

# Strategic Pandering and Rebel Recruitment

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## ABSTRACT

Rebel groups in civil wars sometimes gain the support of individuals or groups that should, by all appearances, logically be opposed to them. This counterintuitive result is explained through a model of rebel recruitment that describes how rebel leaders can pander to aggrieved populations, presenting themselves as in sympathy with and providing solutions to these grievances, gaining the population's allegiance by taking advantage of an information asymmetry about the leaders' true preferences. The grievances rebel leaders exploit are frequently of a symbolic or emotional, rather than an economic, nature. The model includes non-material incentives as goods and demonstrates the rationality of both rebel leaders and recruits. The empirical applicability of the model is demonstrated through a case study of Renamo, a violent, foreign-sponsored proxy rebel group in Mozambique that was able to pander to rural populations with grievances about state repression of traditional life in order to successfully gain a voluntary domestic constituency. The generalizability of the model is then tested through case studies, drawing on a mix of archival and secondary sources, of the Nicaraguan FDN, with similar origins to Renamo, and the NPFL in Liberia, which presents greater variation. The model and case studies explicate a previous under-theorized phenomenon in the study of rebel recruitment and offer new opportunities for academic and policy analysis of rebel organizations.

## BACKGROUND

### Argument in Brief

- Rebel leaders have a strategic incentive to tailor their message to the political and social geography in which they find themselves, and since they possess private information about their true beliefs and intentions, they may mislead individuals into pledging support to a leadership ultimately unconcerned with their grievances and well-being
- Individuals may thus adhere to a group believing that it will represent their interests, while ultimately leaders will channel group efforts toward the leadership's own self-interested ends

### Existing Literature

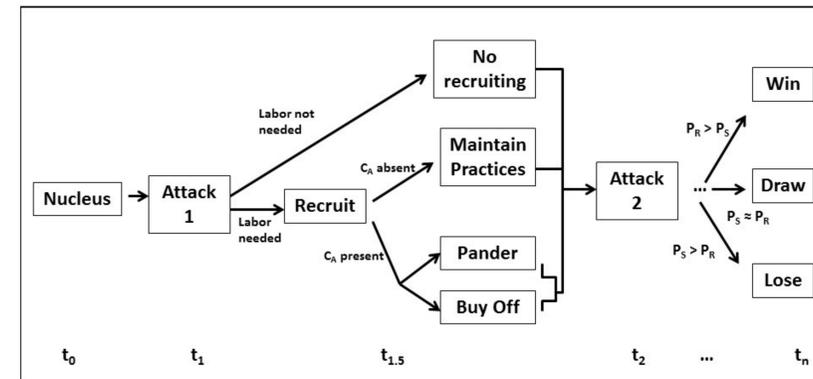
- Industrial Organization of Violence:** Bates (2011), built on by Weinstein (2007) and Beber and Blattman (2013). Rational, self-interested actors, with groups as "internal labor markets." People who join are seeking a return on their commitment; in a broad sense, they are ambitious. Those who recruit them are also seeking to identify those who can best perform" (Bates 2011, 7).
- Misinformation or manipulation of information asymmetries by rebel leaders:** Tilly (1964, ix): "manipulative leaders direct the diffuse anger of their countrymen to their own ends;" Galula (1964, 18): an insurgent leader benefits from "tactical manipulation" of causes or grievances, and has "much to gain by selecting an assortment of causes especially tailored for the various groups in the society that he is seeking to attract;" Lichbach (1994, 89): rebel leaders "manipulate information so as to present their story in the best light," setting up "a 'smoke screen' for their rank-and-file followers"
- Material and non-material motivations in decision making:** Non-material factors can be modeled "as 'goods' of inherent value that individuals consume by fighting" (Blattman and Miguel 2010, 14-15; see also Gates 2002, 114). Wood (2003) and Petersen (2002, 2011) examine the role of emotions in motivating fighters.
- Many potential explanations within a given group or conflict as to who joins or supports an armed group and why they do so:** This is suggested by survey and systematic interview evidence from Africa (Bøås and Hatløy 2008; Humphreys and Weinstein 2008; Pugel 2007), Asia (Barter 2014; Devkota and van Teijlingen 2012), and Latin America (Arjona and Kalyvas 2012; de Posada 2009).

## OBJECTIVES

- Theory-building paper defining and illustrating strategic pandering
- Explain puzzling phenomenon in rebel recruitment
- Explore insights generated inductively from Renamo case with case studies of the FDN and NPFL to establish the generalizability of the framework
- Lay the foundations for future studies exploring strategic pandering and contribute to a growing literature on different strategies of rebel recruitment and motivations among rebel soldiers and supporters

## THEORY

- Three actors:** the rebel group leadership (*R*), the state (*S*), and the civilian population (*C*).
- At **T<sub>0</sub>**, leaders have formed a group and have core recruits, who may be motivated by commitment to group goals or political gain.
- At **T<sub>1</sub>**, leaders decide to commence attacks. Population is assumed to be neutral.
- After the initiation of attacks, the relative capabilities of the state and rebels are revealed. Only if the state is extraordinarily weak should a win be possible to achieve at T<sub>1</sub>, and the rebel group is assumed to rationally only initiate an attack if it believes it possesses sufficient strength not to be wiped out at the first engagement.
- At **T<sub>1.5</sub>**, rebel leaders able to update their assessment of the probability of victory (or the achievement of other lesser goals) and what resources are needed to achieve this. If an increase in labor is needed, leaders must determine the most efficient and effective means of recruitment that to accomplish their goals.
- Updating takes place with every round of the contest (i.e. battle), so decision to change practices may come at **T<sub>2</sub> or later**.
- Suppose that the state has engaged in a practice or package of practices that have **aggrieved a portion of the population (CA)**, creating observable source of opposition.
- CA civilians provide a pool of potential recruits that should be easier to attract, given its preexisting opposition to the state. Demonstrated preference of the aggrieved population is to have its grievances addressed, so rebel leadership thus has a strategic incentive to present itself as in sympathy with and providing a possible solution to this grievance in order to capture CA's support.
- The rebel group could try to buy off the CA group's support, but if it can recruit CA through pandering, this has a lower cost, and may engender stronger loyalty due to CA's belief in a shared identity. Depending on the size of the CA constituency, its recruitment may provide the rebel group with the critical mass necessary to achieve a more favorable outcome in its war with the state, be this outright victory, a negotiated settlement, or a stalemate.
- The outcome of the war ultimately depends on the relative **distribution of power (p)** between the state and the rebels. Power encompasses any material or non-material resource that may improve the capabilities and probability of victory for either side: capital stocks, labor stocks, external support, legitimacy, resolve, group cohesion, etc. For a decisive outcome, a **win (w)** or **loss (l)**, to occur, the balance of power must cross a threshold such that the weaker side can no longer survive. Otherwise, a **draw (d)**, with a stalemate or a negotiated settlement resulting.



Flow chart of rebel recruitment over the course of a civil war

## CASE SELECTION

- Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (Renamo):** motivating case, created by Rhodesian intelligence and sponsored by Rhodesia and South Africa, fought in civil war from 1977-1992, with Renamo launching low-level insurgency in 2014
- Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense (FDN):** similar case to Renamo, brought together by CIA and Honduran and Argentine militaries, fought in civil war from 1981-1990
- National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL):** different development, formed by Liberian dissidents with limited foreign support, fought in First Liberian Civil War from 1989-1996

## CASE EVIDENCE

### Renamo

- Renamo were incredibly violent, destructive, and rapacious, aimed at destabilizing Mozambique on directives of foreign, white-supremacist regimes, yet they still managed to gain popular support in many areas.
- CA constituency created by discontent with socialist government's collectivization policies and marginalization of traditional political and religious leaders.
- Renamo sought to exploit grievances, "fashion[ing] a message based on respect for customary practices and 'traditional' authorities" (Pitcher 1998, 130). "Renamo's defining feature during the war was that it was whatever Frelimo was not. The organization sought to use those aspects of the existing system that angered people the most in the areas where it operated" (Manning 1998, 178).

### FDN

- Initial members and leadership drawn from hated National Guard of toppled Somoza regime, pulled together by CIA and others to destabilize Nicaragua.
- CA constituency created by rural discontent with revolutionary FSLN government over unmet expectations, agricultural policies, land tenure issues, conflict between the FSLN and the Catholic Church hierarchy, weapons seizures, pressure to join FSLN-led associations, ethnic tensions, and eventually a military draft.
- FDN manipulated grievances, with one commander saying "You know as well as I do that a peasant has nothing in his head but straw. He doesn't think about things the way that somebody who went to school does. Two or three stories well-told, and he will join you" (Eich and Rincón 1985, 101-102).

### NPFL

- CA constituency among members of Gio and Mano ethnic groups who had been persecuted by government and others disappointed with government service delivery.
- About 10% of fighters reported having joined the group because they supported its political goals (Pugel 2007, 36).
- Leader Charles Taylor was a social and political chameleon, with "perhaps the key to his survival and success...his uncanny ability to discern and adopt the persona that is most likely to win over his audience" (Pham 2004, 96).
- Taylor "publicly proclaimed that the NPFL was committed to helping the African people get rid of 'dictatorial and corrupt' regimes and to restore democracy not only in Liberia but in all of West Africa," yet "his evident aim was to rule," and he fought "fought only for [his] own ambitions to hold power for its own sake" (Gershoni 1997, 60-61).



A Renamo recruit receiving his weapon

## CONCLUSIONS

- Rebel leaders can use strategic pandering as a low-cost means to gain voluntary support and recruits, despite their true aims.
- This can give the group a veneer of legitimacy internationally, and increased recruits and resources increase the likelihood of the group winning or gaining concessions.
- Looking within rebel groups allows us to understand the rationality and motivations of both leaders and participants or civilian supporters.

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