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Articles

Lees & Petersohn (2021) Replication & Extension: The Impact of Armed Private Military Security Companies (PMSCs) on Total Population Displacement During Civil Wars

Marvin Nathan and Andy Le

Fake Success: Investigating Peru's Decade of False Democracy and President Alberto Fujimori's Public Relations

Graham Snyder

Matchmaking in Insurgency: Leader Signals and the Allocation of External Support

Liam Anders

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Letter from the Editor-in-Chief

It is a privilege and honor that I have the opportunity to present the fourth volume of the Spring 2026 *BORDERS Graduate Journal*. This year, we feature three distinctly unique articles which have demonstrated excellent research skills, posited novel arguments and theories, and showed an evident dedication to advancing scholarship in the field of international relations. We are also proud to feature for the first time an article submission from outside the Master of Arts in International Relations (MAIR) program. Graham Snyder's article delves into how President Alberto Fujimori maintained high approval ratings under the guise of democracy while simultaneously dismantling it, taking a more qualitative and historical approach compared to previous submissions.

The two other articles featured here both represent the culmination of two years of hard work and academic rigor in the MAIR program. Marvin Nathan and Andy Le replicate and extend a study conducted by Lees and Petersohn (2021) exploring the relationship between private military security companies (PMSCs) and the severity of civil wars. Nathan and Le reconceptualize and operationalize the original authors' definition of conflict severity by utilizing total population displacement instead of battle deaths as a measure that better captures sociopolitical impacts. In so doing, they find that PMSCs do have a positive and statistically significant impact.

Lastly, Liam Anders provides an exemplary example of a final capstone project by proposing that leader background can signal credibility or competence, thereby influencing the likelihood of external support. Anders's argument draws from and extends the literature on principal-agent theory and signaling, with potentially significant and meaningful policy implications.

Together, these three articles showcase the dedication, curiosity, and critical thinking of University of Maryland students impassioned by international relations.

On behalf of the team at *BORDERS*,
Simon Younes
Editor-in-Chief

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Lees & Petersohn (2021) Replication & Extension: The Impact of Armed Private Military Security Companies (PMSCs) on Total Population Displacement During Civil Wars

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Abstract

Lees and Petersohn (2021) investigate whether Armed Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) have an independent effect on increasing conflict severity in their intervention in civil wars to alleviate endogeneity concerns. They argue that Armed PMSCs do have an independent effect on increasing conflict severity because weak states will want to escalate the conflict against rebel groups to contest rebel-controlled territory, and contracting out combat roles to Armed PMSCs provides weak states the opportunity to do so. However, the author's way of operationalizing "conflict severity," which is the natural log of battle deaths, is too narrow a conceptualization of "conflict severity." Conflict severity encompasses the broader and severe political, social, and economic consequences a country faces following a civil war and solely investigating battle deaths doesn't properly capture any broader sociopolitical impacts armed PMSCs may have with their presence in civil wars. This study extends Lees & Petersohn's (2021) OLS model 1 by including the natural log of total population displacement as the new outcome variable, and finds that Armed PMSCs do have a positive, statistically significant effect on total population displacement. This study has broader implications for the literature on Armed PMSCs & conflict, as well as policy implications for states and international organizations.

Introduction

Lees and Petersohn's (2021) article "To Escalate, or Not to Escalate? Private Military and Security Companies and Conflict Severity" explores the endogeneity issue regarding Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs) in civil wars. It remains unclear whether PMSCs independently escalate conflict severity or are merely hired into already severe conflicts. The authors argue that weak states employ PMSCs to enhance their combat capabilities, enabling them to escalate conflicts and reclaim territory from rebels. Therefore, PMSCs do have an independent effect on conflict severity. Lees and Petersohn base their argument on the Opportunity-Willingness model, positing that opportunity—defined by structural factors—must be paired with willingness, or the intent to act. They argue that weak states are incentivized to escalate conflicts when rebels threaten population centers and natural resources. Lacking the capacity to do so alone, these states contract PMSCs to either replace state forces or enable them to engage offensively, thereby increasing conflict severity. The authors assert that PMSCs will accept contracts from weak states in exchange for natural resources. They also hypothesize that conflict intensity does not affect a PMSC's engagement decision, as incentives and disincentives for PMSCs to get involved in a civil conflict balance out. Their OLS regression analysis supports the argument that PMSCs independently influence conflict severity, alleviating endogeneity concerns.

This work builds on existing research about PMSCs and their impact on conflict severity. Petersohn (2014) found that both PMSCs and ad-hoc mercenaries escalate conflict severity, as measured by battle deaths, because they operate outside state-imposed norms, leading to a lack of accountability when PMSCs employ brutal combat methods to be effective (Petersohn 2014, p. 194). Petersohn (2015) later expanded on his previous work by showing that different types of PMSCs, whether providing armed or logistical support, have different effects on conflict severity, either by enhancing the military effectiveness of the state or maintaining a high-performance level to secure contracts amid competition. Penel & Petersohn (2022) investigated whether PMSCs affected civilian victimization rather than overall battle deaths. They found that PMSCs, with their corporate structures, are less likely to commit deliberate civilian killings to avoid violating international norms, risking state prosecution due to those states signing onto the international norm regimes, and risk damaging their reputation.

In addition, the Lees and Petersohn (2021) study is part of a broader literature on PMSCs and their impact on different conflict dynamics. Tkach (2020) examined the corporate structure of

PMSCs and found that closed ownership is linked to increased civilian casualties in Iraq. Bara and Kreutz (2022) noted that PMSCs exacerbate credible commitment issues, raising the risk of civil war resumption as their legacy creates postwar uncertainty. Petersohn also identified that PMSCs influence both conflict termination and onset. Regarding the former, Petersohn (2024) finds that PMSCs that are contracted into a civil conflict early, rather than later or never, are more likely to end the conflict early on their client's terms because they shorten the process of learning about their opponent's combat weaknesses and shore up their client's combat capabilities to exploit that early window of opportunity. Regarding the latter, Petersohn (2021) finds that PMSCs are more likely to increase conflict onset because states contracting out the use of force to PMSCs, commercial market actors, shield them from suffering any costs, because states can keep these agreements confidential. With confidentiality between PMSCs and states, states have plausible deniability and therefore no chances of accountability, making conflict initiation an attractive option. Furthermore, PMSCs can be hired by any conflict actor rather than just states, meaning that any conflict actor who sees conflict as an attractive option to realize their political goals can easily hire PMSCs to start a conflict.

However, one important gap that the Lees and Petersohn (2021) paper hasn't properly addressed is the measurement of "conflict severity." They operationalize "conflict severity" only by battle deaths, but conflict severity encompasses the overall negative consequences of a conflict, including its social, economic, and cultural effects on a country's future. Conflict severity is far more multidimensional and includes factors such as the number of internally displaced people, economic damage, and human rights violations. Furthermore, Penel and Petersohn (2021) introduce a contradictory finding into the literature on PMSCs and conflict severity, where PMSCs don't entirely disregard international norms for complete military effectiveness. To get a better sense of whether PMSCs have a true effect on conflict severity, we look at whether PMSCs have a discernible effect on increasing total population displacement, which includes both internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees, during a civil war. A high population of displaced people can give rise to severe economic, political, and social costs for states following a civil war for an extended period of time, allowing us to examine if PMSCs do have broader sociopolitical impacts with their presence in civil conflicts. Thus, our extension research question is whether the presence of armed PMSCs in a civil war independently increases conflict severity, measured in terms of total population displacement.

We argue that armed PMSCs do increase total population displacement in a country during a civil war. States will contract armed PMSCs to augment their combat capabilities and recapture territory, increasing the severity of the battle and inducing people to flee to escape the violence. Furthermore, because armed PMSCs are private companies that compete with other companies to win state contracts, armed PMSCs will deliberately induce population displacement as a tool to show their effectiveness and keep their contracts. These factors facilitated because armed PMSCs can secretly contract with states, giving them plausible deniability and therefore legal cover to operate uninhibited.

To conduct our extension we construct a total population displacement outcome variable using data from the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), which incorporates both IDPs and refugees. Using an OLS regression with clustered standard errors by country, we find that armed PMSCs do have a positive, discernible impact on total population displacement.

Theory

In their study, Lees and Petersohn (2021) find that armed PMSCs independently influence conflict severity, having a significant impact on the dependent variable, the natural log of battle deaths (0.813). However, in the process of doing so, the authors form a very narrow conceptualization of what constitutes conflict severity: battle deaths. Conflict severity is multidimensional, encompassing not only battle deaths but also the long-term socio-political implications for communities, state authority, and post-conflict stability that a civil conflict can induce. The authors also admit this when they state that they only focus on battle deaths for their outcome variable, although “armed conflicts have much broader humanitarian consequences” (Lees & Petersohn, 2021, pg. 2629). This emphasis on battle deaths means that the authors miss out on looking at whether PMSCs are just combat-deadly organizations, or whether their involvement in civil conflicts will produce broader, humanitarian consequences for a country. To fill this gap, we look at a different outcome variable: total population displacement. Total population displacement includes both internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees, and we choose this outcome variable as a more representative proxy of conflict severity because it better captures long-term political, economic, and social consequences for a state and its surrounding region.

In terms of political consequences, Salehyan and Gleditsch (2006) and Salehyan (2008) both find that high numbers of refugee flows resulting from a civil conflict increase the chances of conflict diffusion. In other words, it increases the chances that conflict spreads to surrounding countries and overall destabilizes the region due to refugees. It could also result in the spread of weapons, violent ideologies, and civil war combatants to other countries, as well as exacerbating economic competition and ethnic tension. In addition, Wright and Moorthy (2018) find that host-states housing more refugees will increase state repression, particularly if they're economically constrained. In terms of economic consequences, Ibáñez and Moya (2006) found that the displaced population in Colombia faced harsh short and long-term economic consequences, experiencing significant asset losses and limited ability to generate income. Fiala (2015) finds that, using panel data from Uganda, displaced populations consume fewer goods and possess fewer assets on average compared to nondisplaced populations, and this continues years after a conflict ends. Finally, in terms of social consequences, Maystadt et al. (2019) find that forced migrants can negatively impact host countries with the spread of diseases, especially malaria. Furthermore, they find that forced migrants can exacerbate environmental degradation and resource competition with the host communities. Based on the multifaceted, broad consequences of total population displacement induced by civil conflict within the country and surrounding countries, it does a better job of capturing 'conflict severity' and serves as a viable, new outcome variable for our extension.

We argue that armed PMSCs do not just add more manpower, but they fundamentally alter the state's willingness and opportunity to engage in aggressive territorial strategies that drive civilians to flee. PMSCs do increase total population displacement in a country during a civil war. States will contract PMSCs to augment their combat capabilities and recapture territory from the rebels, increasing the severity of the battle and inducing people to flee to escape the violence. Furthermore, because PMSCs are private companies that compete with other competitors to win state contracts, PMSCs will deliberately induce population displacement as a tool to show their effectiveness and keep their contracts. The core of our theory consists of three causal mechanisms: conflict escalation, strategic competitive incentive, and accountability gap.

Drawing on Lees and Petersohn (2021), armed PMSCs provide weak states with the opportunity to escalate conflict against rebel groups to recapture territory. Foreign intervention on behalf of a weak state during civil wars has always helped states augment their combat capabilities

to defeat rebel groups. However, in comparison to foreign state military intervention, contracting PMSCs is an attractive option because they're quick to mobilize and "do not require reliance on an outside power" (Lees & Petersohn 2021, p. 2626). Armed PMSCs are composed of skilled, disciplined professionals who can augment a weak state's military, and these increased combat capabilities allow weak states to "escalate by contesting more territory, more forcefully" from rebel groups, ultimately increasing the number of violent engagements (Lees & Petersohn 2021, p. 2627). Civilians living in these contested areas with increased violent engagements between armed PMSCs and rebel groups will decide to either move somewhere else in the country or flee the country entirely. Civilians value their physical security, and they will "leave their homes when they feel that their physical security is threatened" (Davenport et al. 2003, p. 31). Thus, when people's physical security is threatened due to increased combat exchanges between armed PMSCs and rebel groups because of a broader escalation of conflict by the weak state, then it's expected that they will flee.

However, like any other corporate entity, armed PMSCs face competition from others for winning contracts with weak states. Other armed PMSC competitors have an incentive "for peer monitoring" because if they detect poor performance from the contracted armed PMSC, the contracted PMSC's "reputation may decrease and even lead to the replacement of the agent" (Petersohn 2015, p.1052). Therefore, contracted armed PMSCs have a market incentive to perform at a high level and produce results for their client, or "risk both replacement by competitors and reputational costs" (Petersohn 2015, p.1052). Therefore, one possible way that armed PMSCs can successfully defeat rebel groups for their client states and retain their contracts is to use population displacement as a strategic war tactic. Conflict displacement literature has found that states can deliberately use conflict displacement as a tool, with Lichtenheld (2020) finding that states fighting in irregular civil wars will deliberately induce population displacement to "use displacement patterns to draw inferences about civilians' loyalties and distinguish potential allies from adversaries" (Lichtenheld 2020, p.261). State forces will always face an "identification problem", where "a government is unable to identify and selectively punish her opponents, while rebels manage to deter civilians from cooperating with the government" (Zhukov 2014, p. 1156). Thus, when states recapture territory from rebels, states will induce population displacement to make inferences about a civilian's political loyalties either to the state or the rebel group, depending on whether civilians comply with the state or not. We argue that armed PMSCs, contracted to fight

on behalf of the state, will also use these tactics when fighting an insurgency to perform at a high level, defeat the rebel group, recapture territory, and maintain their contracts with the state.

However, armed PMSCs aren't totally risk averse. As Penel & Petersohn (2022) found, PMSCs are less likely to commit civilian victimization if their home state has "implemented international human rights standards to a high degree" (Penel & Petersohn 2022, p. 7). PMSCs are corporate entities that can face state prosecution and sanctions, and if PMSCs have their headquarters in states that uphold international human rights regimes, they want to avoid attacking civilians to steer clear of legal repercussions. These fears of legal repercussions can be overcome, however, if both the state and the armed PMSC agree to have "at least the actual scope of the contract can be kept confidential" (Petersohn, 2021, pg. 3). States, as clients, when facing a civil war, may disregard international human rights regimes if their ultimate goal is the preservation of the regime. As such, these states may try to circumvent these rules and secretly contract armed PMSCs to do whatever it takes to defeat the rebels. If states "care more about the effectiveness of the firms and less about the appropriateness of their actions", they are willing to make secret deals with Armed PMSCs so that 1) states can hire an elite combat force and defeat the rebels, and 2) Armed PMSCs have plausible deniability of being involved in civilian victimization, avoiding legal repercussions and maintaining their reputation as law-abiding corporations (Petersohn 2014, p. 22). States can go even above and beyond, allowing armed PMSCs to quickly leave the country and prevent any criminal investigations, making it "impossible to determine later who fired the shots and provides contractors with the advantage to fly under the radar" (Petersohn 2014, p. 22). All of this allows armed PMSCs to be able to have legal cover to provide their combat services to the weak state uninhibited and carry out their duties, ultimately enabling an overall increase in total population displacement during a conflict.

This leads us to claim our main hypothesis: *Armed PMSCs have a discernible positive effect on increasing total population displacement during civil wars.*

Replication

To conduct their empirical analysis, Lees and Petersohn (2021) first created their "cross-sectional time series dataset of weak states from 1990 to 2007," with their unit of analysis being the country-in-conflict-year (Lees & Petersohn 2021, p. 2629). The dependent variable, the natural log of battlefield deaths for each country-in-conflict year, was pulled from the Uppsala Conflict

Data Program (UCDP) Georeferenced Event Dataset version 18.1 (Lees & Petersohn 2021, p. 2629). Their main treatment variables were *Armed PMSCs* and *Support PMSCs*, with data for both variables pulled from the Private Security Database. Both treatment variables are dummy variables, with *Armed* taking the value of 1 if “at least one PMSC was contracted to perform combat, security and/or quasi-policing tasks in a country-year” (Lees & Petersohn 2021, p. 2630). *Support PMSCs* were coded as 1 if “at least one PMSC was contracted to provide operational support, logistics support and/or infrastructure construction tasks” (Lees & Petersohn 2021, p. 2630). Finally, the last main treatment variable was one-year-lagged battlefield deaths, plus one, and logged, because the authors wanted to address the issue of endogeneity and answer the question of whether PMSCs have an independent effect on conflict severity.

In addition to the treatment and outcome variables, Lees and Petersohn (2021) added a few control variables in their 1st model to prevent omitted variable bias. *Rebel Strength* and *Rebel Strength Squared* were added since these variables could increase the number of battlefield deaths in a country due to the matching strength parity with the weak state, while also inducing the weak state to contract PMSCs to augment their combat capabilities. *State collapse* was added because at any point in time, a weak state’s “security forces may be too disorganized to engage in conventional warfare against rebels and so conflict intensity may be lower” (Lees & Petersohn, 2021, pg. 2631). This may reduce the state’s ability to escalate the conflict and, overall, decrease its severity. Finally, *Geographical Extent* was added because the more geographically spread out a conflict is, the more severe it could be.

The method the authors used was an OLS regression, with “robust standard errors adjusted for clustering on country” to prevent heteroscedasticity (Lees & Petersohn 2021, p. 2632). The dataset was provided to us after emailing Prof. Nicholas Lees. While there was no codebook available, we were able to follow the directions from the article to choose which specific variables were the control, outcome, and treatment variables. Table 1 shows our successful replication of Model 1 on the left side.

Extension

For our extension design, we first acquired a new dataset containing data on Internally Displaced People (IDPs) and Refugees from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), covering the same time frame as the original article (1990 - 2007). Secondly, we edited

the replication dataset (DF) by renaming each of the 30 countries to match the names in the UNHCR dataset. We found that some countries were named differently in both datasets. For example, the replication dataset had “Congo-Kinshasa” and “Congo-Brazzaville”, while they are named as “Congo” and “Dem. Rep. of Congo” in the UNHCR dataset. Similarly, the European country of Bosnia & Herzegovina is referred to as “Bosnia” in the replication dataset, while it is named as “Bosnia & Herzegovina” in the UNCHR dataset. To correct this misalignment of country names, we transformed the ‘Country’ variable in both the replication and the UNHCR’s datasets into a factor variable. After transforming the Country variable across both datasets, we renamed each country in the author’s dataset to be the same as the country names in the UNCHR dataset. Next, we mutated both datasets to only include the variables that are required for our extension. In essence, the UNHCR dataset was mutated to consist of only IDPs and refugees (Country, year, Refugees, IDPs), while the replication dataset was mutated to include only the treatment and control variables (Country, year, Time, Rebstord, Rebstordq, Magfail, Magarea, Armed, Supplogistics, lnbd_combined, lnlag_combined) from model 1 of our replication. We used the ‘mutate’ function in tidyverse in R to execute this step. Next, we used the ‘left_join’ function in R to merge both the mutated datasets. The new dataset was named ‘DF_NEW.’

After merging both datasets, we used the mutate function in R to add two new variables: ‘total_displaced’ is simply a sum of the number of IDPs and Refugees for each country-year-conflict observation, while ‘total_displaced_log’, our new outcome variable, is created by adding 1 to the sum of the total_displaced variable and then taking the natural log of the resulting number for each observation. The primary reason why we performed these transformations on the new dataset was so that it would be similar in nature to the transformations performed on the original Dependent variable, natural log of total battle deaths, in the original model 1 (Natural Log of Total Population Displacement - lnbd_combined). Lees & Petersohn (2021) note that due to the very high positively skewed nature of battle deaths in the dataset (10.5), they add 1 and take the natural logarithm of battle deaths. This reasoning applies to the quantification process of refugees and IDPs as well, and hence, to maintain uniformity when conducting our regression analysis, we perform the aforementioned step. Finally, we dropped all the ‘NA’ observations for any country-year-conflict observations that did not have any data on IDPs and refugees, and in turn, we were left with 266 observations from an original 273 observations. For our final step, we run an OLS Regression with total_displacement_log as the new outcome variable, with clustered standard

errors by country, using the stargazer function to create the table displaying the results of our extension. The reason why we decided to run an OLS regression for our extension model is to again maintain uniformity with the author's regression analysis. The new outcome variable is continuous, and OLS is the best model to run on continuous data. Table 1 shows our extension model results on the right side.

Table 1: Full Data Table		
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	Natural Log Total Battle Deaths	Natural Log Total Pop. Displacement
	Original Model (1)	Extension Model: OLS (2)
Lagged Deaths	0.203*** (0.059)	0.131 (0.114)
Rebel Strength	1.329*** (0.263)	-0.194 (0.967)
Rebel Strength Sq	-0.251*** (0.061)	0.091 (0.198)
State Collapse	0.206 (0.299)	0.990 (0.622)
Conflict Extent	0.349*** (0.078)	0.265 (0.226)
Armed PMSCs	0.813** (0.263)	1.716** (0.583)
Supp/Logistics PMSCs	-0.562* (0.257)	-0.381 (0.619)
Constant	2.692*** (0.390)	9.855*** (1.098)
Observations	273	266
R ²	0.470	0.145
Adjusted R ²	0.456	0.122
Residual Std. Error	1.104 (df = 265)	2.630 (df = 258)
F Statistic	33.521*** (df = 7; 265)	6.263*** (df = 7; 258)
<i>Note:</i> *p<0.05; **p<0.01; ***p<0.001 Standard errors clustered by Country in parentheses.		

We found support for our hypothesis. Table 1 presents models 1 and 2: model 1 is the original model, with the Dependent variable being the Natural Log of Total Battle Deaths, while the second model, our extension, includes the Natural Log of Total Population Displacement as the Dependent Variable. We found that none of the independent variables (Lagged Battle Deaths,

Rebel Strength, Rebel Strength Squared, State Collapse, Conflict Extent, Support/Logistics PMSCs), other than the presence of armed PMSCs, has a significant effect on the Natural Log of Total Population Displacement.

Our results show that the presence of armed PMSCs is statistically significant and associated with a high number of total population displacements (1.716), supporting our hypothesis. The results, we believe, also show that Armed PMSCs have an independent effect on total population displacement because the Armed variable is still statistically significant after controlling for the “Lagged Deaths” variable, like the findings from Lees & Petersohn (2021).

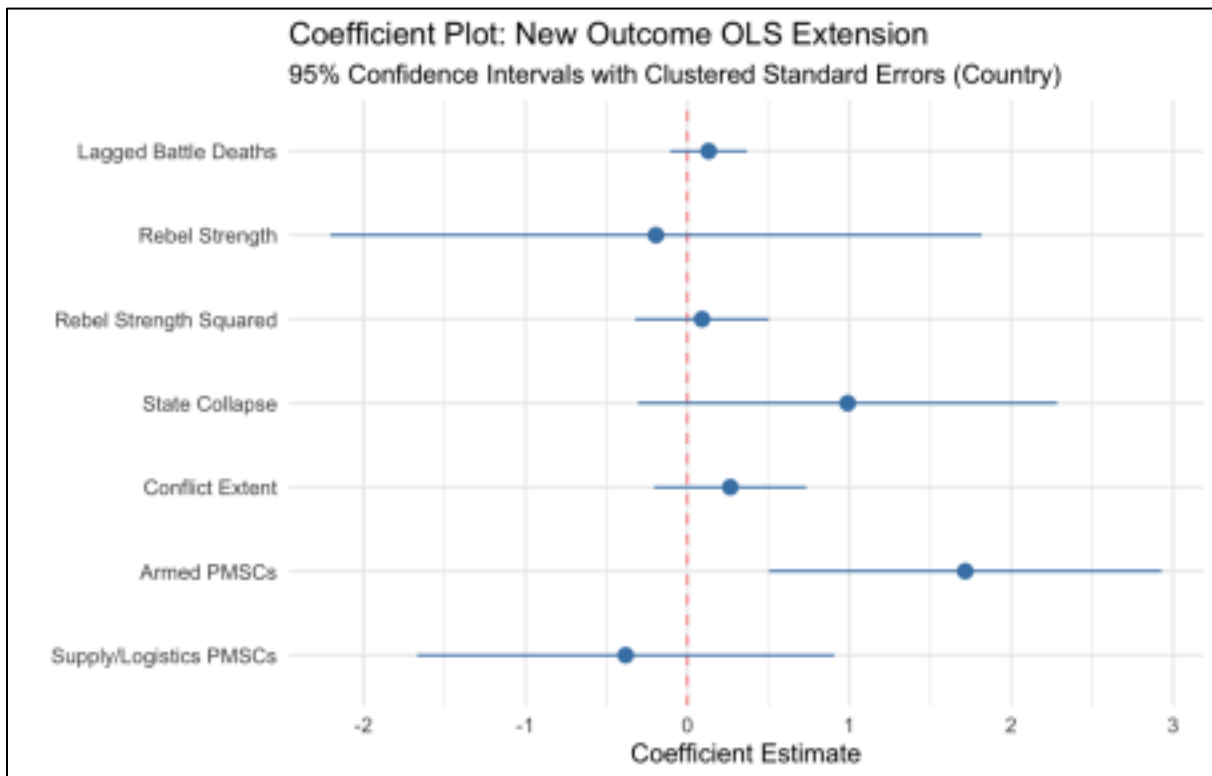


Figure 1

Figure 1 is a coefficient plot that acts as a graphical representation of our extension model (Model 2), which we have included in our paper to show the size of each variable’s effect and the uncertainty associated with it at the same time. The above figure shows that all the independent variables (Lagged Battle Deaths, Rebel Strength, Rebel Strength Squared, State Collapse, Conflict Extent, Support/Logistics PMSCs), other than armed PMSCs, have confidence intervals that cross 0, making them statistically insignificant. armed PMSCs have a very large positive coefficient (~1.7), and its confidence interval does not cross 0, which means that it is clearly statistically significant.

The other main treatment variable, “Supply & Logistics PMSCs,” is found to have a negative, though not statistically significant, association with Total Population Displacement. These findings are similar to the original model 1, where Supply/Logistics PMSCs had a statistically significant negative effect on battle deaths. Lees and Petersohn (2021) reasoned that because Support PMSCs “do not directly augment the offensive battlefield capabilities of a state’s armed forces” and because they sometimes require protection “by troops that could otherwise engage in frontline operations” (Lees & Petersohn 2021, p. 2633). We believe this reasoning is also applicable to total population displacement: Support PMSCs don’t directly augment a weak state’s combat capabilities to successfully escalate a conflict and engage in more battles against rebels for territory. Combined with needing protection from soldiers, there will be fewer conflict engagements, so people will feel more inclined to stay at their homes, and less likely to be voluntarily displaced.

Comparing the coefficient size of the “Armed” variable between the original model and the extension model, one possible explanation as to why the extension model’s coefficient size for the “Armed” variable is much larger than the original model is the armed PMSCs ability to instill “fear” in the population to preemptively flee. Because armed PMSCs are disciplined, professional fighters who can augment a weak state’s combat forces, civilians may flee at the anticipation of heightened violence between armed PMSCs and rebel groups. Thus, armed PMSCs may produce a “displacement multiplier” effect. The original model 1 suggests that armed PMSCs have an independent effect on increasing battle deaths in a country during civil war, and this knowledge of how combat-deadly they are may induce hundreds of people to preemptively flee their homes if they anticipate a deadly conflict occurring in their home region. Prior literature on conflict-induced displacement has found network theory as a possible contributing factor, with Davenport et al. (2003) arguing that if “other members of the community have already made that journey, information about the experience and opportunity will filter back to those who have not left”, giving them more reason to leave if their experience fleeing was manageable (Davenport et al. 2003, p. 35). Therefore, network theory can be a contributing factor to armed PMSCs having a “displacement multiplier effect”: when civilians were previously stuck in the middle of conflict engagements between armed PMSCs and rebel groups, these civilians witness firsthand how combat deadly the armed PMSCs were. By also experiencing armed PMSCs deliberately inducing conflict-displacement as part of a strategic incentive to perform at a high level for their client, these

civilians are going to pass along that information within their community network about the armed PMSCs. This may frighten civilians to the point that they will voluntarily displace themselves to escape the potential violence produced by PMSCs.

Furthermore, because of how armed PMSCs and states can make their contract “secret,” ultimately allowing armed PMSCs to perform their duties without any fear of legal repercussions, this may further drive the perception that armed PMSCs operate with less legal accountability. Therefore, civilians may fear that the armed PMSCs are “lawless” operators with no limits to what they can do on the battlefield. The network theory can also play a role, where civilians that are part of the same network share information about this perception of the armed PMSC to others, ultimately inducing civilians to choose to preemptively be displaced to escape.

Conclusion

To conclude, we chose to extend “To Escalate, or Not to Escalate? Private Military and Security Companies and Conflict Severity” by Lees and Petersohn (2021). The authors investigate the effect of PMSCs on conflict severity and their independent effect on conflict severity in civil wars. They argue that PMSCs independently increase conflict severity through an escalation strategy by weak states to regain territory from rebels, using the OLS regression on data consisting of 30 weak states from 1990 to 2007 to test their argument. Lees & Petersohn (2021) found that only Armed PMSCs have a significant effect on conflict severity in terms of battle deaths.

We extended the Lees and Petersohn (2021) model 1 because we opine that their operationalization of “conflict severity” was too narrow, only focusing on battle deaths. We included total population displacement, including both IDPs and refugees, as our new outcome variable because population displacement captures our conceptualization of “conflict severity”, encompassing broader and severe socio-political effects a country will experience following a civil war. We argue that armed PMSCs have a positive, discernible impact on total population displacement during a civil war because they can be used to escalate a conflict against rebel groups, with more battle engagements prompting civilians to flee to maintain their physical security; they have a strategic incentive to induce and utilize population displacement as a tool to defeat rebel groups and maintain their contracts with their client state, beating out competitors; and because they can avoid legal prosecution if their contracts between their client states are kept secret, creating plausible deniability and allowing no hindrances in their combat operations.

Using an OLS regression model with clustered standard errors by country, we find support for our hypothesis: “Armed” is positive and statistically significant. The “Armed” variable in our extension model has a much larger coefficient size than the original model, and we believe this is because armed PMSCs have a “displacement multiplier” effect, instilling fear in the population that civilians preemptively flee their homes to escape being caught between armed PMSCs and rebel groups.

Our results provide significant theoretical and policy implications. In terms of the theoretical implications of our extension project, we found that armed PMSCs do have broader socio-political impacts on civil wars, rather than just being more deadly in combat. Armed PMSCs driving increased total population displacement can have implications for how their presence can impact a country’s political and economic future. This can motivate future research into whether armed PMSCs have other broader socio-political impacts on a country during their interventions in civil wars, ranging from environmental impacts to systematic human rights violations. For the policy implications, our regression results can potentially motivate UNHCR, as well as bordering countries, to preemptively set up increased refugee camps if armed PMSCs are present in a country. Furthermore, because armed PMSCs and states can keep their contracts secret, ultimately giving armed PMSCs plausible deniability, this can provide further impetus for the UNHCR, as well as the ICC and other countries committed to upholding international human rights, to strengthen the 2008 Montreux Document and improve PMSC monitoring mechanisms.

However, we believe that more can be done to verify the reliability of our results. One possible method is to utilize better data on IDPs and refugees, as well as better data on PMSC presence in countries. Regarding IDPs and refugees, the Global Internal Displacement Database (GIDD) is considered one of the best datasets for collecting information about total population displacement. We unfortunately couldn’t add this dataset into the replication dataset because, for GIDD, the furthest year they go back to collect data is 2008. This doesn’t align with the replication dataset’s timeframe, as the first year they begin is 1990. This leads us to possibly examine what other datasets could be utilized for PMSC presence in countries. One possibility is the Commercial Military Actor Database (Petersohn et al. 2022). Ranging from 1980 to 2016, the CMA database can be combined with data from the GIDD to possibly examine if our results hold up with better data.

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Fake Success: Investigating Peru's Decade of False Democracy and President Alberto Fujimori's Public Relations

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Abstract

Alberto Fujimori, President of Peru from 1990 to 2000, maintained high public approval ratings and public perception despite his presiding over an authoritarian regime marked by human rights abuses and systemic corruption. Drawing on records of Fujimori's presidency through historical accounts, and primary source testimony, this study argues that Fujimori's enduring popularity was the result of three specific factors: the President and administration's manipulation of the media, the elaborate bribery network constructed by intelligence chief Vladimiro Montesinos, and the exploitation of Peru's historically challenged democratic culture. By controlling the press indirectly through financial coercion rather than direct state takeover, Fujimori's administration maintained the façade of democracy while dismantling its institutions. Further, Fujimori's populist appeals to marginalized Peruvians, combined with the perceived success of his efforts in curbing hyperinflation and defeating the Sendero Luminoso insurgency generated public trust durable against accountability. This case study contributes to broader scholarship on competitive authoritarianism and democratic backsliding, offering insight into identifying disguised authoritarian consolidation in the context of a populist wave.

Introduction

Alberto Fujimori, now a criminal on the global stage, served as the 54th president of Peru from July 1990 until his resignation in November of 2000. The child of Japanese immigrants and a former Professor of agricultural engineering, Fujimori was an unlikely president-elect. He “emerged from nowhere” on the campaign trail (Smith 1990), quickly rising to prominence, then victory. While campaigning, he argued for strong economic and moral reform, as Peru grappled with severe hyperinflation and militant uprisings. However, under his administration, those goals became realized in the form of the ‘Fujishock,’ which raised food prices by 446 percent in one month (Chossugbdovsky 1992), and the Grupo Colina: a death squad that suppressed political opposition headed by the corrupt, behind-the-scenes director of Fujimori’s Peru, Vladimiro Montesinos (Ambos 2011). Grupo Colina and the Fujishock are measures which became signature to the broader authoritarian policies of Fujimorismo. Despite this, he enjoyed high approval ratings for much of his tenure (Crabtree 2001). Fujimori won re-election in a 1995 democratic election and remains beloved by many present-day citizens.

President Fujimori inherited Peru in a delicate, damaged state. The government’s most pressing threat was the Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path), a Maoist militant group that claimed over 70,000 lives in its existence. They aimed to collapse the state of Peru and spread their platform to the global stage (Paul, Clarke, & Serena 2014). Moreover, former President Alan Garcia’s legacy of corruption inspired Fujimori’s promise of a “moral renewal” for Peru (Christian 1990). Mistrust of the executive was already high when Fujimori took power, requiring him to improve public relations to stop Peru from sinking into an ocean of instability. Public disdain for the executive was further amplified by Peru’s prolonged, severe hyperinflation: the monthly rate peaked at 117.12 percent in October 1988, and Fujishock brought the monthly rate to 396.98 percent in August 1990, followed by steep deflation (Martinelli & Vega). Entering the presidential office, Fujimori faced many obstacles and sparse confidence from his country. This essay seeks to dissect how Fujimori remained so beloved despite his misdeeds. It is key to investigate unique cases such as Peru’s to identify and prevent populist weaponization and authoritarianism in the future.

Fujimori’s Sins

Alberto Fujimori's legacy is mired in discourse which can ultimately be traced back to a simple question: do the ends justify the means? Peru in 1990 had several open wounds and the Fujimori treatment brought a sting. Historians and political scientists identify Fujimori's administration as a regime; historian Steven Levitsky brands him a "democratic dictator" based on the rapid expansion of Fujimori's power (Levitsky 1999). This perspective is complemented by the brutal reach of the Grupo Colina and Servicio de Inteligencia Nacional (SIN). The Grupo Colina addressed the Sendero Luminoso and political opposition by conducting over 10 extrajudicial kidnapping and execution missions of "suspected" terrorists (Ambos 2011). This extreme breach of citizens' liberties became the grounds for the Peruvian Supreme court to convict him for human rights violations in 2009 (Ibid).

Financial stabilization was perhaps Fujimori's most universal platform piece; the Fujimori administration brought with it contractionary fiscal policy which quickly curtailed Peru's hyperinflation. The cost of this, however, was the Fujishock, aptly named for the August 1990 inflation rate's leap to 398.98 percent (Martinelli & Vega), destabilizing households and rocking Peru's economy. The legislation banned new government procurement measures, drastically deregulated the market, and unified the government exchange rate. One year after the Fujishock, Peru's inflation rates were below 10 percent, an undeniable improvement (Ibid). Soon after, Fujimori capitalized on his power post-autogolpe to cement fiscal reform, in which he sculpted budget-balancing and national bank approval requirements into the new Constitution. Of these changes, Peruvian teacher and engineer Andrés Davis, who lived under Fujimori's administration, comments: "In 1990, I thought he was a good president because Fujimori brought some qualified people and decided to basically have our economy start working again."¹ At the time, the appearance of fiscal improvement was very attractive to citizens who had grown tired of severe economic hardships. However, Davis further comments "He didn't actually address any of the country's problems, and we see that now". While Fujimori made broad strokes, they did not have the lasting impact to justify the extremity of the Fujishock – nearly 35 years later, one in three Peruvians still live in poverty (World Bank Group 2024).

¹ Mr. Davis is a Peruvian citizen who participated in a personal interview with the author on April 23, 2025. His name has been changed to protect his privacy.

To fully understand the problematic nature of Fujimori's civil violations, it is necessary to identify Vladimiro Montesinos, Fujimori's right-hand man and director of the aptly named SIN and by extension, the Grupo Colina. Montesinos is a primary contributor to Fujimori's legacy of corruption, less as an instrument of it, but rather, as the corruptor. Montesinos claimed Fujimori "does nothing at all without my knowing," and the extent of Montesinos' control is affirmed by American intelligence reports from retired Peruvian generals warning Montesinos' SIN was "in effect running the state" (McMillan 2004, p. 70). Montesinos cemented his power by regulating the flow of over US\$3.5 million in monthly bribes to remove obstacles and opposition (Ibid, 82). The degree to which Montesinos operates as the functional architect of the Fujimori regime's illicit networks reveals that the administration's corruption was not purely incidental, rather structurally embedded at the highest levels.

Public Manipulation

Despite the prominence of Fujimori's greatest faults, the public and media perceived him largely positively. Effective manipulation of public opinion and the press are invaluable facets of the President's positive reputation; Montesinos' press bribery was a large asset to Fujimori's public success. One figure estimates that Montesinos dealt out over US\$3 million to news outlets every month to regulate press coverage (Ibid, 82). A key factor that distinguished the Montesinos machine was that the government did not take direct control of the media, unlike other authoritarian states. By laying out his elaborate network of bribes, Montesinos was able to avoid flagging Fujimori's rule as a dictatorship or authoritarian regime, allowing the manipulation to continue without global interference. By controlling the press through a bribery network rather than by taking direct control, Fujimori's government took a step outside of behavior typical of authoritarian states to consolidate power directly under the government. This separation from the government proved to ultimately be a weakness: Montesinos was eventually discovered, and the public still had sufficient autonomy to act against the Fujimori monolith. After Fujimori's fall, Adam Michnik proposed the "Montesinos Virus" framework, a method to identify distinct cases of disguised authoritarian states. He asserted that "Montesinos – behind the constitutional facade of Fujimori – has created a police/military regime that maintains democratic illusions" (Michnik & Matynia 2001, p. 909). Montesinos' extensive bribery and intimidation network reached all of political Peru. His thoroughness ultimately propped up the façade of democracy for many years, dispelling

any inclinations towards the administration's dark authoritarian truth. The continuous churn of pro-Fujimori media through Montesinos' network ensured citizens' impressions of the president remained positive.

The president's interaction with the press and media was crucial to maintaining his strong public image. When Fujimori came into power, he would cherry pick reporters who would be privy to his activities and purposefully bar others from any access (Conaghan 2005, p. 16). Only welcoming positive press, Fujimori's administration was portrayed with a rosy lens, while critical cameras remained covered. The broader history of Peruvian journalism is equally instructive here. Historian Catherine M. Conaghan writes that "the Peruvian press had never functioned as a consistent and effective watchdog on government," expanding that the press was commonly regarded as agenda-pushing for partisan or private interests (Conaghan 2005, p. 16). Since public media had already been devalued in Peru, Fujimori's strident manipulation went unrecognized by many; and those who did recognize the situation were either paid off or apathetic to the issue. Additionally, Peruvians separated the president from his actions largely thanks to Montesinos' manipulation. Fujimori's high approval ratings did not hold up when it came to public opinion on his policies or the behaviors of his officials (Ibid, p. 5-6). This disconnection between Fujimori's carefully cultivated public image and the realities of his administration helps explain the persistence of his favorable standing among many Peruvians day.

Fujimori's regime successfully leveraged the problems at the forefront of the Peruvian election to gain and maintain support. Between stomping out Peru's hyperinflation and terrorismo with Sendero Luminoso, a mano duro (hard/strong hand) was very attractive to many Peruvians. From the start of his short campaign, the president leaned into populism, and much of his public support originated from his ease in understanding and expressing the mood of the people during an era of true crisis in Peru (Crabtree 2001). Levitsky (1999, p. 82) asserts:

Fujimorismo had its social base in the marginal sectors of Peruvian society: non-whites, evangelicals, self-employed or informal-sector workers, and the urban and rural poor. It was these sectors that, by the late 1980s, had grown most dissatisfied with the existing democratic institutions and the parties that governed them. Fujimorismo changed the face of Peruvian politics in 1990, ushering in a new set of political leaders. Drawn to a significant extent from the provincial, nonelite, and nonwhite sectors, the original Fujimorista politicians were. More socially, culturally, and racially representative of Peruvian society than the political class they replaced.

Fujimori gave the appearance of difference after cycles of sameness. Second, he gave large swaths of marginalized groups in Peru a feeling of recognition by appealing directly to them. This attention would drive groups to place great support and momentum behind Fujimori's campaign and early presidency. Fujimori built on the momentum to justify his government's authoritarian leadership, as he cited his early successes as evidence enough to continuously expand the government's power. However, Peruvian citizens like Davis perceive that Fujimori "gave [Peru] a fake success". The power of Fujimori's public appearance and the trust that citizens vested in him despite the unethicity of his methods played a significant role in why Peruvians view Fujimori positively. For many, that trust was simply never broken and the illusion of a perfect president never shattered.

Political Precedence and Power

Fujimori's tenure is also marked by a distinct lack of defined political opposition. This vacuum allowed Fujimori to continue extending his reach uncontested and did not allow sufficient room for Peruvians to imagine an alternative to authoritarianism. In addition, Peru's origins as a political state play a large role in Fujimori's electoral and popular success. The nation has a history of preference towards strong-handed leaders, especially if that leader appears to be one of the people. This preference originates from Peruvians' association of democratic governments in the 1940s and 1960s with the rule of a small European elite (Panfichi 1997, p. 221-231). Thus, the deterioration of democracy in Peru is a case unique to the nation. The precedential distaste for democracy facilitated Fujimori's ease in dismantling democratic institutions throughout his presidency. The apex of the nation's deviation from democracy sits in Fujimori's autogolpe.

Fujimori ended the nation's system of democracy with an announcement that it was "temporarily suspended" in the interest of reconstructing the nation's institutions. As a result, approval for Fujimori soared. The New York Times estimates that 75 percent of the population approved of the autogolpe, which included the dissolution of Congress and suspension of the Constitution. Additionally, the Times reports that in 1991, the same proportion believed Congress was working against stopping the economic crisis, and a striking 96 percent of Peruvians did not trust the Judiciary (Nash 1992, p. 2). Institutional mistrust and dissatisfaction made Fujimori's coup an incredible public relations move. The high approval ratings reflect the people's exhaustion with the government, and Fujimori's coup was seemingly the tone people desired: the strong hand

of change that many had been hoping for when they elected Fujimori. Staging the autogolpe was in line with many among the public's wishes, making it a significant factor in Fujimori's lasting positive impression.

Political opposition to Fujimori was also a non-issue. Montesinos and his extensive portfolio are largely responsible for this lack of opposition. In addition to his dealings with the media, Montesinos was channeling an estimated US\$550,000 to politicians and figures in the judiciary monthly (McMillan 2004, p. 82). This bribery cleared the political path for Fujimori to rule, and prevented alternative options from being presented to the public. Montesinos' political bribes were nearly self-funding: as he continued to buy up political power in Congress, funding for the SIN and subsequently, his bribery, swelled (Ibid, 79). Montesinos' bribe network was also a source of great leverage for the security of Fujimori's administration. He made a point to document and, when possible, record every corrupt transaction that he made throughout his tenure, claiming to have recorded over 30,000 (Ibid, 74). In addition to directly preventing political opposition, Montesinos' documentation of each transaction created an additional layer of obligation for the bribed to remain complicit, else their reputation would suffer. With extensive leverage over so much of Peru, it was nearly impossible for any monumental opposition to form against Fujimori. Moreover, the very existence of the Grupo Colina and other extrajudicial measures created external pressures on politicians and others to comply. Whether people's complacency with Fujimori's takeover was rooted in fear, money, genuine approval, or a combination of all three, the network of bribery and Montesinos' hand supported Fujimori's popularity largely by suppressing political opposition.

The illicit finances under the Fujimori administration led to another source of approval as many personally benefited from it. It is impossible to deny the financial benefits from Fujimori's corruption and Montesinos' bribes. Montesinos himself is at the cornerstone of this financial benefit: estimates claiming that he funneled over \$1 billion out of Peru throughout his tenure (Morrissey 2008, p. 19). Government officials, broadcasters, and judges all benefited from the corruption – and as Davis states, “the people that love him are the people that got rich with him”. Despite the uncertainty of the scale of Montesinos' bribery, it is certain that individuals benefited financially and personally from the corruption of the Fujimori administration. Moreover, as basic economic principles outline, the financial impact of government spending extends far beyond the recipient of the first dollar. The ripples of Montesinos' money became waves of approval for

Fujimori. Though Fujimori's control of the media was likely more impactful, personal and financial benefits supported Fujimori's popularity to a significant extent.

Conclusion

Fujimori's administration defied the standard of democracy, slowly unwinding the democratic experiment of the previous decades in favor of a semi-authoritarian regime. Carrying out extrajudicial disappearances, uprooting the entire government in his autogolpe, and rattling the economy, by all measures, Fujimori should have been run out of office. Despite this, Fujimorismo was seen as the crude bandage that Peru's injuries required. Through a combination of well-organized bribery and strategic PR, Fujimori was able to create and maintain his public support during his administration. Additionally, the professor took advantage of historically underrepresented groups, feigning acknowledgement to create a strong, populist support base. This lean into populism and authoritarian tendencies turned out to be a strategic victory within the complicated history of Peruvian politics, which was partial towards strong-handed leaders. These factors laid the foundation to create strong public and political support, which manifested in his high approval ratings and ease in carrying out the autogolpe. Once Fujimori had implemented his own government, Montesinos' bribery of the judiciary and government officers empowered Fujimori to shape Peru into a sheerly concealed authoritarian state by the end of the 20th century.

Whether Alberto Fujimori was good or bad is a largely subjective question in any sense. His administration was able to put a stop to Peru's historic hyperinflation and the Sendero Luminoso, ending a struggle with the price of 70,000 lives. Concurrently, Fujimori's Peru was ranked as the seventh most corrupt country by Transparency International (Felch & Montgomery 2005). Between his severe human rights violations and the substantive embezzlement that occurred under his rule (McMillan 2004, p. 72), Fujimori was labeled as "permanently morally incapacitated" by the Peruvian Congress as he fled Peru in 2000 (Centro de Documentación e Investigación LUM 2000). His high approval ratings throughout his term and pre-mortem confidence to intend to run for presidency in 2026 (Associated Press 2024) demonstrate the high regard Peruvians hold him in despite his crimes and corruption. Fujimori created and maintained his public approval through effective public relations, Montesinos' extensive bribery, and Peru's complicated political sphere. Facing immense corruption and humanitarian violations, many assert with conviction that the change he brought supersedes the damage. Fujimori's Peru demonstrates

citizen's flexibility to disregard the dangers of authoritarianism in the face of a strong, trusted leader. The acquiescence to Fujimori's ethical violations warns against a lull into political complaisance in the face of a global populist wave. Fujimori's legacy is a paradox—revered by many for restoring order yet irreparably stained by the authoritarianism and corruption that enabled it.

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Matchmaking in Insurgency: Leader Signals and the Allocation of External Support

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Abstract

Why do some rebel groups receive foreign support while others do not? Existing research emphasizes that due to uncertainty, sponsors evaluate rebel groups with organization-level signals to inform their decision to support. Additionally, a growing literature has shown that rebel leaders of varying backgrounds and experiences can shape conflict dynamics and initial access to support. However, less attention has been paid to how such leader-level variation influences how states evaluate rebel organizations under uncertainty once contact is established. This research argues that rebel leader characteristics function as observable signals that help sponsors assess the competence and credibility of potential partners. Using insights from the signaling and principal-agent literatures, I propose leaders with military and combat experience signal competence, while leaders with activist backgrounds, prior rebel experience, or founder status signal credibility. To measure this framework, I outline an empirical strategy that matches data from the Rebel Organization Leaders (ROLE) dataset with the UCDP External Support (ESD-AY) dataset, using a leader-organization-year unit of analysis from 1980-2011. The analysis assesses whether leader traits are systematically associated with the likelihood of receiving external support, while also controlling for conflict, state, and organizational level factors. This approach contributes to the literature by extending the signaling framework to the leader level in external support decisions.

Introduction

External support plays a decisive role in defining the trajectory of civil wars. Rebel groups that receive foreign support are more likely to sustain their operations and achieve their strategic goals, increasing the chances of favorable outcomes (Regan 2002; Roberts 2019; Sawyer et al. 2017). Simultaneously, external actors often rely on giving these rebel groups support to advance their own strategic goals without their own direct intervention. Yet despite this mutual gain, the allocation of external support is uneven. Some rebel groups receive substantial backing, while others operating in similar environments receive little to none. This variation raises a fundamental question about how external actors decide which rebel groups to support, and how rebel leader characteristics shape this variation.

Of course, the existing literature has already established many key insights behind why we see this variation in external support. External support is usually driven by strategic interests and defined by the relationship between sponsors and rebel groups, which is in turn shaped by scarce information and delegation problems (Salehyan 2010; Salehyan et al. 2011). Therefore, states must judge potential rebel partners using incomplete information inferred from observable signals when making these support decisions. Furthermore, rebel groups vary not only in their organizational characteristics but also in their backgrounds and experiences of their leaders, with recent work showing that leader characteristics can facilitate access to external sponsors and influence broader conflict dynamics (Acosta et al. 2022; Huang et al. 2021; Ortiz 2024). However, less attention has been paid to how these leaders, with their varying characteristics, alter how states assess rebel groups once contact is established.

This gap is critical because it relates directly to the mechanisms through which external support is allocated under conditions of uncertainty. Additionally, bridging this gap is crucial because external support can significantly alter conflict trajectories, making the selection of partners a critical strategic decision with substantial political and humanitarian consequences. Continuing, establishing contact between rebel groups and potential sponsors does not guarantee support. Even when access has been established, external actors still must determine whether a group is competent, reliable, and aligned with their interests. Understanding how these evaluations occur is essential to further explaining this variation. My research addresses this gap by theorizing: how can rebel leaders' characteristics act as observable signals in external support decisions? This is achieved by examining whether variation in rebel leaders' backgrounds and experiences explains

why some groups receive foreign support while others do not. By focusing on leader-level characteristics, this research goes beyond access to sponsors to the evaluation process that ultimately determines whether external support is provided.

Specifically, I argue that rebel leader characteristics can function as observable signals that external actors use to infer key qualities of potential partners under uncertainty, similar to rebel organizational-level signals. Further, because information about rebel organizations is often incomplete, states rely on visible and interpretable indicators when making inferences about these rebel groups to inform their support decision. Rebel leaders, as the most publicly visible representatives of their organizations, provide a natural source of such information through their backgrounds and prior experiences. In particular, leader traits can signal both competence, the ability to effectively use external resources, and credibility, the likelihood of remaining aligned with sponsor interests. Leaders with a background in the military or combat experience signal organizational competence, while leaders with prior backgrounds in activism, rebel experience, or who were the founder of their organization signal credibility through commitment. These signals in turn help external actors reduce uncertainty and thereby increase the probability that support is provided.

To measure these expectations, I outline an empirical strategy that combines data on rebel leaders with data on external support to rebel groups, using a leader-organization-year unit of analysis to capture temporal variation. The scope of this research is from 1980-2011, which is the overlap between the two main datasets of Rebel Organization Leaders (ROLE) and UCDP External Support (ESD-AY). I employ logistic regression with several nested models, with a robustness check to capture the intensity of support, measured through an ordered logit model. This design allows for a systematic examination of whether leader-level characteristics are associated with variation in external support, while also controlling for relevant conflict, state and organizational level factors.

This research contributes to the literature in two impactful ways. First, it extends signaling frameworks in the study of civil war by shifting the focus from organizational characteristics to include leader-level traits as well. Second, it clarifies the distinction between access to external sponsors and evaluation, illustrating that leader characteristics may play a critical role in the latter stage of the support decision process for these sponsors. More broadly, this argument has implications for how states access potential partners in proxy conflicts and the risks of misjudging

insurgent actors under imperfect signals. The remainder of this capstone proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature on external support, uncertainty, and then rebel leadership. The theory section then develops the theoretical argument and its mechanisms to create a framework for how states evaluate leader-level information, from which it derives its hypotheses on credibility and competence. The empirical design outlines the data, scope, variables, and models used to operationalize and examine these expectations. The final section then discusses the theoretical and policy implications of the findings and concludes thereafter.

Literature Review

Existing research demonstrates that external support plays a critical role in shaping civil war dynamics. Rebel groups that obtain external assistance are significantly more likely to survive and achieve favorable outcomes (Regan 2002; Roberts 2019; Sawyer et al. 2017). This support is varied; it can include financial assistance, weapons transfers and training, logistical aid, to direct troop involvement (Salehyan et al. 2011; Sawyer et al. 2017). Recent work has emphasized that support varies not only in type but also in its mode of delivery, such as overt or covert sponsorship, which can change rebel behavior and conflict dynamics (Huang and Sullivan 2021; Paliwal and Staniland 2023; Stein 2022). Moreover, support is not limited to just one single actor; states, transnational networks, and diaspora communities can all play a role in supporting these insurgencies (Salehyan et al. 2011; Petrova 2019).

Importantly, external support is not distributed randomly. It is driven typically by the strategic and geopolitical interests of potential sponsors and by the characteristics of rebel groups and their transnational linkages (Cunningham et al. 2009; Karlén 2021; Regan 2002; Salehyan et al. 2011). More specifically, states provide support often to advance foreign policy objectives, weaken rivals, or influence outcomes indirectly. On the other hand, rebels have strong incentives to secure support given its demonstrated impact on success, as previously covered. As a result, there is a mutual strategic logic underlying external support: Sponsors give support to advance their interests through proxy actors, while rebels seek resources that increase their odds of surviving and achieving victory.

Despite these shared incentives, the willingness to grant external support is burdened by significant uncertainty. When states provide resources to rebel groups, they delegate aspects of conflict to actors they cannot fully control, which in turn reinforces the difficulty of monitoring

rebel behavior and ensuring the continued alignment of interests (Salehyan 2010; Stein 2022). This present uncertainty is the principal-agent problem, which makes sponsors consider the risk that recipients will misuse resources, pursue diverging goals, or even fail to perform effectively (Salehyan 2010; Salehyan et al. 2011; Salehyan et al. 2014). Further, because information about these potential partner rebel organizations is often limited, states cannot directly observe key characteristics like internal cohesion or long-term intentions to mitigate their concerns. Instead, to manage this uncertainty they rely on observable signals of group quality (Salehyan 2007; Salehyan et al. 2011). These organization-level signals, such as battlefield performance, territorial control, ideological alignment and others, provide indirect information that allows these potential external sponsors to infer the likely competence and reliability of these rebel groups. This signaling framework explains how states navigate uncertainty in external support decisions; however, most existing literature here focuses on signals at the organizational level of a rebel group. This leaves open the possibility of other sources of observable information could play a role in external support decisions. Also, existing research shows that external support shifts internal organizational cohesion, which influences factional competition and leadership authority within rebel groups (Tamm 2016). However, this literature primarily examines how support affects internal outcomes, leaving open the question of how leader characteristics affect the allocation of support.

Another body of newer research has highlighted the importance of individual leaders in shaping conflict dynamics. Specifically, rebel leaders, from their backgrounds, experiences, and age can affect organizational cohesion, conflict duration, fragmentation, and the use of violence (Doctor 2020; Horowitz and Fuhrmann 2018; Ortiz 2024; Ortiz 2025; Silverman et al. 2023). Therefore, suggesting that leadership characteristics can have very meaningful effects on how these insurgencies operate and evolve. Related work has begun to examine how rebel leaders' backgrounds affected access to external support through their international experiences. Time spent abroad in terms of education, training, or even exile, all can help develop transnational networks that facilitate contact with potential sponsors (Huang et al. 2021). These connections in turn increase the likelihood that rebel groups can identify and engage with external actors aligned with their cause. However, this literature focuses on how rebel groups establish connections with these sponsors, but this does not guarantee external support. After connections are formed, external actors still must decide whether a rebel is a reliable and effective partner. Thereby, this process of evaluation remains less understood.

In total, these literatures provide important insight into the causes and consequences of external support, the role of uncertainty and signaling in support decisions, and the influence rebel leaders have in conflict and transnational networks. However, there is still a missing connection between these groups. Existing work on signaling emphasizes organizational characteristics, and research on leaders focuses on access to external sponsors and broader conflict dynamics. As a result, we lack a clear understanding of how states use leader-level information when evaluating rebel groups under uncertainty. This research addresses that gap by examining whether rebel leader traits function as these observable signals that inform external support decisions. Which would extend the signaling framework to the leader level and illustrate the distinction between access to sponsors and evaluation in external support relationships.

Theory

Building on the preceding discussion, I argue that external support decisions hinge on how states evaluate potential rebel partners under conditions of uncertainty from the principal-agent problem. This uncertainty is further exacerbated from the scarcity of information present, due to rebel organizations often operating in opaque and fragmented environments, from the asymmetrical conflict they are engaged in. Therefore, to evaluate these rebel groups, states rely on observable signals for indirect information (Salehyan 2007; Salehyan et al. 2011). As a result, existing research focused mainly on organizational traits as these signals (Salehyan et al. 2011), but this approach overlooks an important and relatively visible source of information: rebel leaders. Rebel leaders occupy a uniquely visible position within rebel organizations. As the public face of the group, they often serve as the primary point of contact for external actors and are more easily observed than internal organizational dynamics. The differences in leaders' backgrounds and experiences allow these potential sponsors to infer information about the organizations they represent. Existing work explains already that leader characteristics can facilitate access to external sponsors (Huang et al. 2021). This research shifts the focus from access to the evaluation stage.

I argue that rebel leader characteristics function as observable signals that external actors use in their indirect evaluation of potential partners. Because information about organizational-level dynamics is often incomplete or unverifiable, states rely on visible and interpretable indicators when forming expectations about these potential partners. Leader traits do not provide perfect information, but they offer meaningful cues that help reduce uncertainty in that decision

making. Importantly, leader-level signals also should be understood as complementing, rather than replacing, organizational characteristics. They both operate as observable signals. Two key dimensions structure how external actors assess potential rebel partners: competence and credibility. These dimensions reflect the core concerns of sponsors when delegating resources to insurgent groups.

Competence refers to the ability of a rebel organization to effectively use external resources. External actors prefer to support groups that can translate their expensive assistance into meaningful political and military gains. Because it is difficult to directly assess in advance how effectively a group will use external support, states must infer competence from available signals. Leader characteristics can play an important role in this process. Particularly, leaders with prior background serving in the military or those who have combat experience, whether that be with the military, previous rebel group, etc., will be more likely to be perceived as capable of organizing and directing effective operations (Ortiz 2024; Ortiz 2025). Such experience signals familiarity with strategy, coordination and resource use, all of which are highly relevant to the effective deployment of any support given. Thereby, external sponsors seeking to limit uncertainty around how effective their support would be, may use a leader's military and/or combat experience as a key signal to inform their support decision.

Credibility refers to the predictability and consistency of a rebel group's behavior from the perspective of the sponsor. External actors are concerned not only with whether a group is capable, but also whether it will act in ways that remain aligned with sponsor expectations over time. This includes concerns about opportunism, fragmentation, and especially strategic divergence (Salehyan 2010; Salehyan et al. 2014). Leader characteristics can provide cues about how rebel groups are likely to behave over time, as prior research links leadership to organizational cohesion and conflict outcomes (Doctor 2020; Silverman et al. 2023). These observable patterns allow external actors to form expectations about reliability and alignment under uncertainty.

Three such traits can work in that manner. Leaders with activist backgrounds may signal sustained engagement with a political cause, suggesting a degree of expected consistency in objectives. Similarly, founder status can indicate an even more central role in shaping the organization's identity and direction, making future behavior more predictable and reliant. Prior rebel experience may also provide information about how leaders operate within insurgent environments, though its implications may vary depending on the context, such as whether that

experience reflects continuity or fragmentation. In this sense, rebel experience does not uniformly signal positive qualities but instead would provide interpretable information that helps external actors assess the reliability of potential partners. Overall, these three traits would be reassuring for sponsors who must consider whether these insurgent groups will remain committed to their cause and presumably the sponsor's interests too, after support is provided to them. These background characteristics may signal to the external sponsors a stronger ideological and political commitment than leaders who do not share these backgrounds, making the leaders who have demonstrated long-term political commitment appear more credible as partners.

Taken together, competence and credibility represent the core dimensions along which external actors evaluate potential rebel partners. With leader traits providing a means of inferring these otherwise difficult to observe qualities. Furthermore, discussion on how these specific leader traits of competence and credibility are defined exactly will be included in the research design's operationalization of them.

Continuing, external support decisions can be understood as calculations about the expected value of providing assistance to a particular group. Sponsors weigh the potential benefits of support against the risks of delegation (Salehyan 2010). Or in other words, they weigh shaping conflict outcomes and increasing influence in a region against inefficiency and loss of control. Because these outcomes cannot be known with certainty, external actors must form expectations about both the probable effectiveness of the group and the reliability of its behavior.

Leader traits, like the ones mentioned, contribute to this process by influencing how sponsors measure both the tradeoffs of support. Crucially, these evaluations are not binary. Leader traits do not guarantee effectiveness or reliability, nor do they uniformly signal positive qualities. Instead, they provide information that shapes outcomes. In this sense, leader characteristics influence how sponsors update their beliefs about both the potential returns to support and the risks of misalignment. This probabilistic evaluation is central to decision-making with uncertainty, where external actors must choose among imperfectly understood alternatives.

Lastly, the effect of leader-level signals is likely to vary depending on the informational environment. When detailed and reliable information about a rebel organization is available, leaders' characteristics may play a more limited role. However, in contexts where organizational information is incomplete or ambiguous, leader traits become a more salient source of information.

Under such conditions, observable leader traits can play a disproportionate role in shaping how sponsors assess potential partners and, ultimately, whether support is provided.

In addition, to further clarify the scope of the argument, leader characteristics are not the only factors shaping external support decisions. Sponsors must also consider a wide range of strategic and contextual constraints, such as geopolitical interests, escalation risk and domestic considerations more specifically. My argument here is that leader traits constitute one additional source of information within this broader decision-making process. Accordingly, the presence of these traits does not guarantee support in any given case. Instead, they are expected to influence support decisions probabilistically by developing how external actors evaluate potential partners under uncertainty. Across cases, leader characteristics should increase the likelihood of support on average, even if their effects vary depending on the context.

Based on this total theoretical framework, I derive two main hypotheses.

H1 (Competence): Rebel groups led by leaders with military backgrounds or combat experience are more likely to receive external support.

H2 (Credibility): Rebel groups led by leaders with activist backgrounds, prior rebel experience, or founder status are more likely to receive external support.

Research Design

This study combines rebel leader data with rebel group-level measures of external support to examine how rebel leader characteristics affect foreign support decisions. The research design draws from the Rebel Organization Leaders (ROLE) dataset (Acosta et al. 2022) and integrates that with the UCDP external support dataset (Meier et al. 2022) actor-year version (ESD AY) into one unified framework. This merging of leader-level data from ROLE to organization-level data from ESD AY is done by matching rebel organizations across sources aligning observations by year, allowing leadership attributes to be linked to support outcomes over time. Due to ESD and ROLE using different naming conventions for rebel organizations, like FARC versus Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, this matching process involves manual harmonization based off of organization names and through conflict context and temporal overlap if needed. With the resulting harmonization ensuring leader observations are linked to the correct rebel organizations across both sets of data.

The time period for this merged dataset is 1980-2011. While the ESD AY extends beyond this range of years, leader characteristics are the core explanatory variable making ROLE's temporal scope the binding constraint on the sample to observe both leader characteristics and whether support was received or not. Regardless, ROLE still covers 488 leadership cases and 2,072 leader-year observations making the sample robust and varied enough for empirics. Furthermore, the unit of analysis will be leader-organization-year. Foreign states' decisions to support rebel organizations are shaped by the observable characteristics of leaders. Therefore, structuring around the leader-organization-year level allows leader traits to be connected to rebel organizations' outcomes while still capturing the temporal variation in leadership and external support. Ensuring leadership turnover is also accounted for, which would alter the signals portrayed to external actors within the same rebel group over time.

The dependent variable captures whether a rebel organization receives external support each year. This variable is measured by ESD AY dataset (Meier et al. 2022) which aggregates all the support received by a rebel group from external sponsors within a year in a conflict. ESD AY's structure is particularly relevant here, as it aligns with this study by focusing on the recipient of support rather than the sponsor states. Thereby making it easier to connect to leader characteristics later. External support here is broadly defined as assistance from foreign states to a warring rebel party. This support includes military aid, funding, training, intelligence sharing, logistical support and troop deployments in ESD AY, allowing for a comprehensive measure of external support. The dependent variable is operationalized as a binary indicator equal to 1 if a rebel organization receives any form of external support each year from a foreign sponsor, and 0 otherwise. This measure reflects the choice whether external actors choose to support a rebel group or not. To address concerns about the binary coding of support, a robustness check of ordered measure of external support intensity is employed to capture variation in the level of support received. This would range from categories of none to non-military to military to troop deployment following the types provided by ESD AY, listed before. This alternative specification allows for analysis of whether leader characteristics are associated not only with the presence of support but also with intensity of support.

The main independent variables are drawn from the ROLE dataset (Acosta et al. 2022) using their measurements and definitions, which codes rebel leader characteristics based on biographical information from historical texts, archival sources, and news reporting. Therefore,

these observable attributes are used to capture variation in leader traits that may influence external sponsors. In this study, these signals are grouped into two categories: competence and credibility. These categories of competence and credibility are not directly observable but are inferred from the leader characteristics from ROLE. All of these leader background characteristics are operationalized as binary indicators equaling 1 when the characteristics are observed for the leader and 0 when the characteristic is absent. Lastly, it is important to note these rebel leader backgrounds and experiences are observed prior to leadership ensuring that they precede support outcomes.

Competence as a signal is captured through military capability indicators. The first characteristic is military experience defined and measured as whether the leader previously served in a formal military organization state or nonstate. The second, combat experience, is defined and measured as whether the leader had direct experience in an armed conflict's battlefield (Acosta et al. 2022). These two variables of competence capture different dimensions of capability: institutional military training and firsthand wartime experience. These characteristics then, within the theoretical signaling framework, indicate a leader's ability to organize and command external resources tactically to external actors.

Credibility as a signal is measured from three indicators. The first characteristic is activist background which is defined as a pre-leadership occupation category involved with organized political or social movements. The second, rebel experience, is defined as prior participation in armed opposition before becoming the leader of a rebel organization. The third is founder status, which captures whether the leader initially founded the rebel organization. (Acosta et al. 2022). All of these characteristics provide information about leader behavior, as well as continuity and commitment to an organization or movement. Thereby, allowing external actors to assess the predictability and reliability of potential partners.

Together, these binary variables from ROLE operationalize how external actors could rely on observable leader characteristics as signals when faced with uncertainty. By designing the analysis around these categories of leader characteristics, this allows for an empiric test of how different types of leader characteristics influence external actors' decision to support.

The model includes a set of control variables capturing alternative explanations for foreign support, to isolate the effect of leader signals at the organization, conflict, and state level. All conflict control variables are drawn from UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict dataset or ACD (Gleditsch

et al. 2002; UCDP/PRIO 2023) and UCDP Non-State Actors dataset or NSA (Cunningham et al. 2013). These variables are merged into the leader-organization-year dataset by matching each observation to the corresponding conflict-year, assigning the relevant conflict characteristics to each case. Additionally, because multiple rebel organizations may be present in one conflict-year, these controls capture shared structural conditions while allowing leader characteristics to vary at the organizational level.

The first of these controls would be conflict duration and conflict intensity as longer and more intense conflicts may be more likely to attract foreign support due to heightened strategic saliency, or humanitarian concerns regardless of leader characteristics. Conflict duration is measured through ACD where it is operationalized as the number of years since the onset of a conflict, calculated as the current year minus the conflict start year. Conflict intensity is measured through ACD as a binary indicator where 1,000 or more battle deaths per year equal an intense conflict or 1 and 25-999 battle deaths per year equal a minor conflict or 0 (Gleditsch et al. 2002; UCDP/PRIO 2023). The next control is conflict incompatibility which captures the underlying issue behind the conflict, which is controlled because external actors may be more or less likely to support rebel groups depending on whether the group's goal is regime change or territorial claims. This is measured through ACD as binary indicator where 1 equals a territorial conflict over secession or autonomy and 0 equals a government conflict over control of the state (Gleditsch et al. 2002; UCDP/PRIO 2023). The number of rebel organizations in a conflict-year is included to control for the degree of competition among potential external support recipients as well as a general proxy for rebel fragmentation. This variable is measured using the NSA dataset by counting the number of active rebel organizations within each conflict-year (Cunningham et al. 2013).

In addition, the model includes a regime type control drawn from the Varieties of Democracy (V-dem) dataset (Coppedge et al. 2026). Regime type is measured using the Electoral Democracy index, a continuous index ranging from 0 to 1 capturing the level of democracy in a state. Higher values indicate more democratic regimes, while lower values indicate more autocratic regimes. This control is matched to each leader-organization-year observation based on the state in which the rebel group is active, using the country-year identifiers from the UCDP datasets. This variable accounts for the possibility that domestic political institutions affect external support decisions through ideological alignment or strategic considerations.

The analysis employs a logistic regression model estimated at the leader-organization-year level to evaluate the relationship between leader characteristics and external support. Specifically, this will be a series of nested logistic regression models separated by signaling group mechanisms: the first will test competence signals plus controls, the second will test credibility signals plus controls, and the third model will test all the characteristics jointly with controls. This approach allows for a direct comparison of the relative significance of each category of characteristics while also testing whether their effects are robust when measured jointly. The nested models' structure would also align with and account for the theoretical expectation that external sponsors rely on potentially overlapping signals when evaluating these rebel groups. For the robustness check using the ordered measure of support intensity, the analysis employs an ordered logistic regression model. This model specification accounts for variation in the level of support received and provides an additional test of whether leader characteristics influence not only the presence but also the degree of external support.

There are a few important limitations affecting this research design's causal inference. One such concern is endogeneity where external actors might impact leader selection or retention, rather than just responding to their signals. Further, while the use of pre-leadership characteristics establishes temporal ordering, it does not eliminate concerns about endogeneity. Another challenge is omitted variable bias, as unobserved political and strategic factors may determine external support. While the inclusion of regime type control helps this problem slightly, it does not fully capture more specific drivers of support, like geopolitical interests, strategic rivalries, or transnational ties between sponsors and rebel groups. Therefore, some relevant sources of variation at the state level may remain unobserved. Given these two limitations, the models' results should be interpreted as evidence of systematic relationships consistent with the theoretical framework, rather than definitive causal effects.

Measurement limitations are another concern due to ROLE's binary measurement possibly oversimplifying variation in these leader characteristics. This is more pertinent to ambiguous measures such as military experience, which does not distinguish between rank or duration of service rather than founder status where a binary measure is conceptually clear. Another measurement limitation is the biographical data on leaders is derived from public sources which could induce selection bias in reporting favoring more high-profile conflicts and leaders. Despite these two limitations, ROLE still provides the most comprehensive and systematically coded

sources of rebel leader characteristics currently available, making it the most suited dataset for this study. In addition, ESD AY's coding of only the highest form of support given to a rebel group, rather than all forms given, limits this research to only measuring the intensity of support each year rather than all types of support given outright each year for the robustness check. However, this dataset still provides the most systematic cross-national measure of external support, that focuses on the rebel organization as its primary observations rather than external supporters.

Finally, the analysis is limited to rebel organizations observed in the ROLE and UCDP datasets which ignore potential insurgent groups not engaged in armed conflict. This introduces a form of selection bias as the factors related to the successful emergence of rebel organizations may also be related to leadership characteristics and external support. Consequently, the results apply to observed rebel groups and explain external support among active conflicts.

Policy Implications and Conclusion

By demonstrating the role of rebel leader characteristics as observable signals, the findings carry important implications for how states select partners in external intervention and proxy warfare. My research suggests that external actors may rely on visible but incomplete signals when evaluating potential rebel groups, particularly in environments where reliable organizational data is scarce. Thereby, leader traits may disproportionately shape initial support decisions, creating the risk that states could misjudge the underlying capabilities or true intentions of the rebel organization. In practice, this could lead to the inefficient allocation of sponsor resources, where support was directed to organizations that appear competent and reliable based on leader characteristics but do not perform as expected after assistance was provided. This could in turn potentially prolong or even escalate the conflict.

Beyond the initial selection of potential partners, the research highlights the many risks associated with maintaining control in proxy relationships. External support involves not only delegating resources but also significant autonomy to these rebel groups, making it difficult to monitor behavior or enforce alignment. Therefore, while leader characteristics can reduce uncertainty at the evaluation stage, they do not eliminate the inherent risks behind it, leaving room for misalignment. As a result, even relatively well-informed support decisions could still culminate in rebel fragmentation, or strategic divergence. This reinforces the broader limitation of proxy

relationships, where even when partners are chosen based on informative signals, outcomes that diverge from sponsor expectations can still result.

My argument also has implications for how rebel groups position themselves to attract external sponsors. If these foreign actors rely on observable traits when making decisions, then leaders who can signal competence and credibility may be more successful in securing external support. This implies that leadership selection and presentation may be strategically important in rebel organizations, as these leaders act not only as a key internal decision maker but also as signals to external audiences. Therefore, leader backgrounds and experiences are not just descriptive features, but play an active role in shaping the distribution of external support across rebel groups.

This capstone also contributes to the literature by extending the signaling frameworks to the leadership level. Existing work had previously focused on primarily organizational traits as signals of rebel quality, while research on rebel leaders had only emphasized their role in facilitating access to foreign actors. By focusing instead on the evaluation stage, my research connects these two literatures by demonstrating how leader characteristics can function as observable signals that alter support decisions shaped by uncertainty. In this pursuit, it clarifies the distinction between access to potential sponsors and the subsequent evaluation process that informs whether support is provided.

Despite these several contributions, there are limitations remaining. The analysis cannot fully resolve concerns related to endogeneity or omitted variables, and measurement of leader traits with ROLE's binary indicators can obscure important variation in experience and background. Future research could build upon this study by incorporating more nuanced measures of rebel leadership traits or by examining how these external actors interpret these signals in different strategic contexts. Additionally, future research could extend this framework by examining how leader signals interact with other organizational sources of information such as battlefield performance or territorial control. Comprehending how these different signals are combined or prioritized by external actors would provide a more complete account of decision-making under uncertainty.

In conclusion, this capstone showcases that external support decisions are not just influenced by strategic interests and organizational traits but also by how states interpret rebel leader-level backgrounds and experiences. By highlighting how leader characteristics alter the chance of receiving external support, this research underscores the importance of incorporating

leader-level factors into analyses of civil conflict and foreign intervention. Ultimately, this new understanding of leader-level characteristics and their impact on uncertainty provides a more complete picture of how external support is allocated and why it can vary across rebel organizations.

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