

How Civilians Can Make Rebels More Responsive¹

Research shows that:

Rebel governance can vary in its responsiveness towards civilians – i.e., the degree to which rebels solicit and act upon civilian preferences.

Civilians can use nonviolent civil resistance to oppose rebel groups, such as strikes and protests.

Local leaders that control economic and social networks can mobilize local citizens and pressure rebels to become more responsive.

Policy Issue

Responsiveness is a core tenet of good governance. Yet, in many societies, rebels govern citizens. This study examines how civilians shape the responsiveness of rebel governance through nonviolent civilian action.

Living under Rebel Rule

Scholars estimate that as many as 840 million people worldwide lived in conflict zones in 2016, many in areas influenced by rebel groups. About one-third of all rebel groups develop some form of governance. However, we know little about why rebels sometimes solicit and act upon civilian preferences in their governance.

Local Leadership Shapes Rebel Governance

Sebastian van Baalen examined the civil war in Côte d'Ivoire, where a rebel group known as the Forces Nouvelles occupied the northern parts for nearly a

decade (2002–2011). Through in-depth fieldwork and archival research, including interviews with key stakeholders, the study revealed important differences in how the rebels interacted with civilians in occupied areas. Some rebel commanders ruled with an iron fist, preyed on civilians, and did little to fill the service provision vacuum. Other rebel commanders solicited civilian advice, forbade strong-arming and extorting residents, and worked to establish services like education and public sanitation. In other words, these rebel commanders were responsive to local citizens.

Local leaders and their networks played a key role in holding rebel commanders accountable to more responsive governance. Local leaders who had the economic and social influence to mobilize nonviolent resistance against the rebels used negotiations with rebels to ensure responsive governance. Local leaders who lacked this capacity could not challenge the rebels, and governance remained unresponsive. The study thereby demonstrated that local leaders and citizens could contribute to their own protection and well-being amidst civil war.

Involving Civilians in Their Own Protection

Policymakers working in civil war-affected societies should invest in mapping rebel relations with civilians, as responsive rebels are more promising partners in protecting civilians. Moreover, policymakers should remember that local leaders and citizens can play a key role in their own protection. Dialogue between rebel representatives and local elites is key to establishing agreed-upon rules to protect civilians from violence and extortion.

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About GLD

The Program on Governance and Local Development (GLD) is a research program based at the University of Gothenburg, originally founded in 2013 at Yale University by Program Director, Professor Ellen Lust. GLD focuses on the local factors driving governance and development. The program is dedicated to international collaboration and scientifically rigorous, policy-relevant research in an effort to promote human welfare globally. Program findings are made available to the international and domestic communities through academic publications, policy briefs, public presentations, and social media, as well as on-the-ground workshops in cooperation with local partners.



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