1

Understanding Rebel Organizations

1.1 TWO COMMANDERS

By the time the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) launched its invasion of Liberia on Christmas Eve, 1989, General Johnson T. Leamah[1] had been a member of the group for three years. Leamah was once a soldier in Liberia's national army but fled the country when the dictator, Samuel Doe, purged members of Leamah's Gio ethnic group from the military. Languishing in the refugee camps of neighboring Côte d'Ivoire, Leamah heard that Charles Taylor, a former government official, had secured support from Libya and other patrons to overthrow the brutal Doe regime. Leamah was initially skeptical but decided to join Taylor when he learned that he was related to Taylor's wife, Agnes – she shared Leamah's Gio ethnicity and grew up in a village close to his home. As far as Leamah could tell, Charles Taylor had connections to every government and businessman in the region and offered the best chance for one day returning home.

After two years of fighting, Leamah commanded nearly four thousand soldiers from his base in the southeastern Liberian town of Buchanan and had authority over several hundred square miles. His primary responsibility was to secure the area from attacks, but Leamah was also expected to protect civilians and provide security for the multinational corporations that operated in NPFL territory. The job was not easy. In addition to planning military operations, Leamah deployed escorts

[1] To preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of the informants, these vignettes are based on commanders who died during the war. Their experiences are similar to those of other high-level commanders in their respective rebel groups, many of whom were interviewed for this project.

for logging trucks and constructed a training base for new recruits. He organized a system of taxation to collect food without looting civilians and punished soldiers who misbehaved. Because of these actions, civilians in many areas were protected from abuse and continued to farm and engage in market activity.[2]

Leamah's efforts were rewarded by Charles Taylor. Taylor made frequent, impromptu visits to Leamah's territory and gave him $15,000 in cash or more at each visit. Leamah was grateful for the rewards and knew that other, less successful commanders had been transferred to the frontlines or killed as punishment for failure. He also expected to benefit after the war. Although Leamah died from sickness before the 1997 elections brought Charles Taylor to power, Taylor appointed Leamah's successor, Roland Duo, as head of security for a major timber corporation, a position that opened the door to lucrative commercial opportunities. The other high-level commanders in the group were also rewarded for their service.

Two years after the NPFL invaded Liberia, a new rebel group, the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO), emerged to challenge the NPFL's dominance of Liberia's countryside. ULIMO's forces were led by Thomas Karla who, like Leamah, began his career in Libera's military. When the government collapsed in the face of the NPFL invasion, Karla fled to the refugee camps in Sierra Leone, where he joined a self-defense group that eventually grew into an insurgency. Karla distrusted the group's leader, Alhaji Kromah, but Kromah seemed to offer the only chance for securing weapons and support for the struggling soldiers.

After invading Liberia, Karla commanded ULIMO's forces from his base in the northwest diamond fields. Leader Alhaji Kromah largely failed to deliver on his promises of securing support for the group, and Commander Karla struggled to keep his forces supplied with ammunition and food. Although he initially set up training camps and organized food distribution for his troops, he soon abandoned these efforts. Karla didn't expect to be rewarded by Alhaji Kromah after the war, so he decided to profit while he still had the chance. Rather than focusing on military training and discipline, Karla and his troops increasingly turned their attention to mining diamonds and looting civilians.

[2] While civilians in NPFL-controlled towns were largely protected, civilians in remote or unstable areas, and civilians from particular ethnic groups, faced intense abuse at the hands of NPFL forces. These patterns of abuse are discussed at length in later chapters.

Tensions between Karla and Alhaji Kromah erupted into armed confrontation in 1994 over the allocation of positions in a transitional government. Karla was wounded in the fighting, and broke off with other high-ranking commanders to form a new faction. Over the next year, the two ULIMO factions battled each other fiercely and preyed on the civilians caught in-between. Villages in ULIMO territory were depopulated as civilians hid in the forest or fled to displacement camps. While people in NPFL territory were able to continue farming and trading, civilians in ULIMO territory foraged for food in the jungle and lived in constant fear.

1.2 THREE THEMES OF THE BOOK

These two vignettes illustrate the three principal themes of the book. The first theme is the vast differences in the quality of life for civilians and the coherence of rebel armies during civil war that remain unexplained in standard accounts of civil war violence. In the past half-century, some 18 million people lost their lives in violent conflict; many more died from war-related malnutrition and disease (Ghobarath, Huth, and Russett 2003). Existing theories argue that civilians suffer most when control over territory is unstable (Kalyvas 2006; Olson 1993); when rebels have access to economic resources (Weinstein 2007); or when rebel groups are ethnically diverse (Humphreys and Weinstein 2006).

But these existing theories cannot explain why the ULIMO rebels preyed on civilians in even the most stable areas of control, or why the NPFL rebels, with access to tremendous economic resources, provided security for civilians in many parts of their territory. Theories of ethnic composition cannot explain the variation in behavior between these two ethnically diverse groups, or the high levels of abuse committed by other, ethnically homogeneous rebel groups in Liberia's war.

The literature also struggles to explain why some rebel groups break into competing, violent factions while other groups remain unified throughout the war. Using an original dataset, I find that more than 32% of rebel groups in the last three decades factionalized at some point in their history. Understanding rebel factionalization holds more than theoretical significance. In Liberia, ULIMO's split unleashed a wave of looting, massacres, and abuse. Across conflicts, factionalization makes civil wars longer, more violent, and more difficult for international intervention (Cunningham 2006; Stedman 2002).

The second theme of the book is the agency problem that exists within rebel organizations, and especially between rebel leaders and

their top commanders. Leaders allocate weapons and manpower to commanders who have authority over a territory and its resources. Inducing commanders to follow orders is a challenge for leaders who cannot rely on externally enforced contracts. Rebel leaders achieve cooperation through on-the-spot cash payments and promises of future rewards – but these promises are only credible if personal bonds create trust between the leader and commander.

In the vignettes, Johnson T. Leamah made great efforts to implement Charles Taylor's policies because he was handsomely rewarded by Taylor during the war and also expected to benefit afterward. Thomas Karla, by contrast, devoted his efforts to diamond mining and looting because he distrusted ULIMO's leader and received no financial support from him. The contracts between leader and commander, while crucial for the well-being of the population, are subject to a range of agency issues that have not yet been systematically analyzed.

The third theme of the book is the role of external patrons in supporting and influencing rebel armies. External patrons have access to the financial resources, military supplies, and logistics necessary for large-scale rebellion. While many accounts of insurgent success point to the importance of foreign support, the varied interests in the civil war outcomes by foreign patrons have not been sufficiently recognized. Some patrons have an incentive to support qualified, trustworthy leaders and provide resources to strengthen leader control, while others benefit by installing weak leaders who can be more easily manipulated to serve the patron's interests.

1.3 THE ARGUMENT

I argue that the level of security provided by a rebel group and the group's risk of factionalization depend on the leader's ability to offer incentives to top commanders, which itself depends on the motives of external patrons that supply resources to the group. Leaders exert effective control over their commanders when they can offer on-the-spot cash payments and credible promises of future rewards. Effective control induces commanders to maintain a disciplined fighting force and work toward achieving group goals, rather than personal profit. Control is weakened in rebel groups when commanders have access to valuable lootable resources, or when the commander's actions are not easily observed by the rebel leader. These commanders are less likely to train and discipline their forces and have greater incentives to use group resources for opportunistic ends.

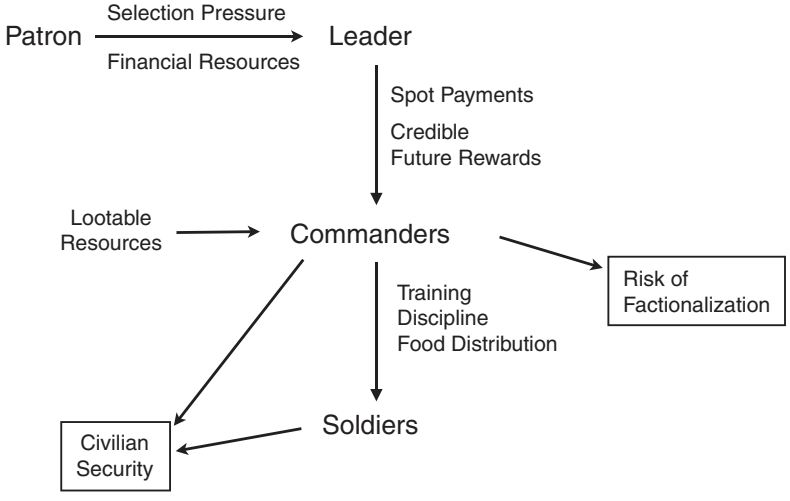

FIGURE 1.1. A principal–agent model of rebel organization.

The relationship between the rebel leader and top commanders is shaped by the influence of external patrons. Some external actors, such as diaspora communities, benefit from disciplined rebel groups with strong leaders. These actors have preferences that align with those of the rebels and are motivated to provide ample financial and military resources to qualified leaders who are trusted by their troops. The result is a more cohesive, disciplined rebel army. Other patrons, whose preferences conflict with those of the group, maximize their leverage over the group's activities by supporting relatively weak leaders and withholding financial resources that could strengthen leader control. Unable to offer cash incentives or credible future rewards, these leaders allow their troops to loot locals in exchange for a minimal level of loyalty and are thus less able to prevent factionalization. Figure 1.1 depicts the theoretical model. Table 1.1 lists the theory's primary hypotheses. These and other related hypotheses will be explained in detail and formally derived in Chapters 2 and 3.

1.4 THE MECHANISMS

The fundamental challenge of rebel organization is the lack of externally enforced contracts among rebel members. This challenge distinguishes rebel groups from other organizations such as corporations or government agencies. Consider the owner of a factory. The owner relies on

TABLE 1.1. *Hypotheses from the Theory of Commander Incentives*

Theory of Commander Incentives	
H1.	The rebel leader's access to financial resources corresponds to lower levels of civilian abuse and less risk of factionalization.
H2.	Lootable resources in the rebel group's territory correspond to higher levels of civilian abuse and a greater risk of factionalization.
H3.	The commander's expectation of future rewards corresponds to lower levels of civilian abuse and less risk of factionalization.
H4.	Civilian abuse follows a spatial pattern determined by the leader's monitoring abilities and access to incentives.
H5.	Peace talks increase the risk of group factionalization.
H6.	Patrons with preferences that conflict with those of the rebels support groups with less trustworthy leaders and provide fewer resources.

managers and workers to produce goods, and these employees follow orders in exchange for a salary. If the owner fails to pay the salaries, the workers can sue for damages. Similarly, if the manager steals from the factory, the owner can call the police and have the manager arrested.

In some ways, a rebel leader is similar to the factory owner. The rebel leader has certain goals and must recruit commanders and soldiers to achieve those goals. But unlike the factory owner, a rebel leader cannot write contracts. Commanders and soldiers cannot sue the rebel leader if they fail to receive their promised salaries or rewards. And the rebel leader cannot call on the police if commanders decide to steal group resources or refuse to follow orders.

Rather than formal contracts, rebel groups rely on social networks and on-the-spot rewards. Social bonds between the leader and group members, such as family ties or a history of prewar interaction, create trust and allow for credible promises of future rewards. Leaders also use cash payments to convince members to implement orders or to reward them for good behavior. The most effective leaders are both trusted by their troops and possess substantial cash resources.

My core insight, based on several years of careful observations in civil war zones, is that civilian welfare and rebel discipline depend on the interaction between rebel leaders and their top commanders. Rebel leaders generally have an incentive to create security in their territory

because it allows for reliable access to food, military intelligence, and new recruits. Security also facilitates large-scale resource extraction, humanitarian aid operations, and other activities. The provision of security in rebel territory depends on the rebel commanders, who have access to significant weapons and resources and directly monitor the behavior of soldiers. Although security provides benefits to the rebel leader, commanders might find more benefit in looting or exploiting resources than in the complex administrative tasks required to maintain order.

Rebel leaders exert effective control over their commanders when they can offer on-the-spot cash payments and credible promises of future rewards. When properly motivated in these ways, commanders have incentives to train and discipline their soldiers and organize systems of food distribution. When leaders cannot offer these incentives, commanders are more likely to allow soldiers to loot and use group resources for personal enrichment at the expense of group goals. Leader control is further weakened when commanders have access to valuable lootable resources such as alluvial diamonds, which increase the opportunity cost of following orders. The leader has little power to curb this predatory behavior unless she[3] can offer strong incentives for cooperation; attempts to punish the troops could trigger factionalization or large-scale defection from the group.

This interaction between leader and commander is an example of a principal–agent relationship, similar to standard economic models and previously analyzed in the context of rebellion by Scott Gates (2002).[4] The assumptions of the theory are simply that rebel members are rational and respond to incentives. When rebel leaders provide greater incentives, commanders are more willing to undertake costly actions on behalf of the leader; when the opportunity costs of following orders become steeper, commanders are less willing to implement the leader's orders.

But this relationship, by itself, is only a partial explanation for rebel behavior. The deeper question is: Why do some leaders have access to financial resources and credible promises, while other leaders do not?

To become a force capable of challenging the state, a rebel group needs access to weapons, ammunition, food, and manpower. To some extent,

3 Throughout the book, I refer to generic rebel leaders as "she," commanders as "he," and external patrons as "it."

4 The theory presented here differs from Gates' model by adding an expectation of future rewards and endogenizing the rebel leader's access to resources by including an external patron as a strategic actor. Gates, however, also considers the effects of competition with government forces, a factor that is not considered here.

rebel groups can generate these resources on their own. Family members and friends can form the core group of supporters. A daring raid on a police station or army barracks can yield some weapons and ammunition. And a network of sympathizers can provide food and safe houses. For decades, small bands of fighters can evade capture and remain a thorn in the side of the government.

Expanding beyond a small-scale insurgency, however, usually requires the assistance of an external patron. In the dataset compiled for this study, I find that approximately 75% of the seventy-three rebel groups worldwide that were powerful enough to control territory between 1980 and 2003 depended on an external patron to supply money or military equipment.[5] Large-scale military offensives require complicated logistics and regular shipments of ammunition. To acquire these supplies, rebel groups either need access to cash and arms dealers, or the support of a foreign government. Without external support, few rebel groups emerge from obscurity.

The importance of external support allows patrons to influence the rebel group and its activities. In the most extreme cases, external patrons select the rebel leader and decide where the forces will be deployed. Even when the patron does not play such an active role, rebel groups have an incentive to select leaders who are acceptable to external actors and thus most likely to attract outside support.

Patrons provide support to rebel groups in exchange for access to resources and commercial opportunities, or to achieve policy goals. These motives have important implications for what kind of leader the patron will support and the amount of resources the patron will provide. Patrons that benefit from disciplined rebel groups are more inclined to support well-qualified leaders, are trusted by their men, and are more likely to supply money and resources to strengthen the leader's control in the group. These patrons also have an incentive to pressure the leader to maintain discipline among the rebel forces. A timber company, for example, would not tolerate looting of its machinery by the rebels it supports. And a diaspora community might reconsider whether to send

[5] Other studies also highlight the importance of external support for rebellion. Foreign governments provided military support to 44.1% of the 331 nonstate armed groups that were active during 1945–2003, excluding coups, according to the EACD dataset (Cunningham et al 2009). RAND's (2001) survey of insurgent movements finds that forty-four of the seventy-four rebel groups (59.5%) active during 1991–2000 received state support that was crucial for their survival. These figures ignore the role of corporations, arms dealers, and other economic actors in civil war, and thus provide a lower-bound estimate.

money to rebels that abuse their family members. In these situations, the incentives of the patron and the leader are aligned, and they work together to create a cohesive, committed rebel force.

Other patrons have goals that are not in line with those of the rebels. A foreign government, for example, might support rebels to gain leverage over a neighboring state. To use the rebels as a bargaining chip, the patron needs to be able to influence the group's activities. If a rebel leader becomes too powerful, the group might deviate from the patron's plans and any political gains for the patron would be lost. In such cases, the patron has an incentive to support relatively weak, untrustworthy leaders who could not maintain power in the group without the patron's assistance. The patron provides just enough support to keep the leader in power, but withholds resources that the leader could use to solidify her position. If the leader ever disobeys orders, the patron can cut off support and the leader will be overthrown. With few resources and no credible promises, the leader lets her commanders and soldiers fend for themselves to acquire food and the spoils of war. These groups prey on civilians and face a high risk of factionalization.

The few rebel groups that form without external support are able to do so either because of tight bonds and credible promises among their core members or because enough weapons and resources are up for grabs in the conflict area. In the first case, groups built on trust are likely to be disciplined and provide security to civilians even without access to financial resources. To risk their lives to attack government positions with few military supplies, the members of these home grown insurgencies must be committed to the cause and believe that their actions are not simply enriching the rebel leader at their expense.

When groups form based on available resources, the behavior of rebel groups depends on the lootability of those resources. During the collapse of the Soviet Union, for example, a flood of weapons from large arms caches in Georgia provided the supplies necessary to form dozens of militias that preyed on civilians (Driscoll 2009). Unable to control access to weapons or other resources, militia leaders could not prevent their men from defecting to rival militias or abusing civilians. By contrast, when Slovenia seceded from Yugoslavia, the rebel leader Milan Kucan maintained control over the arms caches and used his access to the semi-autonomous Slovenian government's finances to provide salaries and maintain discipline among his forces.

The behavior of rebel groups follows from the dynamic interaction between resources and leadership. The leader's authority in the group

depends on her control of the group's financial resources and her credible promises of future rewards – and both are influenced by the leader's partnerships with external patrons. Leader control declines when commanders and troops can profit from lootable resources or acquire their own weapons and ammunition in the conflict area. Rebel group behavior can change over time if new resources are captured or if patrons reconsider their support. The decision of patrons to support rebellion owes more to geography and geopolitics than to the characteristics of the group itself. While better leaders can produce more disciplined and effective forces, ultimately even the best leaders are at the mercy of international forces beyond their control.

1.5 EXISTING LITERATURE ON REBELLION

Much of the early literature on twentieth-century insurgencies was produced by the revolutionaries themselves. These writers, including Mao Tse-tung (1937), Che Guevara ([1961] 1998), and Vo Nguyen Giap (1970), emphasize the importance of civilian support and cooperation. According to these practitioners, creating systems of governance and maintaining popular support are central to the survival of rebel organizations. For decades, scholars assumed that rebel groups would behave with restraint toward civilians (Laqueur [1976] 2004: 335–337; Rice 1990: 59).

The end of the Cold War challenged this romanticized notion of rebellion and led some observers to proclaim the beginning of a new era, one in which many rebel groups are simply criminal enterprises, rather than political movements with legitimate grievances and ideologies (e.g. Kaplan 1994). This faulty distinction, however, emerged from incomplete and biased information, rather than a substantive change in rebel group behavior (Kalyvas 2001). Throughout history, rebel groups have been known to abuse and prey on civilians.[6]

In recent years a burgeoning literature has accumulated valuable knowledge on rebel organization.[7] This section briefly discusses the literature's main areas of concern, and how the theory presented in this book contributes to, and modifies, these core insights.

[6] For example, civilian abuse was rampant among certain militias during the American Civil War (Kalyvas 2006: 108) as well as among royalist forces during the English Civil War (Carlton 1998).

[7] For an overview of the conflict literature, see Blattman and Miguel (2010).