

# **The Failure of an Imagined Community**

## **Organizational Hierarchy and the Split of Rebel Groups**

### **Abstract**

Rebel groups are often susceptible to schism. In this paper, we depart from preexisting group-level analyses to explain how elite members of an insurgent organization decide whether to break away from the parent organization and form a splinter group. Drawing on datasets about two rebel groups - the Inner Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party and the Chinese Communist Party's Red Army in *early 20th-century China*, we present a hierarchy-centric theory of the rebel group's split. We argue that an elite member's decisions are first shaped by her position in the organizational hierarchy. The organizational hierarchy institutionalizes the distribution of power among affiliated members. This differentiation creates incentives for elites with divergent preferences to make a bid for the leadership. The hierarchy also induces status conflicts between higher-ranked leaders and subordinates. Both mechanisms lead to leadership disputes when the control of incumbents is weakened. Individual-level variations are accounted for by the outcomes of the feuds. When there are clear winners and losers, losers break off from the parent group. On the other hand, when there is a stalemate, low-ranking elites quit and create a splinter unit.