Rebel Governance

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Rebel governance addresses the relationship between insurgent movements and civilians in their immediate social environments. It has been defined as "the set of actions insurgents engage in to regulate the social, political, and economic life of noncombatants during war" (Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015, 3). It focuses on consolidated insurgent movements in civil wars, in particular those groups which seek to govern local populations. Rebel governance is based on the premise that insurgent coercion is an insufficient medium- to long-term strategy to obtain local support, and accordingly insurgent groups seek to interact with surrounding civilians in ways which would garner them local legitimacy and popularity. In contrast to other approaches centered on the more headline-grabbing forms of violent interactions between insurgent movements and civilians (Mampilly 2011, 6), rebel governance looks at the more banal and more frequent forms of nonviolent interaction between civilians and insurgent groups. As Arjona summarizes "armed actors do not only kill, but also create institutions, endorse ideologies, form alliances with local actors, provide public goods, recruit and in so doing, transform the societies in which they operate" (2016, 2).

The relationship between insurgent movements and their potential supporters was long a focus of the writings of the practitioners of violence, including both insurgent theorists like Che Guevara and Mao Zedong and their military adversaries engaged in counterinsurgency. However, in recent decades this relationship was substantially neglected in academic research on civil wars. This gap in the field has been addressed by the emergence of work centered on rebel governance pioneered primarily by three scholars: Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir, and Zachariah Mampilly. Collectively, in their various works they have outlined three scope conditions for rebel governance: insurgent movements must control territory, the territory must be home to a resident population, and the insurgent force must be capable of and willing to use violence (Kasfir 2015, 25). They also emphasize that rebel governance is a dialectical process, shaped by civilian agency and preexisting forms of local political organization which negotiate and set parameters for insurgent movements regarding the extent and priorities of rebel governance implemented. The approach has been successfully applied to movements of differing ideologies and a broad range of cultural and political contexts.

Forms of rebel governance

Rebel governance is generally characterized by the provision of services to local populations. The form and content of these services are shaped by the resources and ideological orientation of the insurgent movements, the preferences of the "governed" communities, the preexisting level of state capacity and institutions, and by the changing military balance of power of the conflict itself. Nevertheless, certain patterns of insurgent service provision tend to recur. Insurgent movements prioritize upholding security and stability, a task which, as armed fighters,

they are usually well equipped to achieve at little expense. This can then evolve into a broader form of dispute resolution or parallel insurgent justice system. In the context of generalized disorder, the provision of order and rudimentary justice is a popular strategy to win local legitimacy (Furlan 2020, 482–483). A second form of rebel governance focuses on the provision of health and education services; these can range from informal classes or periodic medical check-ups held by individual guerrillas to the construction of schools and clinics. The final form of governance is the provision of representative forums where mechanisms are formalized so that civilians can communicate their preferences (e.g. for land reform or to object to specific patterns of insurgent recruitment) to insurgent movements (Kasfir 2005).

Avenues for further research

Rebel governance is of course a relatively recent development in the study of civil wars and some of its limitations are slowly becoming apparent. Principally, as it only considers insurgent movements which boast territorial control, it can only account for established movements, thus it is unable to explain the onset of insurgencies or those movements, arguably the majority, that never control territory. Although, territorial control does enable more ambitious and potentially institutionalized forms of rebel governance, its absence does not preclude insurgent movements from providing nascent forms of governance. Indeed, the provision of services and governance can actually lead to enhanced credibility for insurgent movements and contribute to eventually obtaining territorial control (O'Connor 2021). This weakness can be mitigated by a more conscious merging of rebel governance literature with contentious politics and social movement approaches which facilitate the analysis of movements from their onset through consolidation and also spatially disaggregate insurgent mobilizations by looking at both areas under insurgent territorial control and areas with more marginal forms of insurgent mobilization. Furthermore, extensive ethnographic research is the most suitable method of accessing the required form of data. This raises a number of security issues for researchers and their teams in the field and ethical concerns regarding obligations toward the movements and communities being researched (Gutiérrez Danton 2018). Obtaining reliable data is a particularly acute challenge due to the relatively transient and mundane interactions comprising practices of rebel governance in cases of historical insurgencies, where incumbent and insurgent primary sources can often prove partisan and misleading.

SEE ALSO: Civil Wars and Social Movements; Contentious Politics; Guerrilla Movements; Ideology; Nationalist Movements; Peasant Movements; Recruitment; Repertoires of Contention; Terrorist Movements; Violence and Social Movements.

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