



The Takeaway

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Democracy on the Battlefield?

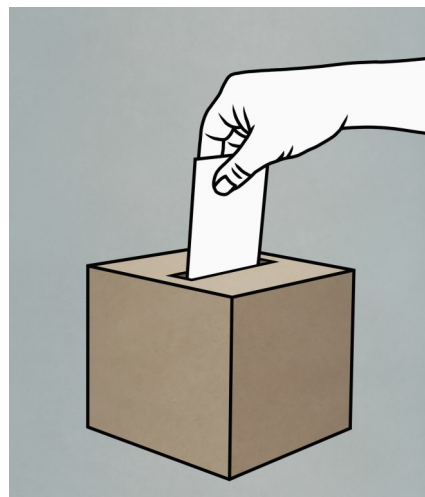
Why Armed Groups Hold Elections

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Armed rebel groups, by definition, use violence to fight against the state in efforts to take over the central government or achieve independent statehood. And yet, this simple view of rebel groups as belligerents belies the fact that they engage in a wide range of non-violent political projects as part of their militant campaigns. Among them, one phenomenon stands out as being particularly arresting given the wartime context: many rebel groups hold popular elections during war.

What explains this behavior? Why do armed groups devote time, effort, and resources to organizing elections and mobilizing ordinary people to vote, when they could concentrate on the battlefield? If one answer is that they seek to garner popular support by flexing their organizational muscle, why do they choose elections, when they could invest in delivering



WHAT'S THE TAKEAWAY?

Rebel elections have been a common feature of contemporary civil wars.

Ironically, some rebel elections have been the first taste of the democratic franchise, however flawed, for local residents.

Rebels use elections to assert their authority, increase their legitimacy, and strengthen their wartime rule.

External states should think through rebels' legitimacy politics when considering their intervention policies.

more immediate wartime necessities such as food, local security, and health clinics to local citizens?

INCIPIENT DEMOCRACY IN WARTIME

Rebel wartime elections are defined as elections organized by armed rebel groups in which local civilians vote for rebel candidates to fill seats within a rebel organizational hierarchy.¹ Thus, a defining feature of rebel elections is that they involve the participation of ordinary people as voters. Rebel groups certainly do not need to hold popular elections, and many do not—they could simply appoint individuals to leadership positions through a closed-door internal process. Nevertheless, rebel elections have been a common feature of contemporary civil wars. For example, after Kurdish forces reclaimed control of territory in north and east Syria from the Islamic State, their political wing, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), held elections for communal positions and regional councils in 2017.² Subsequent elections have been canceled due to fresh outbreaks of conflict, but leaders of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) have vowed to hold further rounds of elections encompassing broader areas in the future.³

Rebel elections vary in the degree to which they might be deemed “free and fair” by conventional standards of democratic practice. There is also wide variation in their level of sophistication. For example, in the early years of its fight for secession from Morocco, Polisario organized mass assemblies in which residents voted by show of hands for delegates to the rebel group’s legislative

body.⁴ In the local elections organized by Nepal’s Maoists during their civil war, people “often had to be compelled to vote.”⁵ Other rebel elections, in contrast, have featured international NGOs serving as election monitors to ensure compliance with certain standards.

Amidst this variation in form and style, one striking pattern to emerge from a survey of wartime rebel elections of the recent decades is the regularity with which observers describe them as offering the first taste of the democratic franchise for local residents. For instance, during the Syrian civil war, opposition members organized elections for local councils in what are described as “the first free elections in Syria in over four decades.”⁶ Earlier, village elections instituted by the National Resistance Army, which fought against the Ugandan government in the 1980s, represented “the first democratic governments ever instituted in Ugandan villages,” notes one study. Elections for the *poder popular local* (local popular power, or PPLs), established by the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front in El Salvador around 1981, were “an experiment in popular democracy and political participation.”⁷ Emerging from Soviet control in the early 1990s and seeking international recognition by the UN, the separatist territory of Nagorno-Karabakh repeatedly boasted of its “first-ever freely elected Parliament” in its official statements.⁸ A study describes even the Khmer Rouge, known for the genocide and atrocities its forces committed, as having organized “the first free local elections in Khmer history” during the Cambodian civil war.⁹ While it is possible that some of these

statements represent a hyperbolizing of sorts by partisan observers, collectively, the irony clearly emerges: in these cases, groups of people experienced the franchise, however flawed, for the first time in the midst of a violent conflict.

In all, my research shows that of the 126 major civil wars ending between 1950 and 2006, at least 17 percent featured rebel groups organizing popular elections during the war.¹⁰

WHY ELECTIONS?

Rebel groups are both insurgents and governors. Even as they fight to achieve military gains, they must interact with local civilians in their milieu and work to gain their support. To do so, they often begin to provide local order and basic social services to local residents in areas that come under their control. They may deploy local defense teams to secure the area, create their own laws, regulations, and courts, and establish rudimentary health clinic and schools, all while creating administrative and bureaucratic structures to manage their governance projects. Through local governance, rebel groups seek to appeal to local civilians and win their support, as well as extract crucial warfighting resources—food, shelter, intelligence, weapons, and so on—from this local civilian base. Where successful, such rebel governance efforts create a kind of “implicit social contract” between the rebel rulers and the ruled.¹¹

Elections, unlike food provision, health clinics, or local security, are not necessary for civilians’ wartime survival. And yet, it can be a linchpin of rebel governance because it

serves specific functions in the rebels’ *legitimacy politics*. Civil wars are, fundamentally, a fight for domestic and international legitimacy. Without local and external recognition of their right to rule, rebels remain pariahs in the international system even if they successfully take over the central government by force, as demonstrated by the Taliban’s assumption of power in Kabul in 2021. Rebel groups are well aware that civil wars are not won on the battlefield alone, and that any military success must be translated into political victory.

Wartime elections can be explained in part by the rebels’ pursuit of domestic and international legitimacy

Wartime elections, in this regard, serve several functions. First, where rebels are fighting against authoritarian governments, holding popular elections allows rebels to mark a clear departure from the status quo and market themselves as a more inclusive regime. Second, by granting residents the franchise, rebels create a sense of local empowerment, which can boost the group’s credibility and broaden its support base. Third, by organizing elections, rebels can flaunt their organizational capacity and ability to manage potentially risky projects. Finally, elections allow rebels to signal their commitment—sincere or not—to peaceful political processes and thus assuage any

fears that they will be ill-equipped to govern should they come to power. In this view, rebel elections are not so much a reflection of the rebels' democratic credentials as they are an instrument through which the rebels seek to assert their authority, increase their legitimacy, and strengthen their wartime rule. They are, in other words, part of their strategy of war-fighting.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERVENTIONS

If wartime elections can be explained in part by the rebels' pursuit of domestic and international legitimacy, any external interventions in support of the rebels should be carefully calibrated to fit local conditions. If an external power such as the United States supplies the rebel group with sufficient weapons and other resources, rebels' need to depend on civilians for support may diminish and their inclination to sustain their implicit social contract with local communities could erode. This has wide-ranging consequences for the rebels' conduct in war, including the likelihood of increased civilian victimization. With ample external aid and little need for local support, rebels are likely to move their focus elsewhere—to the battlefield and to maintaining relations with their external sponsors, and less to meeting local civilians' needs. External states should think through

the rebels' legitimacy politics when considering intervention policies and should expect to encounter difficult tradeoffs.

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Notes:

¹ For the analysis and insights that form the basis of this brief, see Cunningham, K.G., Huang, R., & Sawyer, K.M. (2021). Voting for militants: Rebel elections in civil war. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 65(1), 81–107. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002720937750>

² <https://www.rudaw.net/english/analysis/28012021>

³ <https://npasyria.com/en/69269/>

⁴ Hodges, T. (1983). *Western Sahara: The Roots of a Desert War* (p. 341). Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill.

⁵ Adhikari, A. (2014). *The Bullet and the Ballot Box: The Story of Nepal's Maoist Revolution* (p. 121). London, UK: Verso.

⁶ Yassin-Kassab, R. & Al-Shami, L. (2016). *Burning Country: Syrians in Revolution and War* (p. 69). London, UK: Pluto Press.

⁷ Quoted in Montgomery, T.S. (1995). *Revolution in El Salvador: From Civil Strife to Civil Peace* (p. 120). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

⁸ Avakian, S. (2013). *Nagorno Karabakh: Legal Aspects*, 4th ed. Yerevan, Armenia: Tigran Mets Publishing House.

⁹ Kiernan, B. (1985). *How Pol Pot Came to Power: A History of Communism in Kampuchea, 1930–1975* (p. 317). London, UK: Verso.

¹⁰ See Cunningham, Huang, and Sawyer 2021.

¹¹ Wickham-Crowley, T.P. (1987). The rise (and sometimes fall) of guerrilla governments in Latin America. *Sociological Forum*, 2(3), 477. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01106622>

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