

Rebel Attacks on Civilians

Targeting the Achilles Heel of Democratic Governments¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the strategic incentives rebel groups have for targeting civilians when they are fighting the government in a civil conflict. I argue that rebels exploit the fact that governments are the guarantors of protection for the population. When governments respect this role, they become vulnerable to attacks against civilians by non-state actors. Governments are particularly vulnerable in competitive democracies, since civilians can hold the government accountable for failures to provide security. Under such circumstances, rebels who seek to coerce the government have an incentive to target civilians for strategic purposes. When democratic governments disregard their role as protector and target their own populations, the incentives for the rebels to target civilians are reduced. A statistical evaluation of the severity of rebel violence against civilians in armed conflict, 1989-2004, supports these claims. On the one hand, rebels use more violence against civilians in competitive democracies, compared to in autocracies. On the other hand, when democratic governments target civilians, rebels use less violence against civilians.

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INTRODUCTION

Rebel groups often rely on civilian support for succeeding in their struggle, yet a large share of all the violence directed at civilians in contemporary conflicts have been carried out by non-state actors (Human Security Centre 2005). Why do rebel groups target civilians if they are fighting to overthrow, or get concessions from, the government? This puzzling fact prompts the question what the incentives are for rebel groups to target civilians. By considering the dependency relation between the government and the civilian population, I explain how violence against civilians can actually be understood as a coercive strategy aimed at putting pressure on the government.² Existing theoretical and systematic studies of violence against civilians by rebel groups tend to focus either on rebel group discipline (e.g., Weinstein 2006; Humphreys and Weinstein 2006) or on the interaction between the rebel group and the civilian population (e.g., Kalyvas 2006; Mkandawire 2002; Zahar 2001). However, the role of the government – one of the central actors in civil conflicts – has often been left out of the equation. This paper discusses how the relation between the government and the civilian population could shape the incentives for the rebels to target civilians. In particular, it focuses on the conditions under which governments are likely to be sensitive to such forms of violent coercion.

I propose that the incentives for rebel groups to engage in violence against civilians as a coercive strategy against the government are increased when the government is held accountable by the civilian population. Political accountability creates a dual dependency relation between the government and the civilian population. The government depends on the civilian population for support and reelection; the civilian population depends on the government for security provision.

² By civilians I mean non-combatants (excluding unarmed official representatives for either of the warring parties).

Due to this condition, civilians come to indirectly symbolize the government. By terrorizing the civilian population under such conditions, the rebels put pressure on the government by demonstrating that it cannot uphold control and provide security. The incentives for trying a coercive strategy are much lower when there is no dual dependency. I identify two observable implications of this proposition. First, when the rebels face a government in a competitive democracy, the incentives for using violence against the civilian population are higher. Governments who are held accountable for their actions are believed to be more sensitive to coercive means and thereby more likely to give in to such a strategy. It is the competitive element of democracy in a wider sense that forces governments to honor their responsibility to protect their citizens. Second, when democratic governments disregard their dependency on the civilian population, and target civilians in their fight against the rebel group, the incentives for coercion through violence against civilians are reduced. The civilian population thereby no longer symbolize the state, and cannot be used as an indirect target. The behavior of the government provides additional information about its relation to the civilian population than the mere political structure.

These empirical implications are examined using a new dataset by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program on one-sided killings of civilians by all rebel groups involved in an internal armed conflict during the post-Cold War period 1989-2004. The results support the two hypotheses. Rebel groups are likely to kill more civilians when fighting a democratic, compared to an autocratic, government. This finding is robust to two different measures of democracy. However, this effect of democracy is moderated by bad behavior of the government. The more civilians that the democratic government targets, the fewer civilians the rebels kill. The effect of the political system and behavior of the government indicates that rebel violence is not

only a way of controlling the civilian population but is in fact also an instrument in the communication with the government. In sum, violence appears to be the result of a calculated strategy, where civilians are used as pawns in the strategic power struggle between the rebels and the government.

The paper is organized as follows. First, previous research on rebel killings of civilians is presented. This serves to give an overview of the field and to place the present paper in the current debate on violence against civilians. Next, the argument about the coercive use of violence as a conflict strategy is presented and the factors that increase the incentives and disincentives for violence are introduced and summarized in the form of two hypotheses. Subsequently, the research design is discussed, and the data used to evaluate the hypotheses are presented. The section after that presents the statistical results, and analyses these in the light of the theoretical discussion and previous research. The final section offers some concluding remarks.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The attempts to explain violence by non-state actors mainly fall into two categories: those that focus on the group discipline, and those that focus on the relation between the rebel group and the civilian population. According to Humphreys and Weinstein (2006), the internal structure of the rebel group is a crucial factor for understanding why rebels kill civilians; loosely structured groups tend to lack mechanisms for punishing indiscipline and enforcing standards of conduct, and therefore violence by individuals within those groups is more likely. Resource strong groups who rely on pecuniary rewards for recruitment might attract opportunistic fighters who lack solidarity with the movement (Weinstein 2006). These fighters are more likely to kill civilians indiscriminately in their pursuit for personal gain through looting.

Zahar (2001) also concludes that the structure of the rebel group is an important determinant. She further claims that rebel groups with narrow objectives that do not strive to improve the society at large are more likely to target civilians; groups with broader objectives usually seek recognition from the international community and will therefore restrain themselves from killing civilians. Azam (2002) implies that the large death toll of civilians in African ethnoregional conflicts is the direct consequence of looting.³ He presents a formal model of incentives for looting, but why such behavior would result on so many civilian deaths is never spelled out.

There is an underlying assumption in all these explanations: if there is no efficient group enforcement, or restraint for tactical reasons, rebel fighters are expected to kill civilians. This suggests that rebels kill for personal gain, but the reason for the violence in this looting process is not clearly spelled out. Hence, indiscipline does not explain the rationale behind the actual violence. It raises the question why undisciplined rebels and fighters on a looting streak would cause so many deaths as rebels often do. Stealing food does not require large-scale killings and mutilations that are often committed in recurring operations.

The other strand of research focuses on the interaction with the civilian population. Kalyvas (2006) argues that warring parties in contested territories rely on civilians for information, and when civilians are willing to defect warring parties selectively target civilians to deter denunciation; this is especially likely to happen in areas where one actor is dominant but lacks complete control. Even indiscriminate violence can be used to “shape civilian behavior indirectly through association, and to shift responsibility for hostile actions to a wider groups of people” (Kalyvas 2006, 171). This happens when there is a great asymmetry between the warring parties and information is not available to the weaker party (Kalyvas 2006). Zahar (2001)

³ For a critique of the conceptual confusion of looting and violence in conflict, see Mac Ginty (2004).

emphasizes the role of dependency, but she means that the more economically dependent the rebels are on the civilian population, the better they are likely to treat that same population. Mkandawire (2002) suggests that rebel groups in many African conflicts, because of their urban origin, do not have any support among the population in rural areas. Rebels therefore take control over these territories by striking terror into the population through indiscriminate violence. Also with a focus on the strife for territorial control, Kaldor (2001, 98-100) holds that rebel groups in so-called “new wars” target civilians as a way of getting rid of opponents, as well as establishing control within one’s own group through fear and complicity by involving people in atrocities. In identity conflicts, violence against civilians is thus suggested to be instrumental in the conquest of territory. Kaufmann (1996) accentuates the ethnic component, claiming that territorial control is the only way by which parties can win ethnic conflict. Similarly, Zahar (2001) draws the general conclusion that rebels are likely to be more violent towards out-groups than in-groups.

The common idea of these studies is that violence is proposed as an instrument for keeping or gaining control. But when rebels target civilians it is reasonable to believe that violence is also related to the ongoing conflict with the government. In studies of terrorism, the signaling effect of violence on the behavior of the government is oftentimes in focus (e.g., see Kydd and Walter 2006; Lapan and Sandler 1993; Lake 2002; Crenshaw 1998). Nevertheless, when it comes to violence against civilians during armed conflict, the role of the government has been largely overlooked.⁴ The interplay with the government should be important also for

⁴ While the concept of violence against civilians overlap with that of terrorist violence, there are two important differences. First, the focus here is only on violence during an ongoing conflict, whereas terrorist violence can occur also in peacetime. Second, while terrorist violence is often defined by the

understanding violence during armed conflict. The section that follows proposes a way in which the role of the government might affect the incentives for rebels to target civilians during an internal armed conflict.

STRATEGIC INCENTIVES FOR VIOLENCE

When a rebel group challenges the government with military means they contest the legitimate authority of the state and its monopoly over violence. The rebels use armed force to seek concessions from the government (Zartman 1995; Lichbach 1995). Through violence and destruction the rebels impose costs on the government, thereby trying to pressure the government into concessions. In general, rebels prefer to impose costs by targeting government troops, since military success is the ultimate objective for which the rebel groups is formed and engages in conflict (Gates 2002, 112). Most internal conflicts are characterized by strong asymmetry, and the rebel group might be too weak to impose enough damage on the government to make them give in to political demands. However, there are also other ways a rebel group can increase its chances of winning. Groups may for example engage in indirect strategies, such as starvation and plunder, which allows them to weaken the enemy without the risk of losing fighting forces in combat (Duyvesteyn 2005, 79). Violence against civilians might be seen as the most extreme version of such an indirect strategy.

At a first glance, however, it does not seem to make much sense for the rebels to target civilians – whose support their success often depends on – if they seek to coerce the government. In what way could the government be coerced as a consequence of the rebels targeting civilians? In order to understand this puzzle, it is

tactics used and may include both violence directed against civilian and military targets, violence against civilians as conceptualized here is defined only by the target of violence.

necessary to consider the role of the civilian population in relation to the government. Although the government and the rebels struggle to control the same population, a government often has the ultimate responsibility of protecting the population.⁵ When the rebels are allowed to terrorize the population it signals the government's failure in that fundamental task of protection. By targeting civilians the rebels thereby impose a political cost on the government. Beside the effort of defeating government troops, violence against civilians can thus be used as an alternative way of putting pressure on the government.⁶

However, not all governments can be expected to be sensitive to this form of violent coercion by a rebel group. It depends on the relationship between the government and the civilian population. The government's relation with the civilian population sometimes provides the rebel group with strategic incentives to coerce the government through violence against civilians. When the government is held accountable by its constituents, civilians indirectly represents the government and become a target for the rebels. If the government aims at protecting the people, a strike against civilian targets is also an indirect strike against the government that fails to protect them. The government depends on the civilian population for support and reelection and the civilian population depends on the government for security

⁵ In some conflicts people are very segregated, and the rebels seek to control one clearly defined part of that population. The government nevertheless seeks to retain control over the country and thereby over the whole population. Even if a party cannot expect attitudinal support from a group, it can seek compliance, or behavioral support, which is the central form of support for warring parties during an armed conflict (see Kalyvas 2006, 92-104).

⁶ Whether violence against civilians actually pays is a slightly different question. Pape (2005) argues that suicide terrorism is increasing because the terrorist groups learn that governments give in to such tactics. Abrahms (2006) challenges these claims and contends that terrorism actually does not work as a coercive strategy. However, the efficiency of violence is not dealt with in this paper.

provision. Due to this dual dependency, civilians come to indirectly symbolize the government.

The structural factor that most clearly forces governments to consider accountability towards constituents is democracy. Even though democracy is in general conflict preventive, the role of democracy is different during an ongoing armed conflict. Democratic states offer the citizens alternative channels for expressing discontent through non-violent means – democracy is essentially a mechanism for conflict resolution (Wallensteen 2002, 140-42). This is most likely one strong reason for why democracies are less likely to experience conflict or internal violence in the first place (e.g., see Hegre et al. 2001; Benson and Kugler 1998). However, once a conflict breaks out in a democracy the armed group that challenges the government has already discarded the channels for non-violent political influence. The conflict resolving mechanism of democracy has thus already failed to prevent violent conflict. Instead, democracy becomes a weakness, since the government needs to consider the reaction by the constituents in its dealings with the rebel group. This political structure, which is known to the rebels, shapes their expectation about the behavior of the government. A parallel to terrorist violence can be made here. Studies on terrorist violence have observed a correlation between democracy and terrorism, and suggest that the openness of democratic societies provides an opportunity for carrying out violent events (Eubank and Weinberg 1994, 2001).⁷ Li (2005) shows that the aspect of democracy that increases transnational terrorist incidents is government constraints. The checks and balances and the competitive setting of the democratic system limit the ability of the

⁷ Regarding the particular use of suicide terrorist, however, the correlation with democracy is debated. While Pape (2005) argues that democracies are much more likely to experience suicide terrorism, Wade and Reiter (2007) show that this correlation is in fact quite weak

government to respond to terrorism with powerful or repressive means – it is costly since they risk losing support and thereby the state power (Li 2005, 283).

In a political system where the government depends on the civilian population for being re-elected, the constituents can hold the government accountable for a failure to govern the country in a satisfactory manner. To provide for the people's security is one of the fundamental tasks that is expected from a government. When failing to do so, as when a rebel group is allowed to attack civilians, the government is held accountable and the constituents have a chance of punishing the government in future elections. Democracies are more sensitive to coercive pressure because their citizens have lower thresholds for cost tolerance and they also have an ability to affect state policy (Pape 2005, 44). Autocratic states, on the other hand, do not necessarily care about the cost tolerance of the people. Rebel groups who seek ways to coerce the government without risking being eliminated can exploit this perceived weakness of democracies. Democracy thus constitutes a strategic incentive for violence. When the rebels target civilians, they also raise the costs for the government to continue being involved in the conflict.

In sum, while autocratic states can crush an uprising with harsh means, a democratic state must consider its political accountability and is therefore more vulnerable to violence directed against the civilian population upon whose support it depends. Democracy increases the incentives for the rebels to target civilians, and consequently increases the expected level of violence. This is expressed in the first hypothesis.

H1: Rebel groups kill more civilians when fighting a democratic government than when fighting an autocratic government.

Democratic governments are known to be less atrocious than their autocratic counterparts, because of norms and institutional arrangements (Harff 2003). But this does not mean that democracies never target their own populations. When considering the broader category of competitive democracy, the quality of democratic norms and institutions may still vary. This has implications for the extent to which the civilian population actually is perceived as a symbol for the government. If rebels target civilians as a coercive strategy, the important factor is the rebel group's likely perception of the dual dependency between the government and the civilian population. The behavior of the government may reveal additional information about the degree to which it is concerned with political accountability. When the state uses violence against civilians, it shows through action that it does not take responsibility for the civilian population; civilians, in turn, do not embody state power.

Studies on state mass killings during war have suggested that governments tend to target civilians when they are unable to defeat the rebels militarily, and this may well be used also by democratic states.⁸ In such situations, it does not make much sense for the rebels to try to impose costs on the government by also targeting the civilian population. Since the government and the rebels compete for control over the same population (in whole or only in part), violence against civilians does not function as an act of revenge in the same way as it might do in interstate

⁸ Valentino et al. (2004) propose that governments are more likely to kill civilians when facing a rebel group relying on guerrilla warfare – the rationale being that these types of situations create large incentives for the government to target the guerrillas' civilian base of support, as a way of combating groups that are difficult to defeat through conventional warfare. Similarly, Azam and Hoeffler (2002) argue that violence against civilians is used strategically to displace people in areas where rebels have support, since it reduces the rebels' ability to hide and receive support and thereby increases their costs for fighting.

conflicts.⁹ When the government proves that it does not take full responsibility for the people, the positive incentives for the rebels to target civilians created by the presence of democracy are directly reduced. Moreover, government attacks against civilians might even open the possibility for the rebels to play a protective role and thereby increase or consolidate their support base. In such a scenario, indiscriminate violence by the government is likely to produce incentives for the civilian population to collaborate with the rebels (Kalyvas 2006, 154). Hence, not only are there disincentives for the rebels to target civilians when the government does so; they might also have positive incentives to refrain from violence against civilians and instead take the opportunity to play the “good guys” and thereby gain support. The second hypothesis articulates the observable consequence of the disincentives that government violence gives rise to.

H2: In democratic states, rebels are likely to kill fewer civilians the more civilians that the government kills.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Both hypotheses include variables that may vary over time. Therefore, the dataset used to evaluate the hypotheses is constructed as a cross-sectional time-series, where each rebel group is observed over time: the unit of analysis being group-year. Each separate rebel group involved in intrastate armed conflict from 1989 to 2004 is included in the dataset with yearly observations. This way we can examine different rebel groups in the same conflict and their respective propensity for targeting

⁹ Regarding civilian victimization in interstate wars, Downes (2006, 176) has shown that states are more likely to target civilians when the enemy state is relying on such a brutal strategy, “indicating that revenge or retaliation may be a motive for civilian victimization”.

civilians. Intrastate armed conflict is defined in accordance with UCDP: an incompatibility (over either governmental power or territory, or both) between a government and one or more rebel groups that in one year result in at least 25 battle-related deaths (Harbom 2006).¹⁰

Due to the low threshold for battle-deaths, there are many actors in low-intensity conflicts included and these tend to vary in activity over the years. A conflict actor can be inactive for a few years and then resume violence. These cases are considered as ongoing conflicts here, since the incompatibility is not resolved and the behavior not regulated. The strategic behavior of such actors is of interest also during the inactive years, especially since those actors could choose to target civilians instead of fighting. Therefore, the rule for including cases is that once an actor is active during the period of observation, it continues to be included until: a) victory by either side in conflict; b) there is a peace agreement or ceasefire that lasts for at least three years; c) the rebel group joins the government; d) the rebel group is dissolved or clearly gives up on the incompatibility; or e) the conflict is inactive for more than three years.¹¹

The phenomenon in focus of this study is direct and deliberate killings of civilians by an organized non-state group involved in an armed conflict with the

¹⁰ All data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Project used are available on in the Conflict Database:

<http://www.pcr.uu.se/database/index.php>.

¹¹ Admittedly, three years is an arbitrarily drawn time limitation. However, considering that there are no established standards to rely on, three years is a reasonable time range when interested in capturing those conflicts that are temporarily inactive, without extending it to include too many years on inactivity. Excluding the inactive years from the statistical models do not change the main findings of the study.

central government. The data on killing of civilians is taken from the UCDP.¹² It is a measure of one-sided violence, defined as “the use of armed force [...] by a formally organized group against civilians which results in at least 25 deaths per year” (Eck and Hultman 2007, 235). Important to note is that it only includes direct and deliberate killings, which is the particular interest of this study, thereby excluding other forms of violence like unorganized violent riots, indirect deaths following starvation, and civilians killed in cross-fire. The intention of the rebels is of course difficult to assess, so the nature of the target – that the target is seemingly civilian rather than military – is what determines whether an incident is coded as one-sided or not. The UCDP data collection is based on the readings of over 350,000 articles from five international and some additional regional news bureaus, plus supplementary information from NGO reports etc (Eck and Hultman 2007). When relying on reported death counts, there is a risk of missing information, which is particularly problematic if the missing information is biased in some way that might influence the results.¹³ One concern is that the degree of reported one-sided violence is related to the regime type – which would flaw the results considerably.

¹² UCDP One-Sided Violence Dataset, version 1.2, available at http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/UCDP/our_data.htm.

¹³ Davenport and Ball (2002) show that state terror in Guatemala was reported differently by newspapers, human rights documents and interviews – these three types of sources tended to focus on different types and aspects of terror. Since UCDP relies on two of these three types of sources, the risk of bias is reduced compared to sources relying on media reports only. The third type of source that is not included – interviews – is according to Davenport and Ball better at reporting rural activity. This is echoed by Kalyvas (2004): relying only on written sources may result in an urban bias in the study of civil wars. He argues that this type of bias tends to permeate also our theoretical work on the understanding of violence. However, for the purposes of a quantitative evaluation of the patterns of violence, the UCDP data is a good starting point due to its rigorous data collection procedure, which aims at minimizing these problems as much as possible.

Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing this, and to this date, these data are the best available for global systematic evaluation of one-sided violence. However, the risk of bias is discussed in more detail in the results section.

The dependent variable is a count variable with the threshold of 25 deaths per year: hence, given that a group kills at least 25 civilians in a year, the number of deaths is coded. Given the count data, a negative binomial regression model (NBRM) is chosen. The data are over-dispersed (standard deviation being about seven times larger than the mean), which indicates that there might be both contagion and unobserved heterogeneity (King 1989, 129; Long 1997, 230-36). The NBRM is suitable for handling this.¹⁴ The variable is also left-censored – all the real values between 0 and 24 take the value of 0 in the data – which would normally speak in favor of a tobit model (Gujarati 2003, 616). All models are therefore run using a tobit model as a robust test.

The first independent variable *democracy*. I use Vanhanen's democracy measure, which captures the competitive aspect of democracy that the argument applies to. It consists of two components: the degree of electoral competition and the degree of electoral participation. Competition is the total percent of votes for all the smaller parties, and participation is the percentage of the population who voted in the last elections. The threshold value for democracy is the one suggested by Vanhanen (2000, 257): a minimum of 30% on the competition variable *and* a minimum of 10% on the participation variable. I use the version of the data provided by Teorell et al.

¹⁴ Considering the large number of zeros, a zero-inflated model could also be used. However, this estimator assumes that not all zeros have a positive probability of having a positive count (Long 1997; Zorn 1998). Although this is probably valid for one-sided violence in general, the probability of a zero count cannot be correctly estimated with the independent variables using these data. Many zeros are simply the result of a data collection rule and are thus not "true" zeros. Therefore, a NBRM that does not make this assumption is the better choice.

(2006), which is updated to 2004. As a robustness check, I also use an alternative measure of democracy. Polity IV provides a concept variable for Executive Recruitment, which includes the three dimensions of regulation, competitiveness, and openness of executive recruitment.¹⁵ The second independent variable is *government killings*. Just as the dependent variable, this data comes from UCDP and is thus coded the same way as for rebel groups, described above. Both these variables are lagged one year.¹⁶ In order to evaluate the second hypothesis, the two main variables are interacted. In that way the effect of government killings, conditioned by the value of the democracy dummy, can be estimated.

A number of control variables are included in the models. Relative military strength could affect the type of warfare being fought and in turn the way that violence against civilians is used (Kalyvas 2005, 91). *Relative strength* is a ratio created by dividing government troops with rebel troops, so the higher the ratio the weaker the rebel group is relative to the government. Since this creates an exponential variable, the natural log of the ratio is used. Data are primarily taken from Military Balance, but when missing (as is the case for many rebel groups), UCDB database is consulted and values are imputed. The causes of territorial conflicts are different from those of governmental conflicts (see Buhaug 2006), and the dynamics of the conflicts are thus likely to differ as well. For example, if the rebels claim to be the legitimate representatives of a specific territory, the role of the government in relation to the civilian population might be different. *Territorial*

¹⁵ Polity IV data, available at <http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/polity/>.

¹⁶ A relevant question is whether these two independent variables are not in fact highly correlated. Previous research has argued and shown that democratic states are less likely to engage in mass killings and genocide (Harff 2003; Rummel 1995; Valentino et al. 2004). Nevertheless, a covariance test of these two variables reveals a low correlation of -0.1032 .

conflict is a dummy for whether the actor is involved in a conflict with a territorial incompatibility, as coded by UCDP. A similar problem might occur when the country is clearly fractionalized between ethnic groups. Ethnicity could make the issue of government responsibility for the whole population less central; therefore, I control for *ethnic fractionalization*. It is a measure of the probability that two randomly drawn people in a country belong to different ethnolinguistic groups, and the data is taken from Fearon and Laitin (2003).

As shown by previous studies (Eck and Hultman 2007; Restrepo et al. 2004), the level of violence against civilians is likely to follow the intensity of fighting. It is possible that violence is sometimes just a function of fighting. *Conflict intensity* is a dummy variable capturing the dyadic intensity level as coded by UCDP: 1 corresponds to years with more than 1000 battle deaths, and 0 is for years that result in fewer than 1000 battle deaths. Hence, the variable captures the intensity of fighting between the particular rebel group and the government. According to Weinstein (2006) rebel groups who depend on natural resources to recruit members with economic rewards are more likely to attract opportunistic fighters, who are in turn more violent towards the civilian population. I therefore control for the availability of *natural resources* in the conflict zone. A dichotomous variable on the presence of essential natural resources, such as fossil minerals, metals, or diamonds, in the conflict zone is taken from Buhaug and Gates (2002). The longer the group is involved in conflict, the more it learns about the government and its likely responses to different strategies used. I therefore control for *conflict duration*, which counts the number of years since the actor became involved in the conflict according to UCDP.¹⁷ Since the dependent variable is a count of people killed, it is reasonable to

¹⁷ The start date is based on the first year a conflict dyad reached 25 battle-deaths. When a group splits, the main faction is considered to be a continuation of the former group, but the duration of the

take the size of the population in the country into account. The variable *population* is the log of the total population, using data from the World Development Indicators, provided by the World Bank.¹⁸

Lastly, when estimating the severity of violence with yearly observations we run into the problem of time dependence in the form of inertia: the decision to target civilians one year is not independent of the strategy employed the previous year. Therefore, the dependent variable is lagged one year and included in all models.

FINDINGS

All the statistical findings are presented in table 1. Model 1 evaluates the first hypothesis. Due to the large number of control variables, and the problems of misspecification that may introduce, I also present a trimmed version of the model in which only the variables with a significant effect are included. In both models, democracy is positive and significant, which means that the first hypothesis is supported: rebels use more violence against civilians in democracies compared to non-democracies. The fact that the competitive element of democracy is the most central aspect that provides rebels with incentives to target civilians is confirmed when splitting the democracy measure into its two original components – competition and participation. Whereas participation on its own is not significantly correlated with the level of rebel violence, competition has a significant positive effect – both on its own and in conjunction with participation. For ensuring robustness, I also ran the models using the alternative measure of democracy, Polity's executive recruitment variable. Democracy remains positively and

breakaway faction thus begins to count from zero. When several groups form an umbrella organization, the duration of the oldest member is used.

¹⁸ The data are available at <http://devdata.worldbank.org/dataonline/>.

significantly correlated with higher levels of rebel violence against civilians. Taken together, these findings support the argument that the competitive aspect of democracy is likely to generate incentives for rebels to target civilians.

[Table 1 here]

Model 3 evaluates the second hypothesis by including both government killings and an interaction term, thereby capturing the conditional effect of government killings depending on the presence of democracy. To enable a correct interpretation of the effect of government killings, democracy is in this model coded as 0, and autocracy as 1 – in this way the inclusion of the interaction term provides an estimation of the effect of government killings when the variable autocracy takes on the value of 0, i.e. in democracies only (see Braumoeller 2004). A trimmed version of the model is also presented. The negative and significant effect of government killings shows that also hypothesis 2 is borne out empirically in both models. Hence, the more violent against the population a democratic government is, the less violent the rebel group is.¹⁹ The interaction term also shows that this effect is significantly different from the effect of government killings in non-democracies. The conclusion is that the political structure provides primary information about the dependency relation between the government and the population; more specifically, it defines the degree to which the governments need to consider their responsibility to act as guarantors of protection for the civilian population. These results thus provide some

¹⁹ Of the 439 observations with democratic governments included in the model, government violence against civilians is recorded in 59 (i.e. 13 percent). These encompass 12 different governments, e.g. Guatemala, Indonesia, Israel, Russia, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

evidence for the idea that rebels target civilians when there are strategic incentives for doing so, and they refrain from targeting civilians when the incentives are low.

As an evaluation of a theoretical argument, it is also interesting to examine the substantial effects of these factors. How much do these factors actually matter? The impact of the main independent variables are evaluated through a post estimation that reports the percent change in the dependent variables when an independent variables change one unit – holding all other variables constant (Long and Freese 2003, 270-71). Table 2 shows that when we move one unit on the democracy measure, i.e. when moving from autocracy to democracy, the expected number of civilians killed increase by 240 percent. This means that rebels in democratic states are expected to kill more than twice as many civilians than those in non-democratic states. Democracy thus has a strong impact on rebel violence – not only in terms of significant, but also in substantial, effects. Among these democratic states involved in conflict, rebels are expected to kill fewer civilians when the government targets civilians. Government killings have a negative 0.9 percent change for each unit increase in the independent variable. This means that for every additional civilian killed by the government, the rebels are expected to kill 0.9 percent fewer. It may sound like a negligible effect, but it is easier to interpret the percent change when increasing government killings with one standard deviation: 69 more people killed by the government (which is the standard deviation of government killings in democracies) is expected to results in a 45 percent decrease of civilians killed by the rebels.

[Table 2 here]

In order to assess the robustness of these findings, two alternative tests were made. First, as mentioned in the research design section, the data on one-sided violence might be flawed by a bias that is correlated with the regime type. One might suspect that media in democracies are better at reporting on violent events. The UCDP presents quite a conservative estimate of the level of violence by requiring reliable sources for all death counts. Perhaps this creates a bias against violence carried out in autocracies. In addition to the best estimate, UCDP also provides a high estimate, in which more unreliable sources of information for violence are also included. By using the high estimate as an alternative dependent variable, the potential bias against autocracies could possibly be detected. When running the four models using the high estimate as the dependent variable, the results remain the same. Rebel groups are more violent in democracies, but less violent the more civilians those democratic governments kill.

Second, a tobit model was used to enable a comparison of the results when specifying the value for left-censoring (while instead introducing other problems of assuming a normally distributed dependent variable). The results are not very robust to this alternative way of estimating the severity of violence. Democracy only has a significant effect in the trimmed model. Hence, the tobit weakly supports the first hypothesis. The second hypothesis, on the other hand, is not borne out by this test. Government killings have a negative effect, but it is not statistically significant. Based on this we can conclude that the effect of government killings should be interpreted with caution since the effect is sensitive to the choice of estimator. Nevertheless, the NBRM is the more correct choice of estimator, so we have reason to believe that both hypotheses have some empirical backing.

Taken together, the statistical evaluation supports the two hypotheses, and thereby also the overall proposition that rebels are more violent towards civilians

when the government's role as a guarantor of protection for the population provides them with strategic incentives. The fact that government killings actually reduce the level of rebel violence against civilians, even if it is only for a subset of the conflicts, deserves some further attention. The idea of reciprocity, or tit-for-tat, is extensively applied in conflict studies and international relations in general. (Leng 1993, 70) describes reciprocity as "the extent to which the parties on each side respond to actions of the parties of the other side in kind and magnitude", and concludes that it is an efficient strategy in militarized crises. Violent actions in intrastate conflicts, i.e. the general level of conflict-related violence, also follow the logic of reciprocity. According to Bohara et al. (2006, 112), "The use of violence by one side likely provokes a violent response from the other side, both as punishment for past violence and as a deterrent for future violence". Empirical evidence from Nepal also supports this claim. In sum, tit-for-tat has proven a powerful explanation for violence in general. The negative reciprocity identified in this paper is also the direct opposite of what Azam (2002) proposes regarding ethnoregional conflicts. He suggests that looting and violence against civilians create incentives for the other party to use the same strategy.

The fact that the results of this study go against all these previous ideas about reciprocity can be explained by the special role of violence against civilians in internal conflicts, in particular in democratic states. While parties can retaliate through strikes against military bases or infrastructure, violence against civilians has a different function. Since both parties fight to control the same people, violence against civilians does not work as an act of revenge or retaliation. Even if the conflict is polarized, the government usually tries to retain control over the whole country, and thereby also the population. As long as the civilian population stands in a dependency relation to the government in democratic states, the rebels can exploit

this weakness of the government. But if the government turns against the civilian population, the rebels would not punish the government by also targeting civilians.

The impact of the control variables should also be mentioned. Relative strength has a negative and significant effect in all models. Since the variable is a measure of the degree of asymmetry, the negative effect means that the greater the asymmetry between the rebels and the government in terms of military capacity, the fewer civilians the rebels kill. Relatively strong groups are more violent towards the civilian population than relatively weak groups. This means that violence against civilians during armed conflict is not the result of weak groups who do not have enough troops relative to the government to pose a military threat. An explanation for this could be that strong groups usually end up in a so-called symmetric non-conventional war, which “entails irregular armies on both sides in a pattern resembling pre-modern war” (Kalyvas 2005, 91). Violence in such situations tends to be more indiscriminate and extensive, whereas violence against civilians by weak insurgents is often limited to selective violence. Territorial conflict has a significant negative effect in three of the models. Rebels are consequently less violent against civilians when the incompatibility concerns territorial issues rather than the central government power. Population has a positive effect as expected – the larger the country the more violence also occurs. Conflict duration has a negative and significant effect in all models, which denotes that rebels kill fewer civilians the longer they have been fighting the government. That indicates that violence is not used as a last desperate resort when all else have failed after a long period of fighting – instead, violence is more extensive in the early phases of conflict.

Three of the control variables do not show any significant effects. Ethnic fractionalization does not lead to increased levels of violence in civil conflict. This is not saying that ethnicity does not matter – other measures are necessary to evaluate

that – but the mere fact that a society is ethnically fragmented does not mean that the rebels are more brutal towards the civilian population. The conflict intensity does not have a significant effect: violence against civilians is not a strict function of fighting. While this may go against our intuition about violent conflicts, it does go in line with the finding by Hultman (2007) that relative battle losses – rather than the total number of people killed in combat – predicts the use of violence against civilians. Natural resources do not have any significant effect on the rebel groups' use of violence. Hence, the fact that rebels have the opportunity to recruit rebels with pecuniary rewards does not lead to higher levels of rebel abuse of civilians. It should be noted, however, that the link between resources and rebel extraction of these is not examined here.²⁰

CONCLUSIONS

The recent debate on why rebel groups target civilians in armed conflicts has tended to focus on either group indiscipline or the interaction between the rebel group and the civilian population. I try to widen this debate by focusing on a third important aspect, namely the importance of the role that the civilian population plays in relation to the government. When governments are held accountable by their constituents, they are also more sensitive to violent coercion directed at the civilian population. In democracies where government power is at stake in competitive elections, the constituents can hold the government accountable for its inability to provide for the security of the population. Since governments have the ultimate responsibility as a guarantor of protection for the population, they are vulnerable to attacks that prove they do not have the power to protect. Rebel groups who seek to

²⁰ When measuring resource as the presence of lootable diamonds in the country, there is still no significant effect.

coerce the government could therefore take advantage of this weakness of the government by attacking the civilian population. Striking against civilian targets is militarily cheap for the rebels; at the same time it is difficult and costly for the government to protect civilians from such attacks. This positive incentive is reduced if the government publicly reveals that it does not care about the responsibility to protect the population. In such instances, civilians no longer serve as a target indirectly representing the government.

The finding that rebels are more violent towards the civilian population when fighting a democratic government is consistent with the results from several studies on terrorism. Liberal societies are vulnerable to violent attacks on the open society, and are therefore more likely to be the targets of terrorist attacks. However, at the same time this finding contests the established and empirically supported idea of the peaceful domestic effects of democracy (e.g. Hegre et al. 2001; Muller and Weede 1990; Harff 2003; Rummel 1995). It might therefore seem odd that democracy increases the incentives for violence against civilians by rebel groups. These seemingly contradictory findings are nonetheless compatible. Even though democracies are less likely to experience conflict in the first place, the few democratic states that do experience armed conflict are more sensitive to coercive measures directed against their civilian population than autocratic states. This does not mean that democracy should be limited during armed conflict. It is not the qualitative aspects of democracy that provide the rebels with incentives for targeting civilians; rather, it is the competitive aspect of electoral democracy that forces governments to consider its accountability towards the electorate. The fact that government killings in democracies decrease rebel violence, rather than spurring a cycle of violence, further confirms this idea. The behavior of the government towards the civilian population provides additional information to the rebels about

the importance that the government attributes to the responsibility to protect and political accountability. However disturbing one might find these results – that rebel groups abuse civilians for strategic purposes – they inform us about the possibility of manipulating these strategic incentives. By being aware of the incentives driving rebel groups to coerce the government with violent means, the international community could stand better prepared to deal with war crimes of this sort.

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TABLES

Table 1. Negative Binomial Regressions of Number of Civilians Killed

	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 3</i>	<i>Model 4</i>
Democracy _{t-1}	1.2226 ** (0.4931)	1.3319*** (0.4608)		
Autocracy _{t-1}			-1.2832 *** (0.4948)	-1.3658 *** (0.4710)
Govt killings _{t-1}	-0.0002 (0.0005)		-0.0071 ** (0.0035)	-0.0076 ** (0.0035)
Autocracy*govt killings _{t-1}			0.0071 ** (0.0035)	0.0072 ** (0.0035)
Relative strength	-0.4409 *** (0.1288)	-0.4954*** (0.1246)	-0.4286 *** (0.1297)	-0.4939 *** (0.1254)
Territorial conflict	-0.8909 * (0.4630)	-0.7677* (0.4363)	-0.8499 * (0.4730)	-0.6754 (0.4503)
Ethnic fractionalization	-0.3461 (0.7617)		-0.3609 (0.7729)	
Conflict intensity	0.2826 (0.3439)		0.2637 (0.3522)	
Natural resources	0.2125 (0.3639)		0.2965 (0.3788)	
Population	0.3043 * (0.1595)	0.2977** (0.1406)	0.2843 * (0.1606)	0.2868 ** (0.1407)
Conflict duration	-0.0609 ** (0.0251)	-0.0561 ** (0.0229)	-0.0601 ** (0.0255)	-0.0547 ** (0.0235)
DV _{t-1}	0.0117 *** (0.0019)	0.0108*** (0.0016)	0.0120 *** (0.0020)	0.0109 *** (0.0017)
Constant	-0.6413 (2.3283)	-0.5778 (2.1767)	0.8896 (2.5467)	0.9358 (2.3359)
lnalpha	2.9580 (0.1544)	3.0043 (0.1562)	2.9543 (0.1541)	2.9985 (0.1563)
alpha	19.260 (2.9745)	20.1718 (3.1512)	19.1879 (2.9575)	20.0560 (3.1342)
Number of obs	783	802	783	802

Standard errors adjusted for clustering on rebel group. Estimations performed using Stata 8.0. *** $p \leq .01$; ** $p \leq .05$, * $p \leq .1$, two-tailed test.

Table 2. Percent Change of Expected Count of Civilians Killed by Rebels

<i>Variable</i>	<i>% change for unit increase</i>	<i>% change of std increase</i>	<i>Std</i>
Democracy _{t-1}	278.8	94.7	0.50
Govt killings (in democracy only)	-0.9	-45.4	68.9

These post estimations are based on models including all the control variables. For government killings, a model run on a subset of democracies only was used.