

Chapter 21

Criminal Interests within Political Insurgencies: The Case for Development- Centred Counterinsurgency

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ABSTRACT

Insurgencies are progressive and systematic insurrections with political aims. They are usually aimed at the creation of a new state, the liberation of a nation from foreign intervention, the transformation of the political system, or the imposition of a certain way of life. Whereas this political character sets them apart from common criminals, whose main objective is personal profit; in practice, most insurgencies are a combination of criminal and political interests. Solutions that address political grievances or criminal motivations separately, leaving one of them aside, are highly likely to fail, perpetuating violence. Development-centred counterinsurgency seems to be an ideal framework to confront this type of insurgencies. The case of Colombia is examined to observe achievements, failures and challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Although the conceptualization of political violence and criminality creates differentiated dimensions to describe the nature of non-state violent actors, it is not always easy to observe this distinction in the real world. Depicting armed actors as monolithic and unitary agents might not always be precise, and could even lead into bad policy making. Insurgencies and terrorists have political interests by definition, but in many

cases it is possible to observe fighters who are more motivated by profit. Instead of waging war because they believe in an altruist goal, they do it as way of living.

This reality imposes a challenge for policy-makers. If only the political elements of conflict are addressed (the grievances of the insurgency), then interests in profit will remain, perpetuating violence. Remnants of the organization could prevail, or new armed groups could be formed. By contrast, if policies are only formulated to erode

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-9675-4.ch021

profiting interest, unattended social and political demands will likely perpetuate violence.

This chapter argues that, as a consequence of the existence of political and economic interests within a single insurgent organization, states need to recur to a strand of counterinsurgency practice which could be denominated ‘development-centred counterinsurgency’. This model seeks to fight insurgents not only militarily, but by recurring to practices that resemble nation-building. It is not here argued that there aren’t other possible solutions to conflicts when insurgencies exist. Negotiations or appeasement are examples of possible strategic paths. But it is not the interest of this document to discuss the best possible strategy. Instead, it focuses on best practices when confrontation of the insurgency is necessary.

For this analysis, there will be a differentiated exploration of case studies. After discussing literature regarding economic interests in conflict, the Taliban, the Kurdistan Worker’s Party, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia will be analysed to describe how it is possible to observe criminal interests within the organization. Following an explanation of the idea of development-centred counterinsurgency, the case of Colombia is explored to observe achievements, failures and challenges of this type of counterinsurgency policies, hoping to offer more light for the study of other cases.

BACKGROUND: ECONOMIC INTERESTS IN CONFLICTS

The interest of individuals in making profit out of wars is not a new feature in warfare. Centuries before the so-called *new wars*, supposedly waged for economic incentives and not for political motivations, combatants were already interested in looting.¹ From Julius Caesar to Bismarck, including the conquistadores, the feudal barons and the condottieri, interests in profit had always been common (Lewison, 1936).

The study of economic interests in conflict has almost become a sub-discipline in Development and Security Studies. It is a common theme explored in the post-Cold War era, especially to understand dilemmas throughout the developing world. Several authors such as David Keen (1998, 2006), David Malone and Jake Sherman (2005), Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler (1998, 1999, 2000) and Mats Berdal (2009) have explained how in specific cases economic interests precede political motivations in the causation and endurance of conflict.² The control of regions where specific commodities are produced generates competition between diverse groups and forces that recur to violence to guarantee this domination. In many cases, in the absence of state institutions, a criminal economy emerges. As explained by Keen, “conflicts can create war economies, often in regions controlled by rebels or warlords and linked to international trading networks; members of armed gangs can benefit from looting; and regimes can use violence to deflect opposition, reward supporters or maintain their access to resources” (Keen, 1998, 11).

When this is the case, it is common to see a transformation within the groups themselves: an interest in continue waging war for the sake of profits, instead of winning it to achieve a political goal. “Defeating the enemy or bringing the fighting to an end appears to have become less important for key parties involved than securing the benefits from the continuation of conflict” (Arson, 2005, 4).

This discussion created a certain dichotomy between explanations of conflict based on economic interests in the one hand, and on political agendas in the other; a debate commonly known as greed vs. grievance. Through a series of World Bank sponsored studies, Collier and Hoeffler argued at some point that conflicts were exclusively caused by combatant’s greed; but a more appropriate conclusion is that rebellions are “motivated by a blend of an altruistic desire to rectify the griev-

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