BOOK REVIEW

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Insurgent governance has existed throughout the history of domestic warfare. Yet, until very recently social science researchers have given the phenomena relatively short shrift. To be sure, a wealth of literature has explored the origins of political control, the process of “state building,” and the historical evolution of modern states. A few quality case analyses have also described specific instances of insurgent governance and discussed in some detail the nature and quality of insurgent-civilian relations. However, few (if any) existing studies have attempted to build a theory of rebel rule or to systematically analyze the factors that contribute to successful insurgent governance. Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life during Civil War represents among the first texts in what is likely to become a rich research agenda that addresses this important issue. It skillfully blends theoretical insights into the factors that explain effective governance with rich ethnographic research to produce a thought-provoking analysis of how rebels (attempt) to govern the populations under their control.

The central puzzle presented in Rebel Rulers is simple yet intriguing: what explains the variation in the extent of rebel governance observed during civil war? Rather than simply focus on the factors that facilitate physical control over populations and territory, which has been addressed in much detail elsewhere, Mampilly addresses the question of how rebels govern in the areas in which they are able to assert control. As such, this book focuses explicitly on the variations in rebel governance outcomes observed during civil wars. He outlines three components of “effective” governance: security provision, dispute resolutions mechanisms, and capacity to provide public goods. The provision of these governance features thus measures a group’s effectiveness in governing.

Drawing on impressive fieldwork conducted within areas controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Sri Lanka), the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army (Sudan), and the Rally for Congolese Democracy (DRC), Mampilly develops a framework for analyzing rebel governance. He eschews strictly political economy or purely ideological explanations of rebel preferences and behaviors and presents a multifaceted explanation for variations in governance. He focuses on the combination of rebel leaders’ initial preferences as well as the complex web of interactions between civilians, insurgents, the government, and international actors that emerge and change over the course of the conflict. The web of factors that explain variation in governance is therefore complex, but as Mampilly argues a “single master variable” is virtually impossible to identify. He therefore examines factors at multiple levels of interaction, including pressures from below, dynamics from within, and interests from above that shape both the willingness and capacity of insurgents to successfully implement and maintain governance structures.

The demands civilians place on potential rulers to provide the aforementioned components of governance represents the primary force from below. According to Mampilly’s argument, citizen demands are a product of the state’s historical success in penetrating society and governing the population. Insurgents are more likely to be successful governors in areas in which the state had previously maintained an effective system of governance. The rather counterintuitive hypothesis flows from the argument that previous periods of successful state governance habituate the population into expecting a high degree of service provision and order from would-be rulers.

Within group dynamics that affect governance include the ethnic composition of the rebel organization and its constituents, group ideology, internal leadership cleavages, and the intensity of the conflict. In brief, ethnic or secessionist insurgencies increase rebel leadership’s desire to provide quality governance because the limited constituency from which the group can draw support constrains other mobilization strategies. Compared to groups that attempt to appeal to a broad swath of populations, minority...
insurgents are more susceptible to monitoring and criticism from their ethnic constituency. Group ideology plays a role, but only insomuch as it helps shape group organizational structures. According to the argument, Maoist-style organizational structures are more responsive to the peasantry and more likely to provide services to the population. Internal cleavages, by contrast, undermine the ability of insurgents to establish successful governance structures. The presence of a unified command—resulting either from subjugation or incorporation of competing voices—fosters effective governance. Lastly, periods of relative peace facilitate the establishment and entrenchment of insurgent governance. When the group is able to at least temporarily divert resources from military engagement to improving services, it is better able to consolidate control over the population and improve governance.

The third level of factors—interests and interactions from above—represents a particularly interesting aspect of the governance narrative. It is also the element that stands to make the largest contribution to the literature on civilian-rebel relations. Few works have attempted to untangle the complicated relationships that exist among transnational civil society organizations, rebels, and civilians (we could also include states in this mix). Mampilly begins to unpack these complex relationships, arguing that the processes of bargaining and competition that go on between insurgents and aid organizations significantly shapes rebel governance strategies and success. This is an area that deserves much greater attention and is likely to yield fascinating insights. Problematically, Mampilly’s hypotheses on these interactions seem somewhat at odds. On the one hand, he asserts that the ability to coopt humanitarian organizations should promote effective insurgent governance; on the other, he claims that challenges to local rule by transnational civil society actors will promote better governance. Both of these statements may be empirically true, but a coherent theory of how competition with outside actors may lead to better governance if the group succeeds in coopting competitors would better integrate the hypotheses and advance the argument much further.

The above statement regarding the limits of arguments about transnational actors in many ways underscores the central criticism of the book. Without doubt, the dynamic nature of the conflict environment hinders the ability to neatly dissect the interactions of multiple actors and how these interactions, which themselves are shaped by the changing conflict landscape, in turn shape the willingness and ability of rebels to develop and maintain successful institutions. However, the relationships discussed in the book might have been clearer had the author chosen to focus on fewer potential mechanisms. Each of the levels of interaction mentioned above offers fertile ground for a book. Focusing on only one would have allowed the author to more acutely focus on specific mechanisms and to develop a more nuanced theory of rebel governance. This criticism notwithstanding, Mampilly presents a plausible set of relationships that influence the likelihood of successful rebel governance. The book should be applauded for its efforts to engage an issue that has until very recently remained opaque because of the complexity of the relationships and the difficulty of conducting research in the areas of interest. Given this dearth of literature on the topic Rebel Rulers sheds a much-needed light on an important topic and opens the door to what will doubtless become a fruitful research agenda for a generation of scholars.

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