Strategic Pandering and Rebel Recruitment
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ABSTRACT

Rebel groups in civil wars sometimes gain the support of individuals or groups that, 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 persuade to aggregated 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, 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 persuade 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.

THEORY

- **Objectives**
  - **Theory-building paper defining and illustrating strategic pandering**
  - **Explain puzzling phenomena 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**

- **Case Selection**
  - **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 Libyan 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, 278).
  - **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” (Ellis 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’s 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. They then went on to say that they did not want war,” and he fought “for his own ambitions to hold power for its own sake” (Gershoni 1997, 60–61).

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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