

Bullets to Ballots: Maoists and the Lure of Democracy in India |Dissertation Abstract

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How do insurgents give up arms to join the very political process they had once sought to overthrow? Much has been written on why men rebel, but we know very little about how rebels quit. In my dissertation I show that Maoist rebels in India quit through exit networks that co-evolve with legitimate/state and illegitimate/rebel politics in conflict areas. Maoist retirement is very high in the Southern state of Telangana due to emergence of a ‘harmonic’ exit network that weaves together multiple stakeholders in an amalgam of roles and alliances, who work in sync to build momentum for exit and manage myriad uncertainties of reintegration. In contrast, Maoist retirement is very low in the northern state of Jharkhand because exit network there is so disjoint and ‘discordant’ that it exacerbates mistrust and fear among key players, deterring retirement significantly. This argument links macro (environmental), meso (organizational) and micro (individual) conditions to explain emergence of these two distinct pathways of rebel retirement.

In building this argument, I depart from existing writings on rebel retirement in psychology, sociology, and criminology that identify ‘push’ (like disillusionment with personnel, strategy and ideology, fatigue/burnout) and ‘pull’ factors (like lucrative surrender package, amnesty, desires to establish a family) influencing rebel retirement. The counterinsurgency literature on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) is focused too narrowly on confiscation of arms and livelihood concerns of ex-combatants. I show that in between push-pull factors that affect insurgents’ *desire* to exit, and post-exit DDR programs, is the protracted process of disengagement whereby rebels establish contact with the outside and plan post-retirement safety and livelihood strategies.

In Telangana, this process of disengagement transpires through embedded horizontal exit networks that are ‘harmonic’ due to synchronic co-operation of two categories of actors: movement entrepreneurs and reintegration stewards. Movement entrepreneurs are highly visible opinion makers who maintain one foot in democracy and one foot in the banned movement. On the one hand, they nurture a nascent movement and drum up support for rebel causes. On the other hand, they also critique rebel excesses and concurrently nudge the frontiers of democracy bit by bit to eventually (and inadvertently) lure core constituents out of the movement. As they generate an impetus for exit within rebel organization, reintegration stewards resolve crucial last-mile problems in the process of disengagement locally. Employed in diverse professions like law enforcement, district courts, village administration, government schools or rural health centers, these everyday people weave a bulwark of all major stakeholders through an informal but effective system of *quid pro quo*. In an atmosphere marked by mistrust and fear, reintegration stewards resolve the problem of credible commitment locally by ensuring that erstwhile enemies do not kill retiring rebels as soon as they laid down arms. Thus movement entrepreneurs and reintegration stewards work in harmony to construct an exit network that encourages rebels in Telangana to reintegrate across small towns, cities and villages, in a wide variety of blue and white collar professions.

In sharp contrast, retired rebels in Jharkhand confront a ‘discordant’ exit network that grows out of corrupt nexus of mafia-Maoist-police-contractor-bureaucrat-politicians, who become key stakeholders in Maoist mobilization in the state. This nexus, combined with dwindling mass base and overlapping caste/class division, breeds a thin, disjoint, discordant exit network mired in fear and mistrust. Dominated by violent crossfire among key stakeholders, the grey areas between democracy and rebels in Jharkhand hinders emergence of organic intellectuals, intensifies civilian resentment, compels retiring rebels to retain illegal arms, and blocks rebel social reintegration. This stifles the lure of democracy and discourages the rank and file of Maoists from contemplating retirement. Based on individual life histories as well as large n district level surrender data, I link emergence of harmonic versus discordant exit networks to state-level politics, movement lineage, mobilization strategies, caste/class polarization, and local resource endowments. This question of rebel retirement, examined in the case of Maoists in India, is also significant in a wide range of insurgent contexts such as Al Qaida, ISIS, Afghanistan, Iraq, Ireland, Nepal, El Salvador, Bolivia, Peru, and others.