay of violent groups and local populations. The literature on past efforts among insurgents to build states (thus “freedom fighters” or “nationalist saviors” to some and “terrorists” and “bandits” to others) provides much more relevant theorizing about these social relationships that underlie definitions of ideology and ultimately the target of this study – the variations in their behavior toward local populations.

Robert Bates notes that historically the strongest states grew out of the efforts of armed gangs to determine how to better organize their looting operations. These groups negotiated with local communities, encouraging them to continue producing resources to fund their armed organizations. Armed groups quickly discovered that it was to their benefit to heed the interests of local communities for fear that they drive their sources of material and economic support into bankruptcy (Bates 2001). Today, it is a common observation that some acts of violence do more political harm than good and hence some armed actors would limit atrocities (Snow 1996).

In a similar vein, Mancur Olson devised his well-known categories of “roving bandits” and “stationary bandits” to explain how different armed groups operated in relation to host communities. The latter enjoyed more success in the long-run because they ensured that their
local “victims” could continue to produce wealth by permitting such basic social transactions as engaging in independent economic activity and allowing freedom of movement to foster economic development. In fact, Olson concluded that the most efficient armed groups were the most democratic ones. The more secure the “victims,” the more they produced, increasing the amount of resources the armed groups could extract despite it being at a lower rate of imposition (Olson 1993).

Olson built his interpretation on observations by Lucian Pye (1971) who observed variation among Chinese warlords during the 1920s. According to his classification, there existed two types of rebels at the time – predatory “roving bandits” in the form of White Wolf and “stationary bandit” in the form of Feng Yü-hsiang’s National People’s Army. Feng, the warlord leader of the Kuominchūn or NPA in Northern China, relied on personal relations and rewards to maintain control over a compact area and to move from being solely a military persona to a political one (Pye 1971). This indicates that, indeed, variation among insurgent groups is not a new phenomenon, but has existed throughout the world for years.

These observations suggest that, like states, insurgents ought to confront overwhelming incentives to treat local communities well and listen to their interests, at least in the long-term, even as other insurgents in the same region and at the same time chose other paths. Tilly follows Weber in his claim that state-making is the process of defeating internal rivals. The political actors responsible for this defeat then concentrate the administrative and coercive apparatus that form the institutional backbone of a strong state (Tilly 1990). This process varied among early state-builders and while it was not necessarily the most efficient form that arose from the change in the international system, it was the organizational form that survived the selection process and developed out of early armed groups’ adaptations to economic transformation and the politics of coalitional bargaining (Spruyt 1994).

One of the crucial elements in the evolution of the state (and by extension a factor of success for insurgent organizations) is the social bargain between different actors. Much like the development of ties to local populations by Olson’s “stationary bandits,” this bargain was one that centered on an agreement between actors with coercive power on the one hand and those with economic power on the other (Spruyt 1994). Perry Anderson noted the importance of this social bargain between rulers and ruled. The construction of the national state and its organizational consequences were a function of the relative weight and centralization of coercion. Absolutism in his analysis was a functional requirement for states in Eastern Europe that wished to survive the geo-political pressures from more competitive neighboring polities, particularly those in Western Europe. While war provided monarchies with the political leverage to overcome resistance to authority that had then become centralized (Anderson 1979), society’s principal armed groups nevertheless were forced to accommodate productive groups in society to get the resources and popular support they required to obtain their goals.

Despite the parallels between early state-building and modern insurgents, this literature leaves us without the resources to explain modern rebel behavior. In fact, scholars have used the historical analysis of state-building to explain the lack of consolidation in the developing world. In Europe, the competition for territory as a result of rising population growth and the consequent diplomatic pressures led to the formation of states (Herbst 2000). The “continuous aggressive competition for trade and territory among changing states of unequal size…made war a driving force in European history” (Tilly 1990, 54). In Europe, capital centers developed close connections with peripheral areas, which further enhanced state strength. Links to rural areas
enhanced security as border defenses protected the center from external competitors and at the same time fostered internal consolidation (Tilly 1990).

The particular avenue of European state-building has been shared by few other regions of the world. For example, by 1975 Africa had the population density equivalent to Europe in 1500. Furthermore, unlike the relations that transpired between the capital centers and the rural regions in Europe, the colonial powers in many developing areas were not interested in fostering ties to their periphery. The scarcity of land in Europe necessitated these ties for defensive purposes. The large expanses of land in places like Africa, however, stifled any drive to establish defensive borders as well as the growth of large administrative state apparatuses with close ties to rural areas. Thus, during colonialism, much of the developing world lacked the internal consolidation that took place in Europe. Consequently, upon their decolonization, these regions did not have a strong central state. The period of decolonization further adds to the incongruence in using the historical state-building literature to analyze developing regions of the world. During this time, nationalists became heads of newly independent states that were molded according to how colonial rulers conducted politics. That is, these new leaders based politics primarily in urban centers with few links to peasant populations living in outlying communities (Herbst 2000).

In conjunction with this study, we see that in early European state-building there existed a convergence on the model of the nation-state and the coercion-capital mixture that led to its development. Other formulas such as coercive-intensive and capital-intensive could not compete and were defeated or adapted to meet the terms of war set by stronger states that fielded larger armies funded by capital (Tilly 1990). Yet, this study finds that some insurgents groups diverge from the coercive-capital combination. In southern Sudan, for example, the SPLA went from being highly coercive toward local societies to highly representative and state-like in its various functions. The FARC developed in the opposite direction, directly contradicting the rationale spelled out by scholars of early state-building. In employing increasingly coercive tactics and involving itself in the international drug trade, Colombian insurgents reject the development of more contractarian strategies and closer ties to local communities. The historical state-building literature facilitates an understanding of why insurgents are state-builders and how they can be successful, but it does not offer adequate insight into why these non-state actors often reject the classical state-building strategy.

**The Importance of Dominating Local Populations**

The central hypothesis of this paper is that the level of coercion insurgent groups inflict upon local communities is a direct result of the degree of dominance the group has over noncombatants. Dominance, which in this study is also referred to as ‘control’, is the main independent variable that is most critical to change in insurgent group behavior because it determines the amount and ease with which rebels can obtain resources from local populations. Control can be established using a range of tactics. In this study, I place treatment of civilians by rebel groups on a scale from highly coercive to contractarian. Highly coercive behavior is the type that, for example, was inflicted on civilians by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) during the most recent war in Sierra Leone, or the ongoing abuses committed against noncombatants in northern Uganda by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). This behavior is characteristic of the predatory strategies of “resource wars” or “new wars” and the systematic abuse of local people’s human rights. At the opposite end, contractarian treatment of local populations encompasses the provision of public goods such as security, access to resources, and the ability to participate in decision-making such that a sovereign, democratic or democratizing state provides.
One of the most important aspects for any dominating body is the ability to mobilize populations. Political mobilization “is the collective and structured expression of commitment and support within society” (Nettl 1967, 123). Political mobilization then involves directing people into various organizational frameworks that will enable leaders to develop strong armies, collect more taxes, and complete other tasks (Migdal 1988). The mode for achieving such mobilization is through control. While there are various types of “control”, the kind referred to here is the control which a state or a dominant group projects. In a basic sense, control is power. To be more specific, though, I employ the characterization of Michael Mann. Social control or infrastructural power “denotes the power of the state to penetrate and centrally co-ordinate the activities of civil society through its own infrastructure” (Mann 1984, 189). Placing this designation into the context of rebel groups (which I argue often represent contemporary forms of state-building), increased capabilities of insurgent organizations rests upon higher levels of control.

In this study, the level of local dominance a rebel group possesses is indicated by the existence of one of three types of market environments: a monopoly, a duopoly and an oligopoly.

- A monopoly describes the situation where one organization is the sole provider of a good or service. In the context of rebel groups, it is when there is one group with complete or nearly complete dominance. Not only does the group have dominance over the local region and can adequately put down rival rebel groups, it is also providing more public goods to civilians than is the state.

- A state of a duopoly occurs when two companies dominate the market. Put into the context of this study, this occurs when a rebel group competes with the state for the resources of locals.

- An oligopoly is a term used to describe a market in which control over the supply of a commodity is in the hands of a small number of producers and each one can influence prices and affect competitors. This occurs when there is more than one rebel group in existence in a region and no one group dominates. The state can either be a competitor or not; that is, the state can be reforming or repressive toward local populations.

**Intervening Variables**

While the key mechanism in transforming insurgent group behavior toward noncombatants is dominance over local populations, two additional variables play a critical role in the ability of rebel groups to dominate: international norms and quality of the state the insurgent group is fighting.

*The Democratization and Human Rights Norms*

One explanation for the behavior of insurgent groups that this study examines is that the international expectation of democracy impacts the level of dominance a rebel group can attain over noncombatants. In this study I place “human rights” within the rubric of the democracy norm. The relationship between the democracy norm and insurgent behavior appears justifiable. Contemporary insurgent groups are guided by the influence of world powers that dictate the development of norms of democracy and thereby the recognition of such principles as human rights. This includes norms against ethnic cleansing, genocide, and other standards of international law. Acceptance of these two norms – democratization and human rights – is a precondition for participation in international political and economic arenas.
During the last few decades, democratization has been a driving force in the international system of state-building. Over half of the countries in the world today have adopted democratic political systems. During only a brief period of time, a large number of states have begun a process of democratization – the movement from authoritarian to democratic forms of rule. This has been the case more precisely in developing countries. Democratization in Africa, for example, became a part of a larger world-wide movement to transform non-democratic governments. The economic and political liberalization occurring around the world during the 1980s fostered such a process, particularly after the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War when totalitarian systems in Eastern Europe fell to democratic regimes. International donors and Western powers adopted the post-Cold War democratization project of the hegemons and exerted subtle and interventionist pressure on developing countries to guarantee that they would follow what was quickly becoming a standardized path (Osaghae 1999). In Africa, several one-party systems headed by rulers who took personal charge of the state were challenged by opposition forces, many of which exploited newly gained political liberties. Furthermore, in Latin America, military dictatorships began to fall apart (Sorenson 1998). Between 1972 and 1993, the number of democratic governments more than doubled, rising from 44 to 107 (Karatnycky 1994; McColm 1993).

While democratization has been and remains a central facet of political science scholarship, there is relatively little written about it acting as a prerequisite for acceptance in the international state system. Inherent in Tilly and Olson’s work on the state is that to be sustainable, a state requires some sort of relations that are acceptable to its citizenry, or at least to those who generate the surplus that state leaders need to field their armies and pay of administration. If leaders destroy or undermine these relations with the people they govern, they forego capabilities that a consistent stream of revenue provides. This concept applies directly to contemporary states because of the prevalence of external sources of income.

If we argue that insurgents are contemporary state-builders, we would also expect them to be influenced by norms that affect the behavior of modern states. However, one could argue that the classical formulation of state-building applies more to insurgents. This is because insurgents live in a world where their organization can become extinct if they do not get the resources that they need to fight. They face external threats that sovereign states have not faced since the end of the Second World War. Therefore, mobilizing the population is a more critical strategy for acquiring access to resources and winning support to move forward and capture the existing state’s capital. This behavior does appear in some of the cases considered below, yet even where the distribution of resources is similar, some insurgencies forego this state-building strategy.

As mentioned above, I view human rights to be a part of the democracy norm. Just as democratization has become an important political, economic, and social force, insistence on at least minimal respect for human rights has become a constant theme of international politics. George W. Bush’s justification for war in Iraq, widespread condemnations of violence in Darfur, and numerous other conflicts illustrate this. The acknowledgement and respect for human rights has become an important norm affecting the behavior of non-state global actors as well. Traditionally, the focus of human rights advocacy has been directed at governments or those acting under government control such as military. Broadly speaking, the idea “human rights” has been defined by two sets of actors: government and international non-governmental agencies. Due to pressure from the latter, governments have – over the years – drafted a comprehensive collection of international standards (International Council on Human Rights Policy 2000).
Governments – at least on paper – adhere to certain standards in the treatment of their citizens. They have also accepted the right that other governments and international institutions may hold them to these standards. It also appears that this extends to armed conflicts. For example, the establishment of two war crimes tribunals exemplifies this advance. One was established in 1993 to manage the international and partly internal conflict in the former Yugoslavia. The other tribunal took place in 1994 to deal with a purely internal conflict in Rwanda. (Neier 1996-1997). In statistical tests they find that a state’s human rights performance significantly determined the amount of aid the country received. Those states with poor human rights records received less U.S. bilateral economic aid than those with better records (Apodaca 1999). Thus it becomes even more baffling as to why some insurgents would counter the trend toward compliance, or at least rhetorical support for these norms. Resources and penalties are associated with these norms. One would reasonably think that they should structure the behavior of insurgents toward local people.

It appears that under international law there is an expectation that insurgents will behave uniformly. However, other structural incentives such as resources and the nature of the state they are battling do not have the same impact across all cases. Therefore, international law and threats of prosecution will have only a partial effect on the behavior of insurgent organizations. Of a higher priority to these entities is survival, which due to the end of the Cold War has become all too likely. Unlike states, insurgent groups can “go out of business”. If forced to choose, these rational actors would attempt to survive first and concern themselves with human rights law later – if these two objectives clashed. Furthermore, one would not necessarily equate the violation of the above legal conditions necessarily with violations of the human rights of communities. Thus, while international human rights law does not transform the behavior of insurgents from coercive to representative, it has become a factor that these groups must consider. Insurgent organizations that abuse local populations will not acquire the resources and support that groups who treat locals in a less-abusive manner will.

In respect to the affecting interaction and treatment of local communities, we find that there is variation among insurgent behavior. The empirical evidence suggests that insurgent groups do not incorporate local community interests into their behavior in spite of the fact that norms of democratization and human rights dictate that such treatment garners various types of resources and international support. For example, the SPLA was at its most isolated during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The organization was fiercely opposed to the Khartoum regime and was predatory and coercive toward local communities in southern Sudan. The southern Sudanese rebels were also highly factionalized. However, in 1994 the group made a dramatic change in its behavior towards host communities. The SPLA called its first national convention in an attempt to develop a greater grassroots appeal, stating that a New Sudan would henceforth exist and be governed on the basis of equality and justice. One could say the movement was democratizing. This New Sudan was to include: the separation of powers; the separation of the military from the civil authority; and well-defined, established structures of governance including a legislature, an executive and a judiciary. The SPLA seemed to be undergoing tentative steps toward institutionalization. Many policymakers and scholars argue that this rather dramatic transformation was motivated by a desire for foreign support. However, in a seeming contradiction to the above logic, the SPLA continues to stress accountability in relations with locals, despite already having well-established channels of resources.

One possible explanation for this seemingly contradictory behavior in insurgent organizations is that norms of democratization and human rights may complicate insurgent
efforts to build local support. As has been noted, aid (often the result of this global awareness of human rights, etc.) can act as a rent-seeking opportunity that facilitates the disregard of indigenous opinions and instead fosters authorities’ focus on their own fortunes (Duffield 2001). According to this argument, aid from the outside discourages the building of strong ties with host communities because it encourages rent-seeking behavior. When sources of material and political support and legitimation originate from external actors rather than from potential constituents, local authority structures (in our case, insurgent organizations) have few incentives to create strong social, economic, and political ties to indigenous societies. This has been noted in aid-dependent states where leaders use aid to further embed themselves in the halls of power.

Nevertheless, this contention does not help to explain the puzzle being studied, primarily because states possess something which insurgent groups do not: sovereignty. States can use aid and sovereignty to conduct business without the consent of their citizens. There is no danger that the sovereignty of the state will be extinguished if these leaders do not perform. Within insurgent groups, leadership can easily become factionalized, and thus leaders must gather as much local support as they can. Insurgent groups are once again motivated to attract local community interests, even when they acquire massive external aid.

As I have demonstrated earlier, states respond to norms in specific ways because they possess the prerogatives of sovereignty. Norms act as powerful strictures that guide the behavior of states. Insurgents, however, are caught in a state-building dynamic that is more akin to the early modern European realist competition inside these states because if these groups do fail, they are likely to become extinct. Therefore, insurgent groups examine how states respond to norms, what they themselves must do with regard to these international ideas, and in turn weigh how their different context shapes the outcome.

This further highlights the varying effect of norms. States are impacted differently, compared to insurgents. This supports my earlier proposition that insurgents are similar to early modern European state-builders and therefore should seek local community support. By extension, insurgent groups should welcome human rights and democratization norms because they provide opportunities to demonstrate how they are better performers than the states that they fight. This makes the observation of variation in insurgent behavior even more baffling. Why do some groups reject such advantages?

The reason why rebel organizations often reject opportunities that come with democratization and following human rights law lies in the difference between states and insurgents. As a part of the international system of states, states are forced more immediately to obey human rights norms (we see what happens to states such as Iraq and Sudan that move against this norm). We have witnessed this in the international condemnation and sanctions against states that chose not to follow such norms, such as Iraq and Sudan. Sovereignty, then, is a liability. Yet, this does not explain the variation we see among insurgent groups. If insurgents, lacking state sovereignty in the international system, are not bound to behave according to human rights norms, why then do some groups such as the PKK treat their constituents well? If there is no “police” normative or otherwise to force them to abide by international standards of Human Rights, why do some choose to follow them? Why, for example, did the SPLA sign the treaty in Geneva to ban landmines treaty as well as agreements to demobilize child soldiers? Several insurgent organizations also establish systems of justice in liberated zones. The Frente Farabundo Martí para Liberación Nacional (FMLN) in El Salvador, for example, implemented a strict system of justice once it gained control of an area. The administration of justice quickly became an integral part of their revolutionary program (Anderson 2004).
I maintain that the reason for this variation in insurgent behavior toward noncombatants is not a result of the international influence of democratization and human rights norms. I contend that what is important to the insurgents, and in turn what determines their behavior towards host communities, are matters of control. The norm of boundaries is compatible with this. However, the democracy norm clashes with this. Sometimes a rebel group decides it must violate human rights to maintain control. This alludes to a hierarchy of options that the groups possess. Control is the priority and anything that threatens this control takes precedence.

The Nature of State Authority

The limitations within the state-building literature motivate an examination of a second additional key variable – the nature of state authority. This authority is enforced in a spectrum of ways, ranging from the use of repressive tactics to reforming tactics. While a state cannot be perfectly democratic the much of the western world lies at the “reforming” end. The majority of weak states lie near the “repressive end”, while those heeding the democracy norm are somewhere in the middle, moving toward “reforming”. This study finds that insurgent groups facing more repressive or authoritarian states provide appeal to local communities and will reduce their coercion of these communities. Likewise, if a state is moving toward democratic reforms, insurgents will find their control over host communities declining and will resort to more coercive tactics in their treatment of noncombatants.

Within the literature “new wars” and “resource wars” represent varying degrees of explicit recognition that the weakness of state institutions matters. One can extrapolate from this the broader proposition that the nature of state ties to local communities is important. States that marginalize communities while oppressing them may spawn different kinds of insurgents than will states that marginalize communities while selectively co-opting people in those same communities. The latter will likely generate insurgencies that would have reason to be more violent in those communities because they have to force local people to make choices about whom they support and who they betray to others. This is a basic point made over time by several scholars. Fanon maintains that at a certain point in the history of anti-colonial struggles, government repressions encouraged the colonized to participate in violent struggle (Fanon 1982). Kitson asserts this point, for example, in his memoir of the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya (Kitson 1960), while Kriger emphasizes the importance of government coercion and repression in relation to the linkage between popular support and rebel violence in her account of Zimbabwean guerrillas (Kriger 1992). The literature also indicates that rebels enact strategies that intensify government repression because it will hasten the mobilization of local populations. Marighella, the Brazilian insurgent leader, presumed that attacks on government installations would provoke the central Brazilian regime to retaliate with repressive measures (Sarkesian 1975). When these repressive measures are enacted upon local populations, popular support for rebel groups is likely to increase. In a more contemporary context, one scholar confirms the importance of the relationship between local populations and insurgent organizations in trying to explain the apparent passivity among the Iraqi population in relation to the insurgency inflicting violence on US and Iraqi troops, as well as civilians (Ford 2005). While there is a large counterinsurgency literature on degrees of state “niceness” and insurgency, this study goes a step further and considers how state policy affects the behavior of insurgents. Therefore, the degree of state presence or absence (and if presence, the nature of it) are important factors shaping insurgent behavior.

The nature of state authority is significant in determining insurgent reactions to host communities. Insurgent groups facing repressive states are better able to appeal to outsiders with
real or contrived reform programs that reduce coercion of local communities and are more likely to adopt international demands for democratic internal governance. However, these groups will do so only in conditions where they are confident they can manipulate the implementation of such “democratic reforms” in ways that will increase their control over local communities. Nevertheless, insurgents take the chance that outsiders will not view them as the dominant insurgent group. If their political control over host communities declines, insurgents risk this being interpreted as possessing diminished prospects for manipulating international actors. Thus insurgents find themselves in a situation of realpolitik typical of states in centuries past; poor performance is met with a lack of interest or aggression on the part of outsiders, while effective control on the ground forces them to take account of local groups’ interests.

**Modeling Change in Insurgent Group Behavior**

Using a microeconomic approach, I model the dynamic between insurgent groups, the state, and local populations in which rebel groups operate, depicting the interactions as market transactions. Using such a model reveals that the key factor in determining insurgent group behavior is the possession of dominance over local communities. These communities are considered to be the “buyers” in this model, whereas the state and rebel groups are the “sellers”. In exchange for “buying” these public goods, local communities provide that which both the state and rebel groups require: resources. However, whereas the state need only obtain one type of resource — rents — rebel groups must acquire both rents and the resources to survive. The strength of the international norm of sovereignty means that a state is guaranteed its survival in the international system of nation-states. Thus, the effort rebel groups must expend in order to collect resources is twice that of states.

This seems to imply that the causal mechanism for insurgent behavior is the level of resources required to survive and acquire rents. However, the ability to collect resources is a function of the level of dominance a group or a state has among local populations. A monopoly by one rebel group means that all the local resources are being filtered through the insurgent group. This may be in the form of people, money, aid, supplies, and diplomatic communications. The level of local dominance among a rebel group is the primary independent variable (IV#1).

What happens to the other two independent variables? As you will see, the international norm of democracy (IV#2) acts as an externality; it induces higher transaction costs and as such can cause the international community to act as a spoiler (the international community can spur local communities to demand democratic reform). The quality of the state (IV#3) has an effect on the insurgent group/local dynamic, as I will demonstrate. Yet, as the following microeconomic model indicates, the international expectation of democracy and quality of the state are variables that — while important — are embedded in the level of dominance.

**Assumptions**

A model is a simplified version of a complex process and therefore distorts portions of reality. While this is a cost of modeling, it does allow us to present a process clearly. To depict rebel group behavior and dynamics in model format, we must make certain assumptions about the rebel environment. This model makes the following assumptions:

1. People give their support (resources) to less violent groups (looking at a scale from extremely coercive to providing public goods) because the people acquire more utility from public goods than from violence. [People will go to (support/provide resources to) the group that provides the most “goodies”. To state this in market terms, local populations will buy more from less violent groups. However, the rebel groups, whether or not people “purchase” their goods (protection, public goods, etc.) must still “sell” their
goods in order to survive. They will do so in a way that ranges from highly coercively to providing doing so in a contractarian manner in which they provide public goods.]

2. Local populations have utilities (resources).

3. Resources in a community are limited.

4. Groups exert violence to extract these utilities or resources. The state can be included as one of these “groups” when it is repressive.

5. Rebel groups extract resources for two reasons: a) to acquire rents (money that goes to leadership, money that is hoarded for future use, etc.); and b) to maintain its survival (food, soldiers, etc.). Because rebel groups operate in a lean environment, rebels need survival resources.

6. The state, however, extracts resources for only one reason, to acquire rents. [Accounting for this is the norm of sovereignty; the state does not have to worry about its survival (at least not to the extent that the rebel groups do) because sovereignty is such a strong international norm.]

Model predictions

The microeconomic approach developed in this project is represented in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rebel Group Monopoly</th>
<th>Repressive State</th>
<th>Reforming State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(a) Violence ↓</td>
<td>(c) Violence ↑</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Violence ↑</td>
<td>(d) Violence ↑</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 1: Short-term behavior effects of rebel groups in weak states

**Box (a)** If a rebel group dominates (has a monopoly over local populations with the absence of rival groups), and the state is repressive, the rebel group will move toward less violent behavior. The state and the rebel group are in a market dynamic where they are competing for resources. However, the state clearly has an advantage over the rebel group, as it does not require resources for its survival, merely resources for rents. A state’s survival is guaranteed by the international norm of sovereignty. The people find that the rebel group offers public goods that the state does not. At the same time, the rebel group becomes more contractarian (providing public goods in exchange for resources) because they find it is more efficient to extract resources this way as opposed to doing so coercively.

**Box (b)** if the state is repressive and there is one rebel group, if one or more groups enter the picture violence increases because extractive activities increase.² Even if a moderately violent group exists and another even less violent rebel group enters the picture, violence will still increase (though perhaps not by a large amount relative to highly coercive groups) only because the amount of resources are limited and therefore the area (and population) that a group can

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² All modeling refers to short-term effects.
control becomes scarce. As competition for control of populations and regions increases, violence increases. However, this violence will most likely be targeted to those populations that support rival groups, just as in a market system sellers will attempt to target specific populations that are not buying their particular product.

The repressive nature of the state means it is considered to be another “group” – a rival. Because we are dealing with weak states, the central government cannot obtain a monopoly by extracting enough resources to get rid of other rival groups. However, if the bully starts to reform, it will obtain powerful outside resources and will be able to extract all the necessary resources to defeat rivals. Violence decreases slightly – not a lot but not anarchy.

In the long-term, groups have two choices:

- Rebel groups can unify and become an oligopoly (a cartel). This will result in a decrease in violence, as per prediction 1 (Box a)
- Or, as more rebel groups enter the picture, the level of violence will reach a threshold and level off. That is, groups will maintain a low-level of rival fighting. It is likely that one or more groups will begin to adopt international language and institutions of democracy, as this will get them more support from outside states, particularly because they are fighting a repressive state. Therefore, due to the quality of the state, the more groups join the conflict, the more likely democratization will occur in the long-run. In the short-run, however, violence will increase as groups join.

**Box (c)** If a monopoly of a rebel group exists and the state is reforming, violence increases in the short-run. Violence against civilians rises because there is more competition for resources, particularly since the state is attracting more local support and thus is reducing the supply to the rebel group. The state has the upper hand here because all it needs to extract are resources in the form of rents. The rebel group must extract both rents and the resources to survive.

In the long-run, the rebel group has three choices:

- The rebel group can become a political actor, agreeing to play according to the rules of the polity.
- The group can disintegrate;
- Or, the group can become isolated and radical. This depends largely on the resources available and the leadership.

**Box (d)** If there is more than one rebel group and the state begins to reform, violence increases. In the long-run, the groups have three choices:

- The groups can unify and become a cartel.
- The groups can disintegrate;
- Or, the groups can become isolated and radical.

This model demonstrates that the level of violence is inversely related to the level of rebel group dominance over local populations. The more insurgent group dominance over local populations increases or the more of a monopoly one group has, the level of violence used in extracting

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3 If there is an ethnic quality to this conflict and the rebel group is largely homogenous, it is likely that the group will invoke the right of self-determination.
resources from civilians decreases. One may argue the point that with a monopoly, a rebel group (or any ruler for that matter) can do whatever it wants since there is no third party to stop it from employing violence to extract resources. Yet, this does not appear to be the case. As North argues in his description of the contractual relationship between the serf and the lord during the European feudal era, the lord does have certain constraints placed upon him in regard to the tactics used to extract labor from serfs. The scarcity of labor prior to the 1500s meant that lords were frequently in competition over serfs. As a result, the lord had an incentive to abide by the contractual agreements, which included protection from outside invaders. If they did not, serfs would flee (North 1981). Likewise, in the case of rebel groups and their relationship with local communities, the group has an incentive (the steady and efficient provision of resources) to treat civilians with less coercive tactics because if it does not, either rivals will take the resources away or locals will flee.

As the degree of control over civilians decreases however, the level of violence used in extracting resources from local communities rises. This inverse relationship is explained by the increase in the number of “sellers” or rivals taking part in the dynamic. More rivals means more competition for resources, putting rebel groups in a position where, due to the increase in competition and the subsequent decrease in resources, rather than being able to barter or engage in a contract of sorts with locals, rebel groups must forcibly acquire resources.

**Findings**

The central finding of this study is that dominance over local populations supplies the framework for the rational calculations of insurgent groups. When a rebel group has a monopoly of control over a community, it can more efficiently mobilize populations, collecting resources and accumulating strength in personnel to gain autonomy from the state and potential rival insurgent groups. Due to the scarcity of goods and resources in many environments in which these groups operate, if a rebel group can act as an intermediary between locals and outsiders – thus controlling the flow of scarce goods and the political distribution of norms that embed themselves in a host community, the rebel group will behave in a more contractarian manner, provided there are no significant rival groups in the area. However, once rival groups – which include a reforming state – enter upon the scene, violence against local populations is likely to increase in the short-term.

In modeling the short-term dynamic of insurgent behavior toward local communities, I find that two additional variables intervene: the international norm of democracy and the quality of the state. I consider these two variables to lie outside the immediate insurgent group environment and thus I label them “exogenous”. While central to my model, the effects of these two variables are dependent upon the rebel group’s ability to exercise and maintain dominance over host communities. That is, the influences of international norms and the quality of the state shape the context in which insurgent groups pursue local dominance. Political and social dominance is the currency over which rebel groups struggle against rivals.

International norms can serve to enhance or diminish contractarian rebel behavior. When foreign donor organizations and donor countries emphasize democratic norms as a stipulation to assistance, a rebel group with a monopoly of control will often fake such representative forms of governance. For example, the SPLA characterized itself as a democratic reforming political movement following major changes during the mid- to late 1990s. Like any other resource-maximizing individual or organization, rebel groups will adopt what on the surface appears antithetical to its nature in order to achieve its goal and thus are more likely to take the interests of those communities into account in formulating their strategies. In practical terms, this means
rebel groups will become “better democratizers”, although this shift is dependent upon an underlying coercive element of insurgent strategy (Metelits 2004). Rebel groups behave much like “stationary bandits” or nascent states because – in accordance with a market dynamic – they find it allows them to more efficiently extract resources from locals.

However, in an unexpected consequence of democratizing states, this study finds that national governments and global norms that offer host populations the access to new political channels may encourage insurgent groups to become more coercive toward noncombatants. That is, as the governing regime and transnational organizations such as the United Nations recognize and grant various forms of group rights and encourage autonomy to communities where insurgents operate, these actors – feeling their support networks and resources threatened as civilians shift their support (resources) to the reforming state – are likely to increase the use of coercive measures against locals.

One of the major parallel findings then is that democratization can have devastating effects on local populations in the short-term, resulting in a greater abuse of human rights on the part of insurgents. The existence of rivals such as a reforming state, additional rebel groups, or government-sponsored militia, leads to an increase in local violence against noncombatants as groups battle for control over local territories and their resources. This also occurs where diplomats, international organizations, and activists succeed in independently organizing and mobilizing local communities outside of insurgent efforts. In direct contrast, insurgent groups facing states that are at least as coercive to local populations are far more likely to adopt international demands for democratic internal governance. They do so, however, only in conditions where they are confident that they can manipulate the implementation of “democratic reforms” in ways that increase their authority over local communities. These conditions are jointly sufficient. That is, insurgents will tolerate reciprocity if they can retain power in the area; they will become more democratic, but only insofar as they can benefit. On the other hand, insurgents will reject the political and material resources of conforming to international norms of democracy if they believe such an act will result in the loss of local control; rebel groups will refuse options of democracy and reject innovators who bring such pressures. The rejection of democratic norms will be more pronounced if the existing state becomes democratic, providing opportunities for communities to define and pursue goals that overlap or replace insurgents’ goals and the benefits they can provide to locals.

A corollary to this finding reveals that norms appear to have a greater immediate impact on the behavior of local communities who may use “democracy” as a tool to force reforming insurgents to develop reciprocal, state-like relations with them. At this point, if this norm abidance does not interfere with the maintenance of local dominance, rebel groups with a monopoly on control are more likely to follow such democratic norms. That is, if the insurgent leaders see that by touting democratic norms and engaging in such practices equates to more local control, they will choose this route rather than a more coercive one.

The second intervening variable that has a significant impact on rebel group behavior is the quality of the state (authoritarian vs. reforming). The nature of a national government in its relations to its citizens is significant in determining the degree of rebel group control over local communities and thus the level of violence these groups inflict upon civilian populations. A rebel group that faces a repressive (authoritarian) national government can extract resources more efficiently from local communities. I derive the explanation for this from the state-building literature. Rebel groups that are even minimally less coercive than a repressive state have something to offer locals – public goods. The more contractarian the rebel group behaves in
relation to noncombatants in the area of control the more efficiently it can extract resources. Likewise, by engaging in contractarian behavior, the rebel group can acquire additional resources from external, democratic norm-supporting actors, as explained above. As long as the state is more coercive than the rebel group, this dynamic persists. Yet the central role that dominance plays does not waiver; a rebel group with a monopoly on control will behave in a less violent (contractarian-like) manner only when it is confident that it can manipulate the implementation of “democratic reforms” in ways that will enhance its control over local communities.


