Conclusion

David Bowden

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Chapter 1

Conclusion

Why do some conflicts have multiple rebel groups, while in other cases dissidents form a single, cohesive group? As I discuss in Chapter **??**, the importance of this question has been well established. Civil wars with multiple rebel groups last longer than others (Cunningham 2006; Akcinaroglu 2012), are less likely to end in a peace agreement (Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2009), have more bases on which conflict could recur (Atlas and Licklider 1999), and produce more fatalities. In short, civil wars with multiple rebel groups tend to be among the most severe conflicts. Yet we know little about the causes of such structures. No existing work addresses the formation of new rebel groups during conflicts, and existing work on the splintering and merging of existing rebel groups produces somewhat contradictory findings (see for example Christia's (2012) focus on power versus Staniland's (2014) emphasis on social structure). My dissertation seeks to fill this gap in the literature.

In Chapter **??** I articulate a theoretical framework of rebel movement politics from which I derive predictions about rebel movement structure. I start from the assumption that rebel groups are drawn from a broader pool of dissidents, which includes peaceful activists in addition to combatants. The loyalty of this dissident pool should be crucially important to

most rebel groups as a source of material support, recruits, and political leverage. Rebel groups thus have an incentive to be responsive to these individuals. Failure to represent the interests of these non-violent dissidents will leave a rebel group vulnerable to competition. New recruits may look to form a new rebel group rather than joining an existing one, and entrepreneurial members of existing rebel groups may form splinter organizations in hopes of capturing the supporters of their previous organization. Thus it is the interaction of the preferences of ordinary dissidents and the decisions of rebel elites that determines rebel movement structure.

One circumstance in which rebel elites may fail to adequately adapt to constituent preferences is the onset of repression. The threat of physical violence should increase the risk of being a non-violent dissident, and in turn decrease the *relative* risk of fighting. This should lead some individuals who previously declined to participate in rebellion to take up arms. This influx of new recruits will not always be a boon to existing rebel groups, however. Repression should also tend to induce greater levels of ethnic identification, as repression is often targeted disproportionately at certain ethnic groups, ethnic groups often have militias and political organizations that make them a useful basis for organizing defense against repression, and appeals to co-ethnic states is often an effective means of securing external support. Thus existing rebel groups may struggle to win over these new recruits or even maintain their existing support, unless they happen to already place strong emphasis on ethnic identity. Otherwise, new organizations making more credible ethnicity-based appeals are likely to attract the new recruits and steal civilian support from existing rebel groups. Repression should therefore be associated with both the formation of entirely new rebel groups, and of organizations that splinter from existing rebel groups. To offset the loss of capability that results from splintering, rebels should be open to alliances and mergers with co-ethnic groups. In short, repression should lead rebel movements to both grow and reorganize around ethnic identity.

I test the micro-level foundations of this theory in Chapter **??** using data from the Afrobarometer survey. Consistent with my expectations, I find that individuals who have experienced an attack are more likely than others to express willingness to participate in violence, and also more likely to identify with their ethnic group rather than their nation. Greater levels of repression at the national level are also associated with higher probabilities of ethnic identification. The results hold after performing coarsened exact matching, suggesting that there are not systematic observable differences between individuals who have been attacked and individuals who have not.

In Chapter **??** I examine the formation of new rebel groups during ongoing conflicts. As I predict, the probability that new groups will enter a conflict increases in response to increases in repression. Contrary to my expectations, the ethnic diversity of a country does not limit the scope of my theory — new rebel groups form even at relatively high and low levels of ethnic diversity. Adding support for my theory is the finding that the rebel groups which join ongoing conflicts are more likely than others to draw their support from a single ethnic group. This suggests that the link between repression and the formation of new groups is in fact related to ethnic identity, rather than some alternative process. I supplement these quantitative findings with a qualitative case study of the separatist movements in Burma. The initiation of the separatist movement in Shan State strongly supports my theory, as the rebellion emerged after a wave of abuses by government forces, and placed a strong emphasis on Shan identity. The Arakan case suggests several nuances, most notably the ability of religion to create divisions within ethnic groups.

I test my predictions regarding splintering and alliance formation among existing rebel groups in Chapter **??**. Consistent with my hypotheses, I find that increases in repression are associated with an increased risk of splintering for existing rebel groups, though the relationship is not completely robust. I do not find evidence for my prediction that splinter organizations should be more likely than others to draw their support from a

single ethnic group. I find support for my prediction that repression should increase the probability of ethnically-homogeneous alliances forming, while it does not have the hypothesized negative relationship with the formation of multi-ethnic alliances. Burma again provides qualitative evidence in support of my theory, as the emergence of splinter organizations such as the Karenni National Progressive Party and Shan State Independence Army each appear to be driven by a desire to provide stronger representation for their respective ethnic groups. The formation of alliances among the Shan rebels in response to a counterinsurgency campaign provides further support for my framework.

1.1 Implications

The central implication of this research is that repression can trigger a sectarian spiral, whereby previously non-violent individuals join the fighting, and existing rebels reorganize around ethnic identity. I find that repression increases the number of new rebel groups, splinter organizations, and ethnically-homogeneous alliances. Given the rarity of the latter, it is safe to assume that in most conflicts, repression increases the total number of rebel groups.[1] The level of repression against civilians explains a substantial portion of the variation in the number of rebel groups in a conflict, and I find multiple forms of evidence suggesting that the mechanism is related to increased ethnic identification.

This conclusion contrasts with some prominent existing works. Christia (2012) argues that rebel realignments are a function of the distribution of power between rebel coalitions and the government. When rebels are weaker than the government they will seek alliances. When rebels are stronger, coalitions tend to fragment so as to minimize the members of people with whom they must share private benefits. Her theory does not predict that splintering and certain types of alliance formation would be closely related, as I find them to

[1] A logit model (not reported) predicting which conflict years have multiple rebel groups without distinguishing between joiners, splinters, and alliances confirms this, as the level of repression is a strong predictor of multiple groups.

be. This also contrasts with Kalyvas and Kocher (2007), who expects that rebel movements will generally become more cohesive over time. I show that the trend is contingent on repression. While Christia (2012) does expect that ethnicity should form an important component of the identity of new alliances, she believes such identities are deployed instrumentally. My individual-level findings suggest that the members and supporters of rebel groups may sincerely adopt such identities, however, suggesting that rebel elites cannot switch identities at will as Christia expects. My findings are consistent with the work of Lewis (2016), who argues that ethnicity is not important to the initial organization of rebellion, but ethnic rebellions are disproportionately likely to thrive. The findings here suggest that rebellions without a clear ethnic identity should be vulnerable to splintering and losing recruits to new, more explicitly ethnic rival organizations.

My findings also contrast those of Staniland (2014), who views internal social structure as the key determinant of rebel group cohesion. I find instead that an external factor, government repression, plays a surprisingly large role in shaping rebel movement structure. To some extent, however, this is a disagreement over the relative importance of the two factors. Staniland (2014) essentially assumes that repression will occur, and seeks to explain variation in resilience to it. Still, I find that repression is generally a strong predictor of splintering, while organizational characteristics are not.

This research also suggests a strong connection between the preferences of rank-and-file dissidents and the broader patterns of rebel organization. Existing work tends to conceptualize rebel groups as the private armies of warlords (Christia 2012), who maintain control either through personal loyalty or the provision of private benefits (Lichbach 1995; Weinstein 2007). This viewpoint suggests that rebel elites have little need to be responsive to their members. My findings that both individual preferences and rebel movement structure respond to repression suggests that ordinary rebels do in fact have a consequential amount of agency. When leaders fail to accommodate their preferences, rebel group members have

exit options in the form of splinter organizations and entirely new rebel groups. This implies that there should be a surprising amount of accountability within rebel organizations. At the same time, the formation of new rebel groups is not uncommon, suggesting that rebel elites often fail to respond to their members.

Finally, this research suggests at least one clear policy recommendation. Previous work has shown that conflicts with multiple rebel groups are especially severe and difficult to resolve. I find that repression is a strong predictor of two different processes that can result in greater numbers of rebel groups. This suggests that governments facing rebellion might be well-served to refrain from widespread repression, and instead target their counterinsurgency operations against individuals who have already joined a rebel group to the greatest extent possible. In the following section I discuss avenues for future research on why governments repress despite these the negative consequences. My results also bolster the argument that outside states and the broader international community should endeavor to protect civilians during civil wars. While doing so has long been understood to be valuable from a humanitarian standpoint, my work suggests that the potential for such policies to limit conflict severity should place them in the self-interest neighboring states and any others likely to be affected by the fighting. It should be noted, however, that interventions of this sort are not foolproof. Notably, a UN effort to create a humanitarian zone in Srebrenica, Bosnia in 1995 actually facilitated the massacre of the civilians gathered there. These sorts of humanitarian efforts should thus only be undertaken with a sufficiently large deployment to ensure the security of the civilians under protection.

1.2 Future Research

While this project makes significant progress toward explaining rebel movement structure, numerous avenues for future research remain. These include both refinements to the

analyses I present here, as well as new analyses suggested by my results.

The individual-level analysis could be refined on several dimensions in future work. One limitation of the existing results is their inability to identify the source of repression. It would be possible to make inferences about the likely perpetrator by matching the survey results, which include the respondent's city, to a geocoded dataset of battles, such as ACLED (Raleigh 2012). If most of the violent events in a particular locale are perpetrated by the government, it might be reasonable to assume that it is the source of most attacks on individuals in that area. By contrast, this would not be a safe assumption in territory that is clearly controlled by a rebel group. The use of an external conflict data source could also address the issue of temporal ordering. The Afrobarometer data does not specify whether individuals were attacked before or after they engaged in violence themselves. With geocoded conflict data one could examine whether the average probability of participation in violence or of ethnic identification in a geographic area changes after violent events there. Finally, a more robust method of causal inference that can account for unobservable sources of bias would enhance the validity of the results. While finding a valid instrument at the individual level may be difficult, it should be possible to instrument for the country-level human rights measure.

While general surveys such as the Afrobarometer provide useful data on individual attitudes toward violence and ethnicity, they do not provide tests of every element of my theory. Original survey or experimental work exploring individual attitudes towards rebel groups would potentially strengthen my arguments regarding the connection between individual attitudes and rebel movement structure. For instance, a finding that individuals who experience repression from the government become less supportive of existing rebel groups would provide strong support for my claim that dissident civilians are key drivers of change to the configuration of the rebel movement.

The analysis of new rebel group formation could also benefit from several improvements.

Adding a causal inference technique to the analysis would greatly enhance the validity of the results. While I did not find oil revenue to be a viable instrumental variable, it is possible that a suitable proxy for repression exists, such as colonial history. An alternative option could be panel data techniques that facilitate causal inference without the need for exogenous instruments (Kim and Frees 2007). A more detailed analysis of the attributes of the rebel groups that join ongoing conflicts could also lend further support to my theoretical framework. While the finding that joining groups are more likely than others to draw support from a single ethnic group lends credibility to my argument, an examination of the platform and recruiting appeals of these groups could strengthen the argument that group formation is motivated by a desire to place greater emphasis on ethnic identity. Relatedly, the relationships between newly formed rebel groups and others should be explored. Enhanced ethnic identification might lead to conflict between rebel groups of differing ethnicities. Alternatively, competition for civilian support might produce conflict between co-ethnic rebel groups.

The group formation chapter also raises important questions about government strategy. My finding that repression tends to increase the number of rebel groups makes its use by governments a puzzle. Future work should examine the government's strategic calculus in more detail. It is possible that repression has some hidden benefit that outweighs the cost of additional rebel groups. My findings in Chapter **??** that repression is negatively related to voting suggests one possible answers — governments are essentially accepting an increase in the level of violence by dissidents in exchange for a reduction in the overall size of the dissident movement. Relatedly, while repression increases the number of individuals willing to use violence, it also provokes division among dissidents along ethnic lines. The latter consequence might be sufficiently desirable as part of a divide-and-conquer strategy to justify the former. Finally, the repression puzzle may be a result of incomplete information. It could be the case the repression offers some possibility of total defeat of the dissident movement, and governments accept the risk of inspiring new rebel groups

in pursuit of this outcome. In the Arab Spring, for example, Bahrain used repression to quickly put down the opposition movement there. While the tactic backfired in Syria, the possibility of an outcome similar to Bahrain may have made it a worthwhile gamble.

The analysis of rebel group realignment also has room for improvement. While the findings for both splintering and alliance formation are mostly consistent with my predictions, the results are less robust than would be ideal. This is likely due in part to the rarity of both outcomes. This could likely be remedied, however, as the current analysis only looks at the most extreme instances of splintering and merging — those which result in the formation of new rebel organizations with distinct names. A less extreme, and likely more prevalent form of splintering is the loss of membership, either to rival rebel groups, or to desertion. While this phenomenon would be quite difficult to measure for the entire post-World War II sample, it may be possible to track changes in rebel group membership for a smaller sample of conflicts. With respect to alliances, I consider only cases where formerly independent rebel groups merge to a significant degree. There are undoubtedly many instances of meaningful cooperation between rebel groups that fall short of formal integration. Indeed, a forthcoming data project (Asal and Rethemeyer 2015) should facilitate analysis of such behavior. Including these less extreme examples of splintering and alliance formation should mitigate concerns about the rarity of these outcomes. The concerns from the group formation chapter also apply, as this analysis would benefit from a causal inference strategy and closer inspection of the rationale that rebel elites use to justify the creation of their new groups.

At a broader level, other processes affecting rebel movement structure should be explored. I do not claim to provide a complete account of rebel movement structure, but rather a probabilistic theory of what I believe to be one of the most common pathways to multiple rebel groups. Other factors undoubtedly operate in some cases. For example, many instances of splintering occur not over ethnic lines, but over a divide between moderates

who wish to participate in a peace process, and hardliners who wish to continue fighting. While this phenomenon has received some attention in the context of negotiating peace agreements (Stedman 1997), there is little work on the conditions under which this is likely, nor on the implications for the subsequent fighting. I argue that attracting external support may be one reason for increased ethnic identification following repression, but do not explore external sponsorship in detail. In some cases external states may have a substantial amount of agency, however, which merits greater attention. For example, the Gulf Cooperation Council has repeatedly sought to establish an alliance of relatively moderate Sunni rebel groups in Syria. Finally, future work should explore factors that run in the opposite direction, fostering greater cohesion within rebel movements. The Latin American rebellions are generally much more cohesive than those in other regions. The explanation could relate to my theory, perhaps being the result of more fluid ethnic identities than are seen in most parts of the world. Alternatively, the explanation might involve the extreme levels of external sponsorship seen during the Cold War, or some as-yet-undiscovered factor.

Finally, the severity of conflicts that experience this cycle of increased ethnic identification suggests a need for research on ways to reverse the process. Increased sectarianism can increase conflict severity, and as we have seen in places such as Afghanistan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, can hinder the prospects for lasting peace. Preventing repression is an obvious policy recommendation of this research. Yet, that is more easily said than done, and is of little use in cases where it has already occurred. The most commonly cited factor that can increase national unity is external conflict (Tilly 1992; Gibler, Hutchison, and Miller 2012). Obviously, however, this is not a tenable solution. A few studies have suggested that economic development might promote national identities at the expense of ethnic ones (Miguel 2004), but much more research is needed in this area.

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