

Title and Contact Information

Networks of Rebellion: The Social Origins of Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse

Paul Staniland
Assistant Professor of Political Science
University of Chicago
paul@uchicago.edu
773-710-4544

The Question and its Importance

Around the world insurgent groups wage bitter, violent wars against central states and militant rivals. The FARC, Taliban, LeT, al-Shabab, NSCN-IM, Naxals, and many others battle on shattered peripheries to forge their favored political orders. These groups vary in their war aims, ideological worldviews, sources of funding, and the states and armed groups they face. Crucially, they also vary in their cohesion and unity: some are tightly disciplined, while others are recurrently torn by feuds and splits. Insurgent cohesion helps to determine which armed groups are, and are not, able to reliably generate organized violence, extraction, and governance in the heat of war. Organizational structure thus affects patterns of violence against civilians and the ability of insurgent organizations to negotiate and de-mobilize without debilitating splintering and “spoiler” problems. Existing research has not been able to systematically explain these differences, even as scholars increasingly use insurgent structure to explain other dynamics of civil war. Cohesion varies within and across wars, countries, ethnic and class categories, resource endowments, levels of insurgent popularity, and ideological worldviews.

The ability of armed groups to hold themselves together as unified fighting forces is pivotal to their skills at fighting, extracting, and bargaining. The success of insurgents in translating military successes into political authority and institutionalization hinges in important ways on their cohesion and its absence. Organization, discipline, and control are thus central to exploring fundamental issues in the study of political order, conflict, and violence, from grim struggles for dominance in peripheral villages to elite maneuverings over national political authority. Cohesion shapes who the key insurgent players in the war are and what they can do.

More specifically, scholars have used some conceptualization of insurgent cohesion to explain a number of important outcomes in war. Insurgent fragmentation has been linked to civil war onset by exploring when political competition within a movement escalates into violence.¹ Once in conflict, organizational structure plays a key role. Cohesive groups are seen as generally more effective war-fighting forces and more credible negotiators than fractious groups, thus shaping both the duration of conflicts and their ultimate resolution. Literature on counterinsurgency points to insurgent discipline and staying power as a key determinant of campaign outcomes. The literature on “spoiler” problems is driven by the problem of splits, splinters, and radical factions undermining deals.² Similar issues are involved in demobilization.³ Some have suggested that different patterns of violence against civilians can be driven by variation in cohesion and fragmentation.⁴ More broadly, the interrelationships of armed organizations and factions can play a fundamental role in shaping trajectories of state formation.⁵

¹ Lawrence 2010.

² Kydd and Walter 2002; Stedman 1997, Pearlman 2009 Cunningham 2006, Bakke et al (forthcoming).

³ Daly 2010.

⁴ Humphreys and Weinstein 2006; Cohen 2010, Bloom 2004/5, Bueno de Mesquita 2005.

⁵ Tilly 1992; Zurcher 2007; Reno 1998; in a very different (less armed) way, Boone 2003 and Ziblatt 2006.

The Argument

I argue that the level and pattern of insurgent cohesion are shaped in systematic ways by variation in the social coalitions and networks that underpin organizations. Preexisting networks are appropriated into nascent armed groups in the volatile, risky heat of war and these social bases both create particular organizational structures and lay the basis for long-term trajectories. Changes over time in organizational cohesion are driven by shifts in the nature of the social bases underlying armed groups. This social-institutional theory specifies the social variables and processes that do (and do not) structure insurgent organizations rather than relying on vague clichés about popular support and political context or implausible generalizations about the nature of ethnic, religious, and class mobilization and resource wealth. Though previous studies have linked social dynamics to individual and local participation in violence, none have systematically explored how networks underpin large armed organizations.

At the founding of a group, we tend to see “social appropriation”⁶ of preexisting networks into nascent insurgent organizations. As Rubin notes, “increased reliance on primary social networks is a typical response to a breakdown of state power.”⁷ These networks form the initial social base of an organization, which are characterized by differing combinations of *horizontal* ties between organizers and *vertical* ties between organizers and local communities. Four simple but distinct social bases emerge from configurations of vertical and horizontal ties: overlapping (strong vertical and horizontal), parochial (strong vertical, weak horizontal), elitist (weak vertical, strong horizontal), and anomic (weak vertical and horizontal). Building an organization atop each creates different levels of cohesion and fragmentation and different patterns of internal unrest. The organizers of groups embedded these social bases are all faced with daunting tasks of maintaining trust, secrecy, and internal control in the face of state repression, and the underlying social infrastructure upon which they can rely creates variation in their ability to forge institutionalized organizational structures. I hypothesize that organizations built atop overlapping networks will have the greatest cohesion, those built on parochial social bases will face recurrent elite feuding, organizations embedded in elitist networks will struggle with top-vs-bottom dissension, and anomic network-based groups will have low cohesion along multiple lines of cleavage.

The role of preexisting networks in shaping initial organizational structure is crucial, but insurgency and counterinsurgency are intrinsically dynamic and interactive. A simple structural theory of origins tells us important things, but we need paths out of path-dependence, mechanisms of change that explain variation in cohesion over time. As with all things, there are many plausible causes, but I argue that the core social dynamics we observe in the formative periods of organizations also play a crucial role in shaping how insurgent institutions evolve. I offer a theoretical account of change in insurgent organization focused on the processes through which underlying social bases change, with different processes shifting different social bases. Internal fratricide, realignment of coalitions, and expansion are mechanisms that can endogenously change the underlying social relations of an organization, whether towards more or less cohesion. The internal social processes of organizational life create opportunities both for social integration and for potent internal conflict, and I specify when and how I expect the mechanisms of change to be triggered and to lead to different organizational outcomes.

War is also a competition of violent organizations to break, co-opt, and coerce one another. The external pressures of state power (and militant rivals) can change the social base of an organization as states strategically attempt to sunder the ties and information flows within their competitor/s. State strategies will lead to different outcomes depending on their interaction

⁶ McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001.

⁷ Rubin 1995, 187-188.

with the nature of the insurgent social base. The relationship between states and insurgents can cause shifts in social relationships and mobilization that give an important dynamic conceptualization of war. These mechanisms of change move us out of a reliance on rigid path-dependence and structuralism by identifying sources of fluidity and adaptation that mix structure and agency. They are not the only conceivable pathways of change, but if my theory is right they should play a prominent role in the empirical record.

Thus we need to study the fine-grained social sinews of insurgent power. Social bases shape organizational structures both in the initial phase of organization building and over time. This claim breaks down the dichotomy between networks and organizations that has emerged in much of the literature on political violence by instead showing that organizations are structured by networks, and that organizations in turn shape networks. It also helps us understand a puzzling array of variation by explaining when and how other causal dynamics matter. The social underpinnings of rebellion determine the effects of material resource flows, create or reduce vulnerability to state power, augment or undermine attempts at mass mobilization and public goods provision, and structure how pervasively ideological worldviews are instilled in the fighting cadre.

Evidence

The book draws primarily on comparative case studies, backed by extensive field research in South Asia and Northern Ireland. A set of within-conflict comparisons of armed groups in the civil wars in Afghanistan (1979-present), Kashmir (1988-2003), and Sri Lanka (1972-2009) form the bulk of the book. Each chapter examines the major insurgent groups within each war and tests my theory's ability to explain the pattern of cohesion and fragmentation. This approach holds broadly constant structural conditions and allows for fine-grained comparisons across groups within wars.

I also rely on a set of other comparisons drawn from around the world to assess the external validity of the argument. I examine the conflicts in Northern Ireland, Palestinian territories, southern Philippines, Iraq, and Colombia to show the reach of the argument, while also examining potentially disconfirming cases in El Salvador and French Indochina. This research strategy provides greater confidence that my findings are not simply artifacts of the core cases in the book, and also allows for new insights.

Outline

Target Audience

This book has two intended audiences. The first is academics interested in civil war, insurgency and counterinsurgency, international security, and South Asia. This academic audience includes scholars of both comparative politics and international relations, as well as academics in policy schools. The study of civil conflict spans distinct subfields and approaches, which makes the book more likely to appeal to a wide swath of the field. It also may be of interest to students of social movements in political science and sociology.

The second audience is broader: policymakers, analysts, military and intelligence professionals, and the interested public who want a better understanding of the dynamics of contemporary civil conflict. The book's focus on Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Sri Lanka – three prominent and important wars – gives it further appeal to this audience, as do the array of shorter cases from around the world. The book directly addresses key policy questions, from when

counterinsurgency succeeds to how drug smuggling and state sponsorship affect insurgent groups, and thus has an opportunity to speak to a number of audiences.

Fit with Cornell University Press and Broader Field

The book would complement but not replicate existing work published by Cornell. It fits particularly nicely with Sinno's *Organizations at War in Afghanistan and Beyond*, which focuses on the consequences of organizational structure, and with Straus' *Order of Genocide* and Fuji's *Killing Neighbors*, which examine links between local networks and violence. The book also fits with the research on civil war found in Valentino's *Final Solutions*, Hassner's *War on Sacred Grounds*, Mueller's *Remnants of Wars*, Lischer's *Dangerous Sanctuaries*, Edelstein's *Occupational Hazards*, Radnitz's *Weapons of the Wealthy*, and Salehyan's *Rebels Without Borders*. It is distinct from these books in its focus on the origins of insurgent groups and in its comparative field research in South Asia.

The book also fits into a broader emerging line of research on insurgency and counterinsurgency. Weinstein's *Inside Rebellion*, Kalyvas' *Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Wood's *Insurgent Collective Action and the Civil War in El Salvador*, and Petersen's *Resistance and Rebellion* (all from Cambridge) are examples of how detailed, micro-level studies of conflicts can generate broader theoretical and policy relevance. These works have attracted significant attention and my book is directly in dialogue with them. In Princeton's list, my book is related to Fortna's *Does Peacekeeping Work?*, Toft's *Securing the Peace*, and Doyle and Sambanis' *Making War and Building Peace*.

Production Timeline

A completed draft of the manuscript should be finished by the summer of 2012. The introduction and theory chapters are largely complete. The Kashmir and Sri Lanka chapters primarily need to be edited down. The Afghanistan and external validity chapters are currently being researched and written.