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Rebel Mobilization through Pandering: Insincere Leaders, Framing, and Exploitation of Popular Grievances

Kai M. Thaler

ABSTRACT
In civil wars, unpopular and violent rebel organizations sometimes gain support from politically motivated constituencies who should, by outside appearances, logically oppose such groups. I explain this through a logic in which self-interested, insincere rebel leaders pander to aggrieved civilian populations to mobilize them, presenting the rebel organization as empathizing with and offering solutions to popular grievances. Leaders exploit an information asymmetry about their true preferences to gain allegiance using cheap sociopolitical appeals, rather than more costly material incentives or coercion. I inductively develop the theory through a case study of Renamo in Mozambique and then probe the generalizability of the logic through case studies of the Nicaraguan Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense and the National Patriotic Front of Liberia, drawing on interviews and archival materials. This article explicates a previously undertheorized phenomenon in the study of rebel mobilization and demonstrates how apparent popular, voluntary support for rebels can be more tenuous than it appears.

“We are like fish in the water—if one drains off the water, the fish die. The People are the water in which we swim and survive.” —Afonso Dhlakama, president of Renamo

“Renamo kills people slowly with unsharpened axes or knives. They can pick any family and kill them one by one. Anyone who cries out is killed.” —Mozambican refugees

Afonso Dhlakama, paraphrasing Mao Tse-Tung, evocatively describes the nature of insurgencies and how “the people” sustain them. Yet, as
Mozambican refugees noted above, the Rhodesian and South African–sponsored Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (Renamo) insurgency committed atrocious violence against civilians—the fish attacked the water. Nonetheless, alongside forced conscripts and paid recruits, Renamo attracted a constituency of voluntarily mobilized, politically motivated fighters and supporters, despite being funded and largely directed by racist foreign regimes. How do self-interested leaders of rebel organizations such as Renamo, with unpopular aims and behavior, attract politically motivated fighters and supporters? I argue that this occurs through strategic pandering.

Building inductively on the Renamo case, I theorize pandering as a pattern of rebel mobilization in which leaders change their self-presentation and how they frame their cause, tailoring political narratives and behavioral signals (for example, rituals or appearance) to potential constituencies’ grievances to gain recruits and support in areas where they want to operate. Since only leaders know their true preferences and intentions, they may mislead politically motivated constituencies and individuals into voluntarily supporting leaders (and organizational goals) ultimately unconcerned with popular grievances and welfare. Pandering is a subtype of framing that is, by definition, insincere. It is strategic in that it is adopted as a consistent mobilization plan, rather than a one-off action.

In peacetime, civilians might be able to seek a costly signal of a recruiter’s true intents. Where strong antistate grievances and threats of state violence exist, however, civilians may join an organization based on promises and the prospect of antistate resistance alone, since they are choosing between anticipated continuing losses in the status quo and the potential losses—but possible improvement—rebellion could bring.

Individuals may thus adhere to an organization believing it will represent their interests, while ultimately leaders channel collective efforts toward self-interested ends. Leaders and followers’ internal dialogues and thinking

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3Pandering can include both rhetorical and behavioral signals aligned with public opinion, under uncertainty about leaders’ true intentions—though some only consider policy implementation as pandering: Haifeng Huang, “Electoral Competition When Some Candidates Lie and Others Pander,” Journal of Theoretical Politics 22, no. 3 (July 2010): 333–58. On framing more generally, see Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment,” Annual Review of Sociology 26 (2000): 611–39.


are difficult to assess in real time during a civil war. Through contemporaneous and retrospective statements and by observing leaders’ policies and actions, however, rank-and-file group members, civilians, and observers can triangulate preferences, ideological commitments, and intentions, especially where rebel territorial control provides opportunities to act on stated principles.

Rebel leaders strategically and sometimes insincerely present their preferences, commitments, and goals to international actors to secure resources and support. Rebel leaders are often engaged in a two-level game, facing both foreign and domestic audiences; yet insincere appeals in domestic rebel mobilization have been insufficiently explored, with theories focusing on mobilization based on sincere ideology, economic incentives, fear, or force. I illustrate how insincerity and grievance manipulation can help rebel leaders mobilize combatants and supporters domestically.

**Why Does Pandering Matter?**

All rebel groups and social movements aim to understand popular interests and how these can be used for mobilization. I focus on the insincere use of popular frames in cases where a rebel group seeks to mobilize support, but lacks popularity—whether due to unpopular aims, leaders, or backers; violent behavior; or other issues. Existing theories predict these groups would have difficulty mobilizing support without coercion or material payoffs, yet I demonstrate how they manage to still attract voluntary, politically motivated recruits. Showing how even self-interested rebel leaders use grievances for mobilization contributes to civil wars scholarship by moving beyond the greed-versus-grievance dichotomy to explore rebels’ interacting political and economic agendas and grievances’ importance in rebel mobilization.

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It may be possible in some situations—for instance, when possessing significant material resources, foreign fighters, or strong territorial and societal control—to forgo seeking civilian support. For developing insurgencies, however, mobilizing voluntary support can potentially lower costs to territorial control by reducing tensions with the population; yield new recruits, intelligence, and material resources; create perceived momentum and attract bandwagoners; and provide international legitimacy due to apparent popular backing.

Surveys and systematic interviews show individuals join or support rebel organizations for many reasons. Importantly, the pandering logic presents rebel leaders and potential followers as independently rational actors, with varied reasons for group adhesion: elites have regional or national political and economic goals, whereas ground-level recruits and supporters have their own, often local and personal, motivations. Studying pandering therefore illuminates one pathway of rebel mobilization, which leaders may pursue alongside other mobilization strategies. Understanding this pathway is important for state or nongovernmental engagement and conflict bargaining with rebel organizations. Leaders who appear to have devoted popular supporters may actually enjoy tenuous loyalty if followers were gained by pandering to popular grievances, and followers may defect if states or outside actors work quickly and sincerely to redress grievances.

Structure, Cases, and Data

After examining existing explanations for rebel mobilization, focusing on incomplete information and elite manipulation, I introduce a logic of rebel mobilization through pandering induced from the case of Renamo’s non-coercive, political recruitment in the Mozambican Civil War. I demonstrate the logic in the Renamo case and then show the logic’s wider applicability in two other positive cases of mobilization through pandering: the Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense (FDN), a proxy group like Renamo, and the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), which developed more organically. Given the difficulties of disentangling leaders’ rhetoric and true intentions, in-depth case studies are best suited for the task.


14 Following Philip Roessler, I present the derived theory first, then the theory-building case, then additional cases. Roessler, Ethnic Politics and State Power in Africa: The Logic of the Coup–Civil War Trap (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
The FDN had similar origins and goals to Renamo but this case allowed me to examine pandering in a non-African context. The NPFL was likewise a resource-rich, highly violent rebel organization lacking a coherent ideological program, but it began fighting later than Renamo and the FDN and developed without strong foreign influence on its goals and actions, demonstrating pandering beyond proxy groups and in the post–Cold War period. The number of parties in each conflict also varied. No other rebel group emerged alongside Renamo to challenge the Mozambican state; the FDN faced one major center-seeking competitor, the Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática, but they fought and mobilized support in different parts of the country; and the NPFL faced a breakaway faction (the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia, INPFL) and two ethnically based competitors (the United Liberation Movement of Liberia for Democracy (ULIMO) and the Liberian Peace Council (LPC)).

Renamo, the FDN, and the NPFL all possessed foreign funding or natural resources; thus they should be hard cases for finding grievance-based appeals and mobilization. Renamo was organized and initially directed by racist foreign regimes. FDN leaders came from a hated, recently deposed military. The NPFL was seen as a paradigmatic “greedy” organization. All three groups engaged in widespread, indiscriminate violence against civilians, undermining their popularity. These are therefore surprising cases for finding successful mobilization using popular political appeals. In each case, pandering contributed to improved short-term mobilization, with joiners then relatively unlikely to desert.

The FDN case study uses archival documents from the Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica in Managua, the Hoover Institution, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The NPFL case study draws on 54 individual and group interviews with a purposive sample of 102 participants in Liberia, primarily former NPFL military officers and political officials (cited with interview number and name/position), and trial transcripts from the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL). Interview research was approved by Harvard University’s Committee on the Use of Human Subjects. Ex-combatants who are not public figures received blanket anonymity as a precaution. Contemporary public figures in government and civil society were offered anonymity, but all declined. The online appendix provides full details on all interviews, archival research, and fieldwork ethics and practicalities.

15Cf. Weinstein, Inside Rebellion.
17Pandering may be especially advantageous for organizations unwilling or unable to exercise restraint, or which actively encourage violence.
Renamo, the FDN, and the NPFL represent a limited set of positive cases in which pandering worked, and further in-depth study will be needed to fully establish both the theoretical and practical limits of pandering. Following the case studies, I discuss tentative conclusions and directions for further research and, finally, examine policy implications.

Information and Rebel Mobilization

Information about intentions is a key currency of politics, and leaders, governments, organizations, and other actors commonly use lying and other forms of information manipulation such as propaganda to protect their interests. States manipulate signals in international relations; campaigning politicians lie about intentions or tailor messages to audiences with rhetoric and actions whose (in)sincerity only becomes clear after voters elect them; and domestic and international actors increasingly use social media and online platforms to spread disinformation, portraying themselves excessively favorably and smearing their rivals to rally supporters and potentially provoke violence. Nationalist elites building support for interstate wars or genocide and ethnic cleansing, and ethnic elites inciting communal violence, have likewise manipulated popular fears and grievances to scapegoat “enemies,” mobilize constituencies for violence, and bolster their political standing.

This phenomenon appears to be present in civil wars mobilized along ethnic cleavages. The extremely violent Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda formed around grievances over government persecution of the Acholi people, which remains one of the organization’s primary appeals to civilians. Yet the LRA became a vehicle for leader Joseph Kony’s survival and aggrandizement, with Kony borrowing from different ethnic, religious, and political traditions when appealing to different audiences, but failing to act on ostensible political aims.


Whether or not a rebel group has official goals based around ethnic cleavages—Renamo, the FDN, and the NPFL did not—information about intentions is a crucial component of rebel efforts to mobilize fighters and civilian supporters. Political economy theories of rebel mobilization treat recruitment of fighters and supporters as labor markets. Rebel leaders face both collective action and principal–agent problems, needing to mobilize people to pursue their goals, but also needing to screen recruits for loyalty and obedience. This perspective builds on signaling theory, treating rebel leaders as “employers” with limited information about the reliability of potential “employees” (followers).

Rebel leaders not only interpret potential followers’ intentions: they may actively try to reshape them toward leaders’ own aims. Bernd Beber and Christopher Blattman focus on leaders manipulating information, modeling “the possibility that a rebel leader can ‘indoctrinate’ [child] recruits, so that they have a lower disutility of fighting … allow[ing] for the possibility that the principal can shape a recruit’s expectations through misinformation.” Other theories of rebel mobilization mention in passing strategic misinformation and rebel leaders manipulating information asymmetries. Charles Tilly notes that “manipulative leaders direct the diffuse anger of their countrymen to their own ends.” David Galula argues an insurgent leader is “free to use every trick … he can lie, cheat, exaggerate … he is judged by what he promises, not by what he does,” with a leader benefiting from “tactical manipulation” of causes or grievances, “tailored for the various groups … he is seeking to attract.” Rebel leaders may “strategically frame messages” and “manipulate information … to present their story in the best light,” setting up a ‘smoke screen’ for their rank-and-file followers.

Like other political entrepreneurs, rebel leaders can be “multivocal,” issuing

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23Spence, “Job Market Signaling.”


25Social movement leaders likewise frame appeals to resonate with constituencies they seek to mobilize: Benford and Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements.”


statements and taking actions that may be interpreted differently (but positively) by different audiences to “manipulate the actors around them.”

Therefore, although rebel recruits may possess private information as to their preferences and commitment to the organization, the information asymmetry can also run the other way. Rebel leaders may be aware of the preferences of potential followers with observable grievances against the state, while followers remain uncertain of leaders’ true, unrevealed preferences. Aggrieved populations may thus support rebel leaders in exchange for promised efforts to redress antistate grievances, without knowing leaders’ sincerity.

Some rebel ideological claims are “cheap talk,” but many rebel leaders possess sincere ideological commitments and seek to fulfill promises; civilians must try to determine the credibility of rebel leaders’ claimed intentions. This is similar to models of electoral politics and campaign promises, yet while democratic electoral processes can constrain and undercut incentives to lie, even in peacetime, people have difficulties detecting deception. Doing so is even tougher for lies about intentions, when a leader claims “a future action or goal ... but does not in fact intend to carry [it] out.” People are also less suspicious of statements or proposals with which they agree. So if civilians have grievances against the government and rebel leaders echo these and claim they will address them, civilians are more likely to believe leaders are sincere.

A civil war context imposes further constraints on civilians’ access to information and choices. Rebel organizations tend to form, and then initiate fighting, in low-information environments such as remote rural areas, so civilian access to information can be very limited beyond rumors and what rebels tell them. The LRA, for instance, emerged in northern Uganda in a context “thoroughly inimical to information seeking and use”

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31 This logic can apply to mobilizing fighters, activist supporters, and sympathizers. See Lichbach, Rebel’s Dilemma, 17; Roger D. Petersen, Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
with high illiteracy rates. Rebels may destroy communications infrastructure offering access to outside information as well. Mobile phones, the internet, and social media can potentially offer alternative information from independent or progovernment sources, but access may be scarce. Even in regions with better communications infrastructure, such as eastern Ukraine, rebel organizations produce their own online messaging and have their supporters and propagandists echo leaders’ claims in order to counteract negative reports. Rebel leaders may also shape the information available to civilians by convincing, coercing, or buying off local actors to spread the rebels’ message through social networks that will trust these “brokers.” Constituencies with grievances against the government have good reason to be skeptical of progovernment information and so may also be more willing to take rebel claims seriously, in the hopes they are sincere.

The violent nature of civil war also constrains civilians’ options. Government repression is a frequent component of civilian grievances, and once a rebellion has begun, harsh government counterinsurgency responses may breed further resentment. Rebel groups themselves may commit violence against civilians, especially against those who will not pledge support. Civilians can organize nonviolent or unarmed resistance to the state and rebels, but this is very risky. Civilians seeking to protect themselves thus often have limited opportunities for free riding, so those already opposed to or threatened by the state may be more tolerant of the risk of rebel leaders lying—despite the potentially high personal costs of rebellion—thus facilitating pandering. Once some people in a region or community begin to mobilize in response to pandering, others may also be more likely to follow and to at least partially accept leaders’ claims as true, similar to acceptance of propaganda claims in authoritarian settings. Next, I consider how and when rebel leaders engage in pandering.

40Larson and Lewis, “Rumors, Kinship Networks, and Rebel Group Formation.”
43For example, Andrew T. Little, “Propaganda and Credulity,” Games and Economic Behavior 102 (March 2017): 224–32.
The Logic of Rebel Mobilization through Pandering

The logic of mobilization through pandering takes place in a dyadic conflict environment including three actors: the rebel organization leadership, the state, and the civilian population. Leaders initially form an organization with a core set of recruits who may have joined due to commitment to the organization’s stated political goals or for personal gain. With this nucleus, the rebels begin attacking the state. At conflict onset, I assume civilians are distributed across progovernment, antigovernment, and neutral preferences, allowing both belligerents to potentially mobilize followers.

Rebels should only attack if leaders believe the organization possesses sufficient strength to avoid annihilation in the first engagement and should only be able to win quickly if the state is extraordinarily weak. Initial attacks reveal the observable relative capabilities of both the rebels and the state. Rebel leaders can then update their assessment of the probability of victory (or of achieving lesser goals) and the resources needed to achieve it, and do so again after subsequent battles.

If current practices in mobilization of labor (recruits and supporters) and capital (weapons and finances) are considered adequate, these practices should continue. If leaders decide increased labor is needed—particularly important early in rebellions—they must determine the most efficient and effective means of mobilization, aiming to ensure recruits and followers help the organization achieve leaders’ goals.

If the state has engaged in practices before or during the conflict that have aggrieved a portion of the population, who then prioritize the grievance being addressed, and if rebel leaders perceive this grievance—whether through interactions with civilians, social networks, or media—these antistate civilians provide a pool of potential fighters and supporters who should theoretically be easier to attract. Individuals in this aggrieved bloc may have diverse personal motivations for opposition, but I assume they are unified regarding this grievance. The grievance could also act as a

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44I discuss potential implications of multiple competing rebel groups in the concluding section.
45Early-stage rebel organizations tend to be small and clandestine. Janet I. Lewis, “How Does Ethnic Rebellion Start?” Comparative Political Studies 50, no. 10 (September 2017): 1420–50.
46Though biases may skew perceptions.
48Unlike social sectors prioritizing economic interests in deciding whether to support an organization. Ahmad, “Security Bazaar.”
screening mechanism, suggesting aggrieved constituency members have collective, and not only personal, interests at stake.50

Rebel leaders thus have strategic incentives to signal they empathize with and offer possible solutions to this grievance to try to capture the aggrieved constituency’s support. It always benefits rebel leaders to “use terms and symbols [their] targets understand”51 and to “align” mobilizing frames with popular concerns,52 but although some leaders may truly empathize with grievances, insincere leaders pander, changing their message according to the social environment. Pandering leaders may lie about their sympathies, conceal their true preferences, or present only positive aspects of costly goals.53 Unlike preference falsification, when individuals lie about true preferences to avoid costly sanctions,54 pandering rebel leaders are insincere to seek advantages.

Insincere rebel leaders could try to buy the aggrieved constituency’s support with material payments or promises, but pandering has lower costs and may engender stronger loyalty, at least short term, due to aggrieved constituencies’ belief in shared priorities. Even if leaders are uninterested in governance, obtaining some degree of noncoerced compliance and support is more sustainable and efficient resource-wise.55 Pandering offers a cheap option, since a more positive view of the rebels can increase civilians’ risk tolerance and lower their expectations for private benefits.56 Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder note the “big payoffs” of leaders tailoring ideological appeals in high-stakes, low-information situations such as civil conflicts, “when there is no efficient free marketplace of ideas to counter false claims with reliable facts.”57

As Robert Jervis highlights, the “costs of issuing deceptive signals, if any, are deferred to the time when it is shown that the signals were misleading.”58 Benefits are more immediate, whereas potential costs are only incurred in the long term, so pandering should be more effective early in conflicts when there is less information about rebel leaders’ “type.” Unarmed civilians are also in a weak position relative to rebels, and so although cheap talk may be ignored and lies punished in peace talks and

50Weinstein, Inside Rebellion, 103–5; Lichbach, Rebel’s Dilemma, 282–9.
52Benford and Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements,” 624–25.
57Mansfield and Snyder, “Democratization and the Danger of War,” 29.
58Jervis, Logic of Images in International Relations, 18.
other bargaining situations in civil wars, the power imbalance between rebels and civilians makes punishment more difficult—though recruits and followers may still shirk, desert, or defect. Depending on the aggrieved constituency’s size, its successful mobilization could encourage bandwagoning or even provide the critical mass to achieve a more favorable war outcome.

For the aggrieved constituency, mobilization is rational if they believe the rebels offer the best possibility for addressing their grievances and if they face state or possibly rebel violence by remaining unaffiliated. The success of pandering depends on how much the target cares about detecting insincerity and the costs of testing it. Fear or a common enemy alone may provide enough unity for collective action, but, especially if there is uncertainty about trusting the rebels, believing leaders share grievances and a common frame of reference can catalyze adherence, with lower costs than coercion. Upon joining the rebels, it may be rational to stay even if individuals or groups later recognize rebel leaders’ true preferences, due to threats of punishment by rebel or state forces upon desertion and/or to keep opportunities for social and economic gains. Like in other more authoritarian settings, once in a rebel group and under its control, it is better to behave “as if” one believes leaders versus risking punishment by questioning them.

Pandering is available not only to less ideologically motivated, more predatory organizations like Renamo, the FDN, and the NPFL. More ideological, “activist” rebel organizations, too, must appeal to followers to see their grievances in the leaders’ political-ideological frame. Activist rebel groups, however, are less likely to be insincere when appealing to popular grievances, with leaders likely more committed to following through on

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60Rebels also provide an opportunity to gain a defiance benefit in resisting the state. Elisabeth Jean Wood, Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
61See James D. Fearon, “Strategic Dynamics of Social Mimicry” (working paper, Stanford University, Stanford, CA, 2013).
promises and implementing proposed programs, although sincerity can be difficult to judge absent territorial influence and rebel governance.

If, however, an activist organization is unpopular—for instance, due to extremist aims, severe violence, or harsh internal discipline—pandering can still help generate local acquiescence or support. The Islamic State (IS), for example, is doctrinaire, with ideologically driven leadership. Based on extreme ideological commitments to a “pure” Islamic society, IS has been highly violent but has remained flexible in appeals to civilians, falsely proclaiming moderation. In Somalia, IS’s affiliate downplayed its religious orthodoxy and exploited popular discontent with al-Shabaab to mobilize followers, promising “an easier life: lower taxes, more tolerance for substance abuse and fewer political diatribes.” In Syria, IS “pandered to moderate skeptics by emphasizing their common cause—[toppling] Assad—and downplaying their desire for an Islamic state, leading new converts to believe that Syria’s future would be decided by its people,” before seeking to lock in new followers through reeducation. Another ideologically motivated group with strict internal discipline, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, occasionally falsely promised salaries and better living conditions to entice poor recruits—who wound up disappointed by “the asperity of guerrilla life and unfulfilled (economic) promises.”

**Limits of Pandering**

Pandering is a strategy designed to meet rebel leaders’ proximate goals of increased mobilization and may or may not help achieve ultimate, long-term goals. Support that pandering generates may be fleeting. It could provide only short-term benefits if an organization takes control of significant liberated areas or seizes state power, or if the government addresses sources of popular grievances: leaders and aggrieved constituencies converge in preferences for regime change or generalized political changes, but they diverge over further preferences about future governance. Disillusionment occurs in any armed organization when frustrations arise due to slow progress or failure to meet stated objectives, with followers

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71 On mobilization over time, see Polo and González, “Power to Resist.”
questioning leaders’ competence. When leaders have pandered, however, and aggrieved constituencies begin to suspect or discover that leaders are insincere, they may feel lied to, misled, and betrayed. This can provoke stronger resentment of leaders, fueling defections, fragmentation, or revenge attacks on leaders.

Several mechanisms can exacerbate these tensions. Reduced government repression may diminish incentives to join the rebels and make rebel violence less tolerable.72 Once rebels control territory, civilians may expect them to provide order and public goods—expectations that will only rise if rebels capture the state;73 if rebel governance is predatory and demonstrates that leaders prefer private gain over public interests and grievances,74 maintaining support mobilized through pandering may be difficult. Leaders negotiating unpopular deals with the state may also undermine voluntary followers’ allegiance. In Colombia and Myanmar, for instance, politically motivated fighters demobilized or defected when leaders deviated from proclaimed collective goals.75 Many Syrian IS recruits became unhappy when leaders betrayed their stated “meritocratic and rule-abiding” principles.76 Pandering could also incur costs if a particular aggrieved constituency’s joining antagonizes existing rebel forces. Finally, in some cases where material resources are abundant or there is a large pool of potential recruits with low reservation prices for their labor, rebel leaders may decide pandering is unnecessary or risky.77

I now empirically illustrate the logic of strategic pandering through the theory-building case of Renamo.

Renamo in Mozambique

Renamo was, in many ways, an archetypal “proxy group.” Mozambique gained independence from Portugal in 1975, after a long liberation struggle by the leftist Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (Frelimo). Seeking to destabilize Frelimo’s new government and punish its support for Zimbabwe Africa National Union (ZANU) insurgents, Rhodesia’s Central Intelligence Organization (CIO) organized a force of Mozambican exiles and

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77Jeremy M. Weinstein argues that in Sierra Leone, the RUF’s initially politically motivated leaders abandoned political appeals after gaining access to natural resources. Weinstein, Inside Rebellion, 303–5.
dissidents. A 1977 raid on a Frelimo reeducation camp yielded recruits angry at the state, including André Matsangaissa, Renamo’s first leader. Renamo remained subservient to Rhodesia until 1980, when white minority rule ended. CIO officials offered to help Renamo fighters repatriate and reintegrate in Mozambique, or to transfer them to South African management; the majority chose the South Africans, who wanted to destabilize Mozambique and curtail Frelimo’s support of the African National Congress (ANC).

Renamo’s initial nucleus of supporters held anti-Frelimo grievances due to mistreatment or lost economic opportunities. But Renamo’s growth from a few hundred to nearly two thousand members from 1976 to 1979, and its survival as a cohesive force, would have been impossible without Rhodesian funding. Where Frelimo’s support was stronger, Renamo initially only attracted criminal youths. Renamo also engaged in widespread forced recruitment, with most fighters and low-level officials recruited coercively, and others offered economic incentives. Forced recruitment accelerated under South African patronage, and South Africa ceased Rhodesia’s salary payments to Renamo members, with fighters “paid” through looting and extortion opportunities.

**Renamo Leaders’ Goals**

Rhodesia and South Africa envisioned Renamo as a proxy force to attack ZANU and the ANC within Mozambique and destabilize the Frelimo government. A Renamo document formulated by Dhlakama and South African intelligence delineated the destabilization program: “1. Destroy the Mozambican economy in the rural zones. 2. Destroy the communications routes to prevent exports and imports to and from abroad, and the movement of domestic produce. 3. Prevent the activities of foreigners.”

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(cooperantes) because they are the most dangerous in the recovery of the economy."^{84}

Renamo’s leaders possessed some genuine anti-Frelimo grievances, yet material and personal gain were their primary motivations. They embraced the Rhodesian and South African destabilization program as a means to force concessions and potentially gain political power but lacked “a coherent political programme” or “any real desire to win support on ideological grounds.”^{85} In 1979 Matsangaissa stated, “We are not interested in policy making … later we will have to work out politics.”^{86} Propaganda efforts in Mozambique were vague, stressing “themes such as ‘we are against communism, we are against socialism, we are for capitalism, we are against (communal) villages and want to live individually in the bush.’”^{87}

Asked about the content of “political education classes,” a Renamo commander replied: “It was, ‘we cannot run away, when the war ends we are going to do this and that, when we win we will have such and such a life, everyone will have a job … After the war, we will all have jobs, everyone will have money.”^{88} Matsangaissa, however, recognized antigovernment grievances that Renamo could leverage to mobilize followers, beyond those who could be bought or kidnapped.

**Development of an Aggrieved Constituency**

Two prominent, interrelated sources of popular antigovernment grievances existed: Frelimo’s policy of rural collectivization and its persecution of traditional leaders and lifeways. Starting during the independence war, Frelimo moved much of the rural population into collective villages. The program initially was optional, and many people willingly resettled. In “insecure” areas, however, Frelimo used force and threats against resisters.^{89} Resistance to collectivization varied regionally: in southern Mozambique, the rural population adjusted, but for central and northern Mozambicans, collectivization threatened their livelihoods.^{90}

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88 Manning, “Constructing Opposition in Mozambique,” 178.
Land also represented an ancestral inheritance and a home to spiritually significant graveyards and shrines. Many Mozambicans viewed the world as composed of visible and invisible realms, with healers mediating the invisible realm or sorcerers manipulating it. Collective villages thus formed a dangerous environment where family and land ties were broken and sorcerers could exploit state-created disorder.

Frelimo wanted to eliminate the influence of traditional local leaders and religion and to remove colonial administrative structures reliant on local elites. Frelimo’s hostility to organized religion and attacks on “the feudal-traditional past, religion, [and] obscurantism” aimed to uproot traditional authority and promote a modern, “scientific” worldview. Traditional leaders thus interpreted war’s arrival as a consequence “of the humiliation of chiefs by Frelimo, of the devastation of places of cult ceremony and of the destruction of ritual objects,” while many peasants felt Frelimo was attacking their ways of life.

**Renamo’s Pandering**

Renamo leaders recognized that popular discontent with Frelimo’s modernization and collectivization projects created an aggrieved constituency in north and central Mozambique, bordering Renamo’s Rhodesian patrons. Renamo leaders “sought to use those aspects of the existing system that angered people the most in the areas where it operated,” trying to exploit grievances by reinstating traditional authorities and signaling respect for tradition. Commander Raúl Domingos described Renamo’s mobilization and lack of political indoctrination: “The war was about mobilizing people to get rid of aspects of the regime they found offensive. We used the language of the population, appealing to specific aspects that they felt. To speak to the population about democracy, liberty, human rights, things very … [abstract] … they don’t understand.”

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92 West, _Kupilikula_, 177–79; Lubkemann, _Culture in Chaos_, 169–78.
94 McGregor, “Violence and Social Change in a Border Economy,” 43. See also West, _Kupilikula_.
95 Geffray, _La cause des armes au Mozambique_, 77. See also Corinna Jentzsch, “Auxiliary Armed Forces and Innovations in Security Governance in Mozambique’s Civil War,” _Civil Wars_ 19, no. 3 (2017): 325–47; Cahen, _Mozambique: La Révolution implosée_.
97 Manning, “Constructing Opposition in Mozambique,” 178.
98 Ibid.
Since traditional authority and religion underpinned grievances, Renamo used “traditional religious idioms.” Politically motivated fighters told Jessica Schafer that Renamo’s fight “was a political conquest” that they joined because Frelimo sought “to expel the chiefs and put in the [party] secretaries, but it’s the chiefs who know how to give to the spirits while the secretaries couldn’t do this, and they gave orders people didn’t like.”

Renamo forces met with traditional authorities and spiritual leaders when entering towns, often restoring these elites’ status and using them and local informants for indirect rule.

This situation suited Renamo as a primarily military organization uninterested in governance. Renamo Secretary-General Evo Fernandes stated in a 1985 interview, “Administration doesn’t have anything to do with the military. We are based on the traditional system: the administrative system depends on the area the chieftain has.” Renamo did not really care about traditional authorities’ interests, though: Renamo sometimes attacked such leaders without seeking alliances, and “religious practitioners [were] no more immune from kidnap, injury or death at Renamo’s hands.” Renamo violently suppressed any chiefs or spiritual leaders seeking independent influence.

Renamo’s embrace of tradition was a rational strategy to mobilize and capture an aggrieved constituency. For rural Mozambicans with antistate grievances, it was rational to join Renamo, since no other force existed to challenge the state, and it offered protection from both state and Renamo violence. In some areas, therefore, Renamo recruits fought to “live as [they] pleased” outside Frelimo’s collective villages, and “tens of thousands of people ... voluntarily moved to Renamo-controlled and occupied areas.”

Some traditional leaders rejected Renamo, and regional Frelimo officials sometimes ignored national policy, working with traditional leaders. Yet only late in the war, around 1989, did Frelimo begin embracing traditional leaders and religions, undermining some Renamo support and cultivating

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100 Schafer, “Guerillas and Violence in the War in Mozambique,” 226.
102 Emerson, Battle for Mozambique.
105 Wilson, “Cults of Violence and Counter-Violence in Mozambique,” 552.
107 Schafer, “Guerillas and Violence in the War in Mozambique,” 226.
108 Geffray, La cause des armes au Mozambique, 39.
the government-affiliated spiritualist Naparama militia. Once members of the aggrieved constituency joined Renamo, however, it became rational to remain in the organization even if they recognized Renamo’s pandering, due to both opportunities for socioeconomic advancement and to the threat of rebel or state punishment if they deserted.

Renamo started losing its aggrieved constituency support, however, as the war dragged on and the rural population began seeing through Renamo’s rhetorical and behavioral façade. Christian Geffray wrote that “Renamo does not have a way to maintain in the long-term the credibility of its propaganda and … the illusion that it has anything else in mind other than war”; Renamo also constantly attacked civilians. Once war ended and competitive elections arrived in 1994, however, both Renamo and Frelimo tried to “engage with and invoke the support of local traditional authorities,” and top Renamo leaders continued appealing to wartime grievances against Frelimo’s rural policies, reinforcing the mobilization opportunity grievances on these dimensions had presented during the war.

**Discussion**

Renamo began as a foreign-created proxy organization without a significant domestic constituency, but mobilized voluntary domestic support by pandering to antistate grievances around tradition and collectivization. The organization grew from a few hundred members at its mid-1970s founding to an estimated 6,000 to 10,000 in 1980–1981, and to 20,000 members by the mid-1980s. Pandering was one among multiple mobilization strategies, but Renamo’s growing support base helped push the war to a stalemate and negotiated settlement. Renamo also gained domestic legitimacy it otherwise lacked—important not only for presenting the organization to foreign actors but also for postwar elections and then mobilization in a new low-intensity conflict in 2012–2018.

The cases of the Nicaraguan FDN and Liberian NPFL illustrate the workings of strategic pandering in different settings, with the FDN (like

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110Manning, “Constructing Opposition in Mozambique,” 172–6; Schafer, “Guerrillas and Violence in the War in Mozambique,” 224–5
111Geffray, La cause des armes au Mozambique, 121. On violence against civilians, see Hultman, “Power to Hurt in Civil War.”
114Pearce, “History, Legitimacy, and Renamo’s Return to Arms”; Manning, “Party-Building on the Heels of War.”
Renamo) a foreign-funded and -founded group, and the NPFL having more domestic, organic origins and aims and fighting in a non–Cold War conflict.

**The FDN in Nicaragua**

In Nicaragua, a 1979 revolution led by the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) overthrew the Somoza dictatorship and its hated Guardia Nacional military. A counterrevolution soon began on multiple fronts, with rebels collectively called the “contras.” Former Guardia members led the main contra force, the FDN, with CIA and Argentine organization and financing. Despite some exiles’ efforts to moderate the FDN, ex-Guardia hard-liners dominated it: some advocated calling the organization the “Nicaraguan National Guard—to preserve the name.”115

The CIA tried recruiting civilian leaders to hide “that the FDN … was led by former Somoza National Guard officers,” but the organization’s Guardia roots impeded popular support and domestic legitimacy.116 FDN leaders claimed “only three percent of FDN combatants” were ex-Guardia members, yet by 1985 they made up 46 of 48 FDN commanding officers.117 The entire FDN Strategic Command (except the communications assistant); the air, naval, and counterintelligence section heads; and all officers in two of the four regional commands were former Guardia officers.118 No clear FDN political program was formulated beyond opposing the FSLN, and the organization committed widespread, brutal human rights violations.119

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CIA continued giving the FDN directives on operations into 1987, one of the last years of heavy fighting. Yet, despite its Guardia roots and leadership and violent actions, the FDN gained voluntary, politically motivated civilian recruits and supporters. After sporadic cross-border raids and failed urban insurrection efforts, FDN leaders recognized the need for political appeals to “capture” a peasant social base. Peasants in Nicaragua’s highlands had received few benefits from the new FSLN government, underwhelming them, given their expectations. They were angered by agricultural policies restricting markets for crops; land tenure issues and expropriations; conflict between the FSLN and leaders of the Catholic Church; weapons seizures; pressure to join FSLN-led associations; and, eventually, a military draft. Organized civilian political opposition was weak, elite-dominated, and unappealing to peasants. These factors created an aggrieved constituency and a mobilization opportunity for the FDN.

With generous US support, the FDN pandered, portraying itself as pro-peasant and devoutly religious. Propaganda and mobilization teams were instructed to engage peasants about land-related concerns and appeal to them using religion, folklore, and local customs. The FDN incorporated elements of peasant militias created by rural landlords and disillusioned former Sandinistas; co-opted disgruntled rural leaders and their networks; and recruited heavily among aggrieved peasants in Honduran refugee camps.

Religious appeals were particularly prominent. FDN propaganda chief Edgar Chamorro described how their newsletter “exploited the image of the Christian soldier” and portrayed the pope as a contra supporter amid FSLN–Vatican conflicts. The FDN’s infamous CIA-published manual “Psychological Operations in Guerrilla Warfare” called them “Christian

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122 Timothy C. Brown, The Real Contra War: Highlander Peasant Resistance in Nicaragua (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001); Horton, Peasants in Arms; Centro para la Investigación, la Promoción y el Desarrollo Rural y Social (CIPRES), La guerra en Nicaragua [The war in Nicaragua] (Managua: CIPRES, 1991); [Peter Marchetti], Dos pasos atrás y dos y medio adelante: Reflexiones e interrogantes sobre la política agraria y militar [Two steps back and two and a half forward: Reflections and questions about agrarian and military policies] (1984), Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica [hereafter IHCA or IHNCA]/FN, 972.850 53, D722.
125 Dillon, Comandos; Brown, Real Contra War; Horton, Peasants in Arms.
126 Chamorro, Packaging the Contras, 24.
guerrillas” on a “democratic crusade,” and FDN forces carried rosaries to distribute when appealing to peasants.127

An FSLN report cited the FDN’s appeals as religious pandering, “capitalizing on the contradictions existing between the Church hierarchy and the revolutionary state, which is mustered as clear evidence of Sandinista atheism … [the FDN] proclaims that God is their commander-in-chief and that they will win because He is helping them,” thus trying “systematically” to gain rural religious leaders’ allegiance.128 Worried FSLN military officers cautioned that by “taking advantage of … the religious sentiment of the population [the FDN] has a possibility of increasing its forces.”129

Membership gains cannot be attributed to pandering alone, but FDN forces grew from around 1,000 in the early 1980s to 8,500 by mid-decade, and peaked in 1989 between 9,000 and 12,000, with around 30,000 peasant collaborators.130 FDN leaders, however, condescendingly viewed peasants as pawns. One stated, “You know as well as I do that a peasant has nothing in his head but straw … Two or three stories well-told, and he will join you.”131 Peasants had no agency over decision making once in the FDN and leaders “in every moment had other objectives, different from the interests for which the armed peasants were fighting.”132 Recruits increasingly clashed with ex-Guardia leaders, whose promises to focus on peasant concerns were insincere.133 One peasant said, “The [FDN] administration [in Honduras] killed more commandos than the enemy. The administrators robbed the troops. They stole money, stole the aid. They hoarded it, making themselves rich … [They] beat, killed, and raped.”134 Peasant fighters “coming down from the mountains and confronting reality, had to discover the illusion with which they had been victimized by their leaders and allies.”135

The FDN also formed an alliance with Indigenous Miskito rebels on the Caribbean coast, and in doing so presented itself as fighting to protect Miskito rights the government had violated. However, “by the mid-1980s,
it had become apparent to the Miskito that they had been manipulated by the CIA and [FDN], who cared nothing about Miskito goals like land rights, cultural autonomy, and local control over natural resources.”  

In areas of FDN influence, the organization did not seek to govern, but, a priest observed, related to the population “only through recruitment of fighters and acquiring food from peasant families.” The organization’s true goal was destabilization, FDN officer Jorge Ramírez Zelaya admitted, rather than victory or redressing grievances. 

The FSLN government over time undertook reforms addressing many peasant and Indigenous grievances, reducing the FDN’s operational space and mobilization pool. FSLN commander Humberto Ortega described the counterinsurgency using Mao’s fish-in-water analogy: “The economic, political, and social comprehensive plans are what, structurally, have allowed the counterrevolutionaries less and less space; the water in which the fish tries to move is contaminated.” By the war’s end in 1989, only 10%–20% of Nicaraguans polled viewed the contras positively. FDN leaders could not maintain their façade of concern for peasant welfare, but mobilizing aggrieved peasant constituencies helped achieve their goal of destabilization, eventually forcing the government to the negotiating table.

The NPFL in Liberia

The NPFL differed in two important ways from Renamo and the FDN. First, the NPFL was not a foreign proxy force, and always aimed to capture and control the state; second, the organization emerged and fought outside the Cold War context, lacking incentives to join the Western or Soviet bloc ideological camps. The NPFL fought against the regime of Samuel Doe, an Indigenous Liberian soldier from the Krahn tribe, who seized power in a 1980 coup, ending 133 years of political dominance by Americo-Liberian elites. Thomas Quiwonkpa became the national Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL)’s commander under Doe, but the two fell out and Quiwonkpa fled the country in 1983, gathering dissidents to form the NPFL. After Doe won the rigged 1985 elections, Quiwonkpa launched a failed coup attempt and...
was killed. Doe responded by attacking Quiwonkpa’s Gio co-ethnics and the related Mano tribe, concentrated in Nimba County, and also by purging Gios and Manos from the military and sparking intense ethnic animosity.143 Following the failed coup, Charles Taylor, another ally-turned-enemy of Doe, consolidated control of the NPFL.

Pandering came naturally to Taylor. His former finance minister, Nathaniel Barnes, described Taylor as having “the gift of gab, he had a silver tongue. You sit in a room with Charles Taylor and he could convince you of anything.”144 A social and political chameleon, Taylor was “tricky,”145 seeking to be “all things to all men.”146

Of mixed Americo-Liberian and Gola heritage, Taylor was raised in the Americo-Liberian community and educated in the United States, where he was a political activist, before returning and serving in the Doe administration. Taylor then fled in the early 1980s like Quiwonkpa. Throughout the late 1980s, Taylor bounced around West Africa, building ties to regional leaders and working to rebuild the NPFL. Other Liberian dissidents distrusted Taylor, who demanded that in toppling Doe, the “military would determine who would dictate everything … [and] he would be the head of everything.”147 Taylor, meanwhile, sidelined other militant leaders he considered rivals and made fighters pledge personal loyalty to him.148

After training in Libya, the NPFL invaded Liberia in December 1989, entering Nimba County from Côte d’Ivoire with about 100 men. Doe responded with repression in Nimba, and the NPFL soon attracted more recruits, expanding by late 1990 to an estimated 10,000 members.149 Doe had crushed the limited existing domestic political opposition after Quiwonkpa’s coup, so the NPFL presented one of the only means of active opposition for regime opponents. Other fighters, meanwhile, joined due to promises of loot or of jobs and money when the NPFL won, and displaced Americo-Liberian elites were promised renewed political influence.150

Entering through Nimba was intentional: many early joiners were Gio and Mano volunteers with grievances against the Doe government, seeking revenge.

144Interview 36.
145Interview 18, former NPFL officer.
147Interview 53, Sen. Conmany Wesseh, former student leader and peace negotiator.
148Huband, Liberian Civil War, 53–59; Ellis, Mask of Anarchy, 72.
against Doe’s Krahn co-ethnics and Mandingo allies. Taylor was pursuing his own interests, but thought that “to [gain] power, [he] should get assistance from the most aggrieved party.” Taylor “used the fact that the Gios and Manos were mortal enemies of Doe ... And he exploited that, entered through their territory,” but “he was just using them to accomplish his own ends.” Jonathan Taylor, Charles Taylor’s cousin and cabinet minister, said of the NPFL and other rebels: “When they come in the idea is to want to create a better life, so-called coming to liberate. And they will say how all of these rights and freedoms have been denied. And they will use that once they find an environment that’s receptive, they will play on that.”

The postwar Truth and Reconciliation Commission found the NPFL responsible for almost 40% of total human rights violations and war crimes, “three times greater than the second worst offending faction.” According to a survey of demobilized combatants, however, about 10% of NPFL fighters reported joining the organization because they supported its political goals, despite the NPFL’s violence and harsh demands for discipline and labor.

Politically motivated followers joined the NPFL not only due to appeals about collective security threats, but in response to leaders’ claims they would create a “new Liberia,” end tribalism, and uplift marginalized rural populations. The NPFL systematically sought to gain control over media, especially radio broadcasting, to spread leaders’ narrative about the group’s aims and smother alternative voices. Like Renamo and the FDN, the NPFL used traditional religion and symbolic politics to signal empathy with aggrieved followers. Though Taylor denied that the NPFL used ritual specialists (zoes) or religious ceremonies, he and the NPFL actively engaged with traditional religion. Taylor stated that NPFL leaders “took advantage of our chiefs, our elders, our Zoes to work along with the population.”

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151 Interview 3, NPFL intelligence officer; interview 13, NPFL general; interview 19, NPFL special forces officer.
152 Interview 35, Joseph Saye Guannu, political historian.
153 Interview 47, Nakomo Duche, legal scholar and former UN official.
154 Interview 49.
156 Compared to 35% who reported joining to protect their family, 20% because of fear, and 19% who were abducted. James Pugel, *What the Fighters Say: A Survey of Ex-Combatants in Liberia, February–March 2006* (Monrovia: UNDP Liberia, 2007), 36.
channeling mobilization. The NPFL at times acted violently against certain zoes and secret societies, however, further suggesting instrumentality, more than genuine belief and respect, drove NPFL leaders’ relationship with traditional religion.161

Despite its rhetoric, the NPFL lacked a coherent ideology and developed few concrete plans for governance.162 Taylor’s “evident aim was to rule … [he] fought only for [his] own ambitions to hold power for its own sake.”163 Prince Johnson, an early NPFL commander who split with Taylor in 1990 to form the INPFL, said he left because Taylor was “overambitious for power” and “wanted to seize and hold power” with himself as president.164 Taylor purged popular Mano and Gio military and political leaders and centralized power around himself to the point that “there is no NPFL but Charles Taylor.”165 Many Liberians with antigovernment grievances had been convinced, however, that the NPFL would provide economic redistribution and development after toppling Doe. One young NPFL deserter said “she had been indoctrinated to believe that she was fighting to liberate Liberians who were supposed to be in bondage … fighting for peace and prosperity against a common enemy.”166

Yet leaders often personally appropriated whatever goods fighters captured, while Taylor and top deputies raked in millions of dollars from diamonds, timber, and other enterprises.167 One young ex-combatant lamented, “When I think of the five years I spent in the bush, killing people and being shot at, I feel pretty stupid. We were giving our lives for people who by tomorrow won’t remember how they got where they are.”168 A former NPFL general remarked, “They came to us, they say we are fighting for freedom. We know before the war the people were suffering, but this country before the war, the suffering were not like this.”169 As George Klay Kieh Jr. wrote, “Taylor’s strategy for winning support was anchored on the exploitation of the grievances of the various groups who were essential to

161Rebecca Nielsen, “The Differential Impact of War on Local Power Networks in Sierra Leone and Liberia” (paper presented at Harvard-MIT-Yale Graduate Student Conference on Political Violence, New Haven, CT, Yale University, April 18, 2013), 11.
162William Reno, “Foreign Firms and the Financing of Charles Taylor’s NPFL,” Liberian Studies Journal 18, no. 2 (1993): 175–88; Reno, “Predatory Rebellions and Governance.” Taylor’s former adviser John Richardson claims Taylor “had a vision, but he didn’t have the foggiest idea of how to implement [it].” Interview 52.
165Interview 3, NPFL officer; Ellis, Mask of Anarchy, 85.
169Interview 1.
the success of his military campaign,” though promises were not kept and Liberians discovered that “the Taylor-led NPFL was no better than the Doe regime.”

Some supporters defected from the NPFL because “the citizens thought that the rebels were bringing transformation … But, having fought for some time … the citizens began to realize there was no change.”

Despite controlling over three-quarters of Liberia’s territory from 1990 into 1995, the NPFL developed limited governing structures, and those that existed were predatory, geared toward exploiting local populations, extracting resources, and pursuing central power in Monrovia, which the NPFL won in 1997 after a negotiated settlement. Taylor and NPFL leaders exploited marginalized Liberians’ grievances to gain power but merely enriched and empowered themselves, contributing to grievances that fueled a new civil war and ultimately toppled Taylor and the NPFL in 2003.

Table 1 summarizes key elements of strategic pandering in the three case studies.

170Kieh, “Combatants, Patrons, Peacemakers,” 130.
171Interview 31, former AFL captain.
Testing and Extending the Logic of Pandering

This article demonstrates a logic of rebel mobilization through pandering by self-interested rebel leaders, who insincerely align themselves with popular preferences to capture support from an aggrieved portion of the population. For an unpopular rebel organization, the development of an aggrieved constituency offers an important opportunity for mobilization and the potential to develop domestic and international legitimacy. Successful pandering increases the organization’s size, attracting bandwagoners, potentially making the organization a veto player in a conflict, and improving the probability of a favorable outcome. Pandering can decrease dependence on foreign sponsors. It signals that rebels could remain a political force in peacetime. These gains, however, may erode if rebel leaders fail to deliver on their promises or if the state acts to redress grievances, especially early in the conflict when newly mobilized rebels have not been strongly socialized or incentivized into remaining in the group. Further testing of this pandering theory is needed to specify the conditions under which pandering is and is not attempted, and when it may be more successful as a mobilization strategy. Negative cases may be difficult to identify, but it should now be easier to look for failed pandering attempts or instances when unpopular groups decide not to engage in pandering.

I have discussed the pandering logic in dyadic conflicts between one rebel organization and the state, but a multiparty conflict in which rebel groups compete with each other militarily and for civilian support may change the structure of mobilization. I consider groups in competition if they operate in the same region and seek to mobilize the same population. Competition could undermine pandering by giving civilians a choice of groups to support, yet competition can still be compatible with pandering.

First, competing rebel groups might pledge to truly address popular grievances, pressuring pandering leaders to follow through on insincere promises or face diminishing support, though this was not the case in Liberia—the INPFL’s 1990 breakaway due to Charles Taylor personalizing power did not lead Taylor to change course and fulfill the NPFL’s ostensible public aims before or after the INPFL’s 1992 dissolution. Or the entry of a new competitor making grievance-based appeals could lead rebel

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174 In Nicaragua, although both groups were center-seeking, ARDE operated at the southern border of Nicaragua, whereas the FDN operated and mobilized support in the northern part of the country; Indigenous rebels on the Caribbean coast sought autonomy.
leaders to engage in pandering, making new ideological claims and promises to try to undercut the new group’s support base.175 If grievances exist against a rebel group, other rebels could also pander against them by saying they will treat civilians differently. In Liberia, ULIMO and the LPC both mobilized among Krahn and Mandingo populations that had supported the Doe government and then been targeted by NPFL forces. ULIMO and LPC leaders promised to liberate their ethnic kin and improve their lives, but both groups were violent and predatory toward civilians while leaders enriched themselves, just like the NPFL.176

Disaggregating rebel organizations and their supporters, more generally, helps us understand both rebel leaders and followers as rational actors pursuing varied strategies and interests. Rebel leaders may use a variety of mobilization strategies concurrently, including pandering, to increase their fighting capacity and support base. For governments and international actors, understanding how rebel organizations generate support and analyzing the depth of popular affinity for organizations is key to calibrating conflict resolution efforts. By better understanding mobilization pathways and the specific grievances or incentives motivating different rebel group members, policymakers and practitioners can also improve and target demobilization efforts to build a more durable peace.

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ORCID

Kai M. Thaler http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0836-8689

Data Availability Statement

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