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978-0-521-86077-2 - Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence

Jeremy M. Weinstein

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

### VARIETIES OF REBELLION

#### *Lukumbi Village, Uganda, 1981*

Word of the rebels came first in the form of rumors. “There are men who move at night,” he was told. “They live deep in the forest.” “They are strangers to this zone.” But Samuel had never seen them with his own eyes.<sup>1</sup>

Government soldiers, however, were known to Samuel and his neighbors. They came in packs, demanding to know where the guerrillas were hiding. Out of fear, people would sometimes offer information. Samuel recalled one person who volunteered to take government soldiers to a rebel camp. They shot him from behind as he led them into the forest. The government troops claimed he was plotting to have them ambushed.

Soldiers maintained a regular presence in the village: knocking on doors, hurling threats, and exacting punishment on those who refused to cooperate. Most of the soldiers were of another ethnic group from another region of the country, and the enmity between locals and those in the military stretched back decades into Uganda’s colonial and immediate postcolonial experience. Political sympathies in the village thus lay with the men hiding in the forest. But the soldiers had some local collaborators – representatives of the government’s political party, chiefs who owed their authority and wealth to political elites in the capital, and groups of youths from minority ethnic groups in the area. They informed government soldiers about the presence of guerrilla units and identified community members who were offering support and comfort to the insurgents.

<sup>1</sup> Interview, Semuto, November 19(B), 2000. The letter following the interview date is used to distinguish among multiple interviews conducted on a single day. “Samuel” is used as a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of the respondent.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Inside Rebellion

These collaborators often disappeared. At the time, Samuel knew nothing more than that the rebels had come to take them away. He later learned that informers underwent a process of political indoctrination in the forest. If they accepted responsibility for their actions and agreed to support the rebellion, the rebels welcomed them into the movement. If they refused, they were killed.

So, the first time Samuel saw the rebels, he was scared. It was 2:00 in the morning. He and his father were outside herding cattle that had escaped from their kraal. They were stunned to see a group of men moving in the dark, entering the forest with bags on their heads. His father shrieked, catching the attention of the men who rushed over quickly to quiet them down. Samuel recognized a local leader among the men in the group. He spoke to the father and encouraged him to offer his support to the rebels. But he also warned them: “in case you report us, we will come and kill you with your children.”

Soon after this encounter, Samuel and his father began to supply food to the insurgents in the forest. Although they feared the rebels at first, the behavior of the government soldiers solidified their support for the insurgency. Government troops continued to wreak havoc in the village, killing people and raping women. Samuel recalled thinking that the rebels were different. While the government soldiers were intent on killing them, the insurgents played by different rules.

In the ensuing months, the rebels dispatched political cadres into the villages, tasked with organizing resistance councils in support of the movement. Formed following a public meeting in which cadres described the political goals of the insurgency, the councils were elected by community members to administer the areas with “justice and impartiality.” They had primary responsibility for maintaining security in the zone; local militias were organized to track the movements of government troops and warn of impending attacks. The councils also ensured a steady supply of recruits to the insurgents, using their local knowledge to root out thieves and lazy types. Samuel moved quickly to join a resistance council for his village.

This brought him into closer contact with the rebels. He found that the rebels were “so disciplined because they hated the government soldiers for their misconduct among the civilians.” There were acts of indiscipline because, as Samuel remembered, “it’s human.” But resistance councils were encouraged to report this misbehavior to insurgent commanders. And these violations of the “laws the soldiers had” were punished.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

### *Maríngué Village, Mozambique, 1979*

Luis was only seventeen when the rebels arrived without warning in September 1979.<sup>2</sup> They first cornered a local leader and sliced off his ear, accusing him of supporting the government. The insurgents then gathered the population in the center of the village. They killed seven people in a public display of violence. Each victim was accused of having family members that supported the government. Young boys were also abducted that day, Luis recalled – taken away from the village and not seen again during the course of the war.

The rebels remained in the village for three months following the first attack. Life under the insurgents was difficult. Luis's father was a wealthy cultivator who was quickly identified by the group as it sought to secure sources of food. The rebels arrived at their home one day, on the outskirts of the village, and shot their guns in the air, demanding contributions of food. Luis' family complied by offering a contribution, but it was deemed insufficient. The soldiers then robbed them of all the food in their house. Neighbors also suffered at the hands of the rebels. Luis explained that husbands with beautiful wives were obligated to make trips to the rebels' base to deliver food; when they arrived, the wife would be asked to stay, while the husband was sent home. If they refused to leave their wives behind, they were beaten severely.

On occasion, the insurgents spoke of "political things." They organized one public meeting in which a rebel commander explained the purposes of the war: "they were fighting against the government and its system," Luis remembered. An antigovernment posture had resonance in central Mozambique because the government was viewed as biased in favor of the ethnic groups of the south. Moreover, its campaign of socialist transformation in the countryside, which was just getting underway, threatened to undermine local practices of governance, land rights, and cultivation that were highly valued by the population. But the message of the insurgents was clouded by their behavior. Theft, abduction, and rape were common practices even during this first visit of the rebels to Maríngué.

The rebels' stay in the village was short-lived. After three months, a government counterattack forced the insurgents to flee to the bush. To protect people and make the village easier to defend, dispersed patterns of land

<sup>2</sup> Interview, Maríngué, May 23(B), 2001. "Luis" is used as a pseudonym to protect the anonymity of the respondent.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Inside Rebellion

holding were quickly replaced by communal villages at the government's behest. On a daily basis, villagers went to the fields to work the land, but returned to the confines of the communal village at night, where they were watched closely by soldiers and locally organized militias.

The insurgents returned in 1982, again without warning. They launched a daylight raid on four communal villages near Marínguè, including the one where Luis and his family now stayed. When villagers heard the shooting, they fled to the bush and hid wherever they could. The rebels looted household belongings and then burned each and every home to the ground. Government soldiers were unable to repel the attack, and members of the local militia, like everyone else, fled quickly to protect their lives. Luis and his family, along with many of his neighbors, remained on the outskirts of the village. They constructed ramshackle houses near the land they worked and never returned to the center of town.

They elected instead to live in a zone of rebel influence. The village itself was too much of a target, and government forces had proven unable to offer them protection. But insurgent areas were not much better. Luis described life under the rebels as "very bad." People were forced to make weekly contributions of food to the insurgents; those who refused were punished severely. Civilians had no choice but to comply with the requests made by the rebels. While Luis understood the purposes of their military campaign, he could not make sense of their coercive tactics or brutality.

An old African saying likens the experience of civilians in wartime to that of the grass underneath the feet of dueling elephants. The grass is trampled by two outside forces over which it has little control. But it would be a mistake to imagine that civilians lack agency in all civil wars or that the abuse of noncombatants is simply a by-product of the battle between opposing armies. Civilian populations – their interests, their resources, and their support – figure centrally in the political and military struggles that plague many developing countries. And we see in these stories that the civilian experience of war differs across contexts. Understanding why requires a sustained look "inside rebellion" in an effort to determine why some insurgents who choose to challenge the state turn out to be thugs, and others, revolutionaries.

### *The Puzzle*

One conservative estimate of the direct death toll from civil wars since 1945 exceeds 16 million, more than five times as many people as have died

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

in interstate wars.<sup>3</sup> In the 1990s, over 90 percent of deaths caused by war occurred in internal conflicts.<sup>4</sup> The lingering effects of violence, including disease, famine, and the destruction of economic and social infrastructure, substantially (even exponentially) increase the numbers of those who perish as a result of fighting in developing countries.<sup>5</sup>

Journalists and scholars who write about civil war assume that violence against civilians is one of its fundamental characteristics. War correspondents report on untold human suffering in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Colombia but never stop to ask why the war in Congo has claimed nearly 100,000 lives directly in battle, while Colombia's civil war, which has lasted more than four times as long, is responsible for only one-fifth the killing. Analysts explore the tactics and strategies of insurgents fighting in the bush in Sierra Leone and Nepal but fail to grapple with the reality that while rebels in both countries sought to capture state power and remove undemocratic regimes, those in Sierra Leone hacked, raped, and pillaged their way through the countryside in a war that cost more than 10,000 lives, whereas insurgents in Nepal transformed local structures of governance, mobilized large numbers of civilians, and killed fewer than 1,000 people in nearly 10 years of fighting. Scholars discuss the hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians who have perished in Chechnya and Mozambique but never think to inquire why the Russian government bears responsibility for most of the killing in Chechnya, but insurgent forces were largely responsible for the violence in southern Africa. From conflict to conflict, we are made keenly aware that the primary victims of violence in civil war are noncombatants caught in the midst of fighting. Yet we know surprisingly little about why some civil wars are so much more violent than others or why some groups commit horrendous atrocities and others do not.

Scholars who write about the violence that characterizes civil war tend to begin by exploring state behavior as a critical first step in making sense

<sup>3</sup> James Fearon and David Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97 (2003): 75–90.

<sup>4</sup> A new dataset on battle deaths in civil war offers a strong empirical basis for comparing human suffering in warfare across conflicts and over time. See Bethany Lacina and Nils Petter Gleditsch, "Monitoring Trends in Global Combat: A New Dataset of Battle Deaths," *European Journal of Population* 21 (2005): 145–66.

<sup>5</sup> The best recent study documenting the indirect consequences of war is Hazem Ghojarah, Paul Huth, and Bruce Russett, "Civil Wars Kill and Maim People – Long After the Shooting Stops," *American Political Science Review* 97 (2003): 189–202.

Cambridge University Press

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Jeremy M. Weinstein

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Inside Rebellion

of the consequences of warfare.<sup>6</sup> One cannot fault that starting point: some of the most extreme cases of civilian brutalization have come at the hands of national governments and their militaries. State violence has included communist mass killings such as those in the Soviet Union, China, and Cambodia; ethnic genocides like those of Armenia, Nazi Germany, and Rwanda; and counterinsurgent massacres of the type perpetrated in Guatemala and Afghanistan. Yet rebel groups often share responsibility for the violence inflicted upon noncombatants, and the tactics, strategies, and patterns of violence exhibited by nonstate actors in civil war remain largely unexplored.

Some rebel groups abuse noncombatant populations, while others exhibit restraint, discipline, and control. Insurgent leaders in some countries transform local structures of governance, engaging civilians in the process of affecting political change; others build administrative machineries that do nothing more than extract resources. In some contexts, rebel groups kill their victims selectively, while in other environments violence appears indiscriminate, even random. Movements sometimes loot and destroy the property of civilian populations, while at other times they protect it from government attacks. In this book, I present a theory that accounts for the different strategies pursued by rebel groups in civil war, explaining why patterns of insurgent violence vary so much across conflicts. By “violence,” I refer both to the *character* of insurgent attacks (the extent to which groups use force selectively to punish and prevent defection) and its aggregate *level* (the number of killings, abductions, rapes, and so on). Drawing on interviews with nearly two hundred combatants and civilians in three countries, I build my explanation by looking inside rebel organizations at their origins and structures. In focusing on origins, I highlight the factors that shape a rebel group’s membership. In examining structures, I demonstrate how the profile of a group’s membership constrains the organizational strategies its leaders can pursue, the structures of governance it can build in liberated

<sup>6</sup> There is no shortage of sophisticated research on the causes of mass killing as perpetrated by states. For recent academic perspectives, see James Ron, *Frontiers and Ghettos: State Violence in Serbia and Israel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), and Benjamin Valentino, *Final Solutions: Mass Killing and Genocide in the Twentieth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004). For a more popular history of genocide in the twentieth century, see Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003).

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

zones, and its capacity to use violence in a strategic, selective, and limited fashion.

### *The Argument*

I argue that differences in how rebel groups employ violence are a consequence of variation in the initial conditions that leaders confront. Factors that raise or lower the barriers to organization by insurgent leaders – in particular whether material resources to finance warfare can be easily mobilized without civilian consent – shape the types of individuals who elect to participate, the sorts of organizations that emerge to fight civil wars, and the strategies of violence that develop in practice. My central finding is that rebel groups that emerge in environments rich in natural resources or with the external support of an outside patron tend to commit high levels of indiscriminate violence; movements that arise in resource-poor contexts perpetrate far fewer abuses and employ violence selectively and strategically.

### *The Mechanisms*

Fighting an insurgency involves building an organization capable of challenging a government militarily. Many barriers to the organization of insurgency exist. Potential rebels must raise capital to finance the logistics of a military campaign, recruit foot soldiers willing to risk their lives in battle against a stronger government force, and generate support from civilians who can supply food, information about the location and strategies of government forces, and valuable labor in support of the movement. In confronting these challenges, rebel leaders may draw on two types of endowments: economic endowments, which come from diverse sources, including natural resource extraction, taxation, criminal activity, or external patronage; and social endowments, including shared beliefs, expectations, and norms that may exist in (or be mobilized from within) certain ethnic, religious, cultural, or ideological groups.

This book shows how the initial endowments to which rebel leaders have access shape the organizations that emerge and the ways in which different rebel groups ultimately use violence. First, resources shape the membership profile of a rebel group. That is, initial endowments constrain the set of recruitment tactics leaders can employ, altering the benefits and costs of joining in such a way as to affect the calculations individuals make

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Excerpt

[More information](#)**Inside Rebellion**

about whether to participate in an insurgency. My argument begins, then, with the most fundamental – and perhaps most studied – aspect of rebellion: participation.<sup>7</sup>

Attracting recruits to participate in civil war is not an easy task. The work of rebellion is difficult and potentially dangerous. And when a rebel group sweeps to power and transforms the political regime in a country, it is difficult for it to exclude nonparticipants from the new freedoms that come with political change.<sup>8</sup> So while the potential costs of participation make joining unattractive, the promised benefits may not tip the balance. The onus is on leaders of rebel groups to develop appeals that motivate participation in high-risk collective action.

Recognizing that potential recruits trade off the costs and benefits of participation, rebel leaders often offer selective incentives to motivate participation.<sup>9</sup> As Samuel Popkin first argued, they find ways to distribute material benefits such that participants are rewarded for exerting effort and nonparticipants are excluded. At the same time, rebel leaders develop appeals around ethnic, religious, cultural, or ideological claims, reminding individuals of their membership in or affiliation with aggrieved groups, playing on their allegiance to a particular set of ideals, or activating norms of cooperation and reciprocity in order to motivate participation.

This book builds on the insight that recruitment strategies depend a great deal on the incentives that are likely to motivate individual participation, but it extends the discussion to reflect an additional consideration. I break with the common assumption that all potential recruits are of the same value to a rebel group, recognizing instead that rebel groups can attract both

<sup>7</sup> James Scott's research on the sources of peasant protest provides the intellectual foundation for many subsequent studies of political violence and civil war, including this one. In exploring the causes of anticolonial movements and protests against the expansion of markets, Scott highlighted the ways in which market forces disrupted traditional peasant ways of life, threatening local institutions and, ultimately, peasants' ability to survive. His focus on the logic underlying an individual's calculus to resist social change is reflected in the major studies that have followed. While many have varied their assumptions about how peasants behave, key contributions have continued in Scott's tradition of highlighting the choices peasants make. See *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

<sup>8</sup> Olson's classic statement on barriers to collective action has influenced subsequent work on organization in contexts ranging from insurgency and war to political organization and community action. See *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Popkin, *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Introduction

high-commitment and low-commitment individuals. High-commitment individuals are *investors*, dedicated to the cause of the organization and willing to make costly investments today in return for the promise of rewards in the future. Low-commitment individuals are *consumers*, seeking short-term gains from participation. The problem is that even though potential recruits are aware of their level of commitment, rebel leaders do not have access to this information. The recruitment process therefore involves both motivating participation and attempting to attract the right kind of recruit to the organization.

A group's endowments shape the potential strategies that its leaders can employ.<sup>10</sup> Groups with access to economic resources are able to translate those endowments into selective incentives, or payoffs, in order to motivate individuals to join the rebellion. Resource-constrained groups must develop alternative strategies. They make promises about the material benefits that may accrue to individuals in the future and the collective benefits that the country will reap from a rebel victory, but these promises are only credible where leaders draw on social endowments that tie them to potential followers by means of ethnic, religious, or ideological ties. They can also mobilize within ethnic networks, religious organizations, formal and informal associations, and communities to activate norms and expectations that promote or reinforce cooperation.

Different initial endowments, then, create a situation in which there is variation in the opportunity that participation presents to potential rebels, and rebel groups attract different types of people depending on the costs and benefits of participation. Where participation is risky and short-term gains are unlikely, rebel groups tend to attract only the most committed investors. I call the movements in which they engage *activist* rebellions. Where

<sup>10</sup> My focus on variation in the initial conditions rebel leaders confront has its roots in the literature on social movements. Resource mobilization theories focus attention on how the resources and organizational capabilities of groups help to explain their mobilization potential. See J. Craig Jenkins, "Resource Mobilization Theory and the Study of Social Movements," *Annual Review of Sociology* 9 (1983): 527–53. A second strain of argument highlights the importance of political opportunities in paving the way for collective action. Exogenous changes in the environment, such as openings in access to power, electoral realignment, and cleavages within elite groups, make it possible for resource-poor movements to emerge. A key work in the literature on political opportunity structures is Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). More recent research links variations in endowments and opportunities to the strategies movement leaders employ, demonstrating how broad structural factors constrain the repertoires of action available to different groups. See Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *The Dynamics of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Cambridge University Press

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Jeremy M. Weinstein

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Inside Rebellion

participation involves fewer risks and individuals can expect to be rewarded immediately for their involvement, groups tend to attract consumers, who take part in what I call *opportunistic* rebellions.

The membership profile of a rebellion then affects its internal organization and the strategies it pursues in war. Rebel leaders confront a series of difficult choices as they design their organizations and engage civilians. Two merit particular attention here. They must decide how to ensure that orders are followed and they must extract the resources they need from civilians without destroying their base of support and sustenance. The nature of the strategic dilemma leaders face at each step in this process of organizational growth, and the options available to them as they respond, are themselves a function of the resource environment in which the group formed and its profile of recruits. Activist movements can maintain internal discipline by drawing on established norms and networks enabling them to decentralize power within their armies; opportunistic rebellions must permit indiscipline in order to maintain their membership, while holding on to the reins of military strategy. Activist insurgents can often obtain resources by striking cooperative bargains with noncombatant populations; opportunistic groups tend to employ coercive tactics because they cannot credibly commit to non-abusive behavior.

The outcome I ultimately seek to explain is how rebel groups use violence. Linking differences in the initial conditions leaders confront to variation in the membership and internal structure of groups helps to make sense of the character and level of violence committed by rebels against civilian populations. Structures of internal control and external governance shape the capacity of rebel groups to discipline the behavior of their members and influence the expectations of civilians about the types of behavior they will see when the rebels come to town. Where social and political ties can be employed to develop effective organizations, rebel leaders have a greater capacity to use violence strategically. Because they have clear guidelines about how combatants should behave and strong mechanisms for enforcing discipline, activist insurgencies are better able to selectively identify targets, implement attacks, and discipline the use of force. The short-term orientation of opportunistic insurgencies, on the other hand, tends to be detrimental to civilian populations. Without local ties, opportunistic groups have more difficulty identifying potential defectors and are prone to make mistakes. A constant demand for short-term rewards also drives combatants to loot, destroy property, and attack indiscriminately. A group's early missteps then initiate a cycle of civilian resistance and retribution by group members