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Civilian Resistance to Rebel Governance

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How can unarmed civilians defy armed insurgent or paramilitary groups that attempt to rule them? All rulers awaken opposition and rebel rulers are not the exception: civilians disagree with, disobey, and even openly confront armed combatants who rule their communities. Yet, academic research has largely ignored different forms of civilian resistance against armed groups, blinding our understanding of civilian agency, rebel behavior, and civilian-combatant relations. In an effort to contribute to filling this gap, this paper investigates when, and why, different forms of resistance to rebel rule are more likely to emerge.

While support is often discussed as a key means for rebel survival and success, resistance is rarely theorized. Excellent case studies have shown that civilian opposition to rebels exists, but we ignore how common it is and why it emerges in some cases but not others. In this chapter I focus on two forms of civilian resistance against rebel rule: *partial resistance*, which entails opposition to specific decisions or actions by the rebels; and *full resistance*, which entails opposition against rebel rule altogether. I theorize when, and why, is each of these forms of resistance likely to emerge.

I propose two central hypotheses. First, that partial resistance against rebel governance is common in every community where rebels govern. Second, that full resistance is much more demanding: it is likely only when preferences for preserving the status quo are sufficiently strong to make it worth the cost, and when civilians have a high capacity to initiate and sustain collective action. Two factors determine civilians' willingness and ability to resist collectively: the quality of pre-existing local institutions (i.e. the institutions in place prior to the arrival of the rebel group), and the scope of rebel intervention in local affairs. I develop this argument by delving into armed groups'

strategic needs as well as civilians' preferences for governance and capacity to organize and sustain risky collective action.

To illustrate the feasibility of the argument, I rely on original, qualitative and quantitative evidence as well as secondary sources on the interaction between local communities and both guerrilla and paramilitary groups in Colombia. This evidence shows how civilians negotiate with, and resist, non-state armed groups under different conditions.

The next section briefly discusses resistance within the existing literature. The third section defines the research question, introduces key concepts, and develops the argument. The fourth introduces the Colombian case. The fifth describes the two explanatory factors advanced by the theory within the Colombian context: minimal and interventionist rebel and paramilitary governance, and pre-existing local institutions. The sixth section discusses resistance by communities to guerrilla and paramilitary rule. The conclusion identifies implications for our understanding of civil war, rebel governance, and more generally for political order.

1. Civil war, civilian choice, and resistance

In civil war, civilians may offer an armed group their support voluntarily, passively obey its demands, oppose it, or flee. Understanding these choices is essential to address rebel behavior, war dynamics, and the effects of conflict on local populations. Although civilian support is often portrayed as a necessary fuel for insurgents, civilians' alternatives vis-à-vis rebels are seldom theorized. Resistance has been particularly neglected, especially when it comes to explaining its causes and the different forms it takes. Scholars have

stressed that rebels have to address to some extent the preferences of local populations given how crucial civilian support is for their quest (e.g. Mampilly 2011, Gutierrez 2003, Wickham-Crowley 1988, Guevara 1997); yet, what the opposite of that support is, how it varies, and how it shapes war dynamics is rarely theorized.

In recent years, scholars and activists have written about “peace communities” or “zones of peace”—instances of organized, peaceful resistance during wartime. Most of this work is primarily empirical, describing how local communities have confronted rebels and militias especially in Colombia and the Philippines (e.g. Hancock and Mitchell 2007). Other forms of less structured resistance have been addressed in case studies that stress the importance of negotiations and transactions between civilians and combatants in war zones, as well as daily forms of hidden resistance (e.g. CNRR 2011; Förster this volume; Lubkemann 2008; Mampilly 2011; Uribe de Hincapié 2006; Vlassenroot, Raeymaekers, and Rijksuniversiteit te Gent. Vakgroep Studie van de Derde Wereld. Conflict Research Group. 2004). These studies show the importance of civilian resistance and call for an explanation: why does it take place at certain times and places, but not in others? Why, when resistance emerges, does it take a particular form? Finding an answer to these questions would advance our understanding of civilians’ choices in warzones; the causes and consequences of rebel and counterinsurgent strategies; and, more generally, the conduct of war.

2. The argument²

² The argument relies on, and extends, a theory of the origins of social order in civil war developed elsewhere (Arjona 2010).

The argument I propose requires defining three concepts: rebel governance; the quality of pre-existing local institutions; and resistance.

Although governance refers to a broad set of practices, in this chapter I focus on the creation of rules to regulate conduct. Such rules may involve any sphere of local life—be it politics, economics or social relations. I use the term *rebel (or counterinsurgent) governance* to refer to the creation of this type of rules by irregular armed actors. I identify two types of governance based on the scope of the group's intervention in local affairs.

The first is *rebelocracy*, the rule of rebels, in which the armed group acts as an interventionist government. It regulates conducts beyond public order and minimal taxation, in realms such as politics, economics, and social relations. The armed group may also provide public goods and services such as education, health, or food, or intervene in their provision. The second type is *aliocracy*³, the rule of others, where the armed group intervenes only to monopolize the use of violence and preserve public order while other matters are in the hands of others—be it the state, traditional authorities, civic leaders or other actors. Under aliocracy, rebels may also demand a material contribution from locals such as food or payments, but do not intervene in other spheres of local life. In other words, aliocracy resembles a minimal government while rebelocracy is closer to a comprehensive one.

Turning to pre-existing local institutions³, they are the formal and informal rules that structure social interaction in a given community (North 1991) prior to the arrival of the armed actor to the area. They may come from different sources such as the state, traditional or religious authorities, local organizations, and even charismatic leaders who succeed in

³ From the Latin Word *alios*, meaning *other*.

organizing a community around a set of principles that people support. Local institutions vary in their quality, that is, in their legitimacy and efficacy. Legitimacy means most members of the community believe their governing institutions are rightful, to wit, they count with the normative approval of most community members. Efficacy, as commonly used in legal theory, means most people obey the rules.

I differentiate between high-quality and low-quality institutions. High quality institutions are *both* legitimate *and* effective, whereas low quality institutions are illegitimate, ineffective, or both. This classification merges communities that have deeply different structures. Consider a community in which people value their traditional norms but no longer observe them because they are deemed obsolete. By contrast, a community strongly divided along ethnic lines, with one group dominating another, may have effective institutions if its decisions are enforced, but they would appear illegitimate by part of the community. Both communities fall under the category of low institutional quality. Although they differ in many ways, I will argue that they face similar challenges when dealing with an armed actor attempting to rule them.

Finally, resistance refers to any act of opposition to an armed group. In the literature, what counts as resistance is subject to debate (Hollander and Einwohner 2004); I ascribe to a minimalist definition that includes both expressive acts showing disagreement and acts of disobedience. These acts vary along different dimensions: they may be overt or purposely hidden; collective or individual; structured or loose; intended or unintended; peaceful or violent; sporadic or permanent. Although all these dimensions are relevant, I focus on two broad types of resistance based on its scope: *partial resistance*, where opposition is against specific conducts or decisions of the armed ruler but not against its

rule; and *full resistance*, where opposition is against the group's rule altogether. To illustrate, a protest against a government's health policy is an act of partial resistance; a protest demanding the president to step down is an act of full resistance.

Partial resistance entails a variety of acts, ranging from symbolic expressions of discontent that the armed actor cannot notice—what Scott (1985) calls everyday resistance—to openly questioning rebels' commands or actions. A merchant closing his store to avoid selling goods to a fighter, a youngster's disobedience of a curfew, and a mother's demand that combatants stop harassing her son are all examples of partial resistance.

For resistance to be full, opposition cannot be against aspects of rebel intervention but against rebel rule altogether. It may involve one person or the entire community and can be highly organized or loose. Instances of full resistance include a person asking an armed group to leave the territory or an entire community disobeying all its commands.

When is resistance likely to emerge in a locality where rebels rule? When is it partial or full?⁴ For simplicity, I refer only to situations where a single armed group controls the territory, almost a condition for rebel governance to emerge.⁵ The argument, therefore, is expected to apply to localities where a non-state armed group controls the territory and attempts to rule the population—that is, to establish clear rules to regulate conduct.

⁴ Resistance emerges against rebel governance, violence (which may occur within or outside governance), or both. In this paper I focus on resistance to rebel governance, not to violence per se.

⁵ Control is, to be sure, an elusive concept. Rebel governance usually requires that only one armed actor is present in the *local* territory, but other groups may be nearby. Here I focus on cases where one group has control over the local area, regardless of whether rival groups are present in surrounding areas.

I argue that (i) resistance is concomitant to any rebel government; and (ii) the form it takes depends on the scope of rebel intervention and the quality of pre-existing local institutions. While alioracy tends to trigger only partial resistance, rebelocracy can elicit either full or partial resistance, depending on the quality of the local institutions that exist prior to the arrival of the armed group to the area. Communities with high-quality institutions—those that are legitimate and effective—are more likely to engage in full resistance against a rebelocracy, while communities with low-quality institutions—those that are either illegitimate or ineffective—are likely to engage in partial resistance only. Table 1 summarizes the argument, and the remaining of this section develops it.

Table 1. Conditions determining partial as opposed to full resistance

		Scope of armed group’s intervention in local affairs	
		Aliocracy	Rebelocracy
Quality of pre-existing local institutions	Low	Partial	Partial
	High		Full

Partial resistance is likely to emerge in all cases of rebel governance. Two reasons explain this ubiquity of partial resistance. First, the impossibility of a ruler to fully control the population. Theorists of irregular war have convincingly argued that rebels (and counter-insurgents) strive to control local territories. Such control requires controlling civilians, as they may help the enemy (Galula 1964; Guevara, Loveman, and Davies 1997; Kalyvas 2006; Mao 1978; Trinquier 1964). Rebels, therefore, typically obsess over defection and treason, similar to paranoid dictators. However, fully controlling the behavior of the ruled is difficult. Even the most repressive regimes have fissures that

individuals can exploit to voice their disagreement. Subordinates often question the system in which they live—even if they do support it to some extent—and sabotage it either symbolically with jokes, songs, and other expressive acts or substantively with small acts of disobedience and misconduct (Scott 1990). They usually follow the rules of the game set by the armed group, but voice opposition “offstage”. Even an armed group with a large network of informants and a tight monitoring system will miss some acts that challenge its authority. As it is virtually impossible to monitor everyone at every moment, expressive acts of opposition are likely to take place in every locality under rebel rule.

The second reason why partial resistance is common is that rulers cannot hold power solely on the basis of coercion, as political philosophers, students of dictatorships, and revolutionary leaders alike have noted. As (Wood 2003) argues, not all the support that rebels need from civilians can come from coercion. In addition, even if a community lacks the capacity to launch organized resistance, individuals can help the enemy to gain control. Several scholars have noted that rebels’ decision to rely only on oppression often backfire. Gutiérrez (2003), for example, describes how civilians who are abused by an armed group end up supporting its enemies. Similarly, (Wickham-Crowley 1987) argues that when guerrillas break the social contracts they establish with civilians, they are likely to lose control. Mampilly (2011) also argues that rebels must take into consideration the demands made by civilians in order to secure their loyalty. Armed groups learn, therefore, that they need at least some voluntary cooperation among locals, and giving them voice is a useful strategy.

To be sure, this voice has strict limits, as armed groups also want to minimize displays of opposition that could discredit their rule, and avoid any possibilities for

challengers to mobilize others against them. This tension between the group's need to control the behavior of its subjects yet allow some expression of discontent leads to the emergence of either formal or informal spaces where *some* disagreement can be voiced, giving place to partial resistance.

In sum, as with any kind of rule, some willingness to oppose at least certain aspects of rebel rule is to be expected regardless how popular rebels are. Furthermore, since it is in rebels' interest to allow for some expression of this opposition, individuals are likely to make use of it. Partial resistance is therefore to be expected in most, if not all, rebel governments.

Full resistance, however, is a different beast. As armed groups strive to preserve their control over territories and populations, tolerating a person's opposition to their very rule is unlikely. Just like dictators, rebels seek to eliminate early on potential mobilizers against them; for this reason, while individuals are allowed to voice disagreements with the specifics of rebel governance, total defiance is not tolerated. If a single individual were to overtly oppose rebels' rule, the response would be harsh. Civilians are therefore unlikely to take this risk.

Yet, a collectivity can have some leeway if it can make a credible threat of massive disobedience and sustained opposition. Armed groups do face costs when killing most members of a given community: first, the odds of future control decrease, as voluntary support will be unlikely; second, such intense violence may stir a strong response from the state; and finally, there are reputational costs, as rebels may lose support elsewhere. Since rebels are not likely to kill everyone in the community, the risk of engaging in collective resistance is lower than that of doing so alone. It follows that full resistance is likely to

emerge in the form of organized, collective opposition.

I argue that collective resistance against rebel rule requires two conditions: a generalized desire to resist and the capacity to do so. The desire to fully oppose rebel rule is not to be expected everywhere, as civilians may not have strong preferences for the pre-rebel status quo and may even welcome rebel intervention. In addition, civilians do not only have to *want* to resist; they also have to be able to do it. Under what conditions would civilians both desire to resist and have the capacity to do so?

The answer, I argue, lies in the existence of high-quality local institutions prior to the arrival of rebels—that is, institutions that are both legitimate and effective. Institutional quality shapes resistance through two mechanisms: first, by affecting community members’ preferences for existing norms, and therefore their desire to oppose a new regime that threatens them; and second, by affecting their capacity for collective action.

Under the first mechanism, local institutions shape civilians’ preferences for change: in a community with high-quality institutions people value their institutional status quo and have a strong preference for preserving it. Under low-quality institutions, people are less likely to have a strong preference for preserving current institutions; even more, those who perceive their institutions as illegitimate or ineffective may crave change.

Traditionally, collaborating with rebels has been portrayed as an instance of collective action—people anticipate gains, but participating in the rebellion is costly (e.g. Popkin 1979; Wood 2003). In areas where either insurgents or irregular counterinsurgents rule, however, cooperation tends to be the dominant strategy as it leads to pleasing the armed actor and avoiding its reprisals. Full resistance, on the contrary, is risky and its

benefits cannot be delivered to participants alone: it is a classic collective action problem.⁶

The quality of pre-existing institutions is a key determinant of full resistance because in addition to shaping preferences for current institutions, it also affects the community's capacity for collective action. The existence of legitimate and effective institutions influences the extent to which community members rely on shared norms of behavior and conflict resolution, as well as their organizational capacity, interpersonal trust, and reciprocity. These factors have been found repeatedly to affect the capacity to initiate and sustain collective action (e.g. Flora et al. 1997; Ostrom 1990, 1998, 2000; Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1993; Temple and Johnson 1998). On the other hand, communities with low-quality institutions lack shared norms among their members. Their divisions make it difficult for them to agree on a course of action, and overcome free-riding problems. These communities are therefore unlikely to organize resistance to either rebelocracy or aliocracy.

Institutions are not, of course, all that civilians care about. Safety matters too, as do the time and resources that resistance requires in order to flourish. Incurring these costs is only justified when armed groups' demands do threaten the institutional status quo that civilians want to preserve. When rebels aim to establish aliocracy—that is, a minimal form of rule limited to the spheres of public order and taxation—the institutional status quo is not radically threatened; when, on the other hand, rebels pursue a rebelocracy—that is, a comprehensive rule involving other spheres of life—local institutions are expected to change dramatically. It is against such intrusive rule that communities are willing to organize collective resistance.

⁶ Indeed, Wood (2003) focuses on contested areas, rather than places under rebel rule.

In sum, full resistance is likely to emerge when an armed group attempts to establish a rebelocracy in a community with high-quality institutions. Otherwise, civilians are not likely to be both willing and able to launch resistance against rebel rule.

3. The Colombian case

The Colombian conflict started in the 1960s when self-defense groups formed during the civil war called *La Violencia* (“The Violence”) launched a Marxist armed movement known as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), with the aim of taking power. Other rebel groups embracing communism emerged in the following years.

In the mid-seventies many of these groups saw an accelerated expansion as they used illicit drugs, kidnaping, and extortion to finance their operations, develop their military capacity, and expand to new territories. Their activities, together with decentralization policies and the possibility of peace agreements with the government, soon affected regional and local elites, which formed paramilitary groups (Romero 2003). Based on income derived from drug trafficking and both voluntary and coerced contributions from landlords and firms, paramilitary groups expanded throughout the country, creating a new wave of intense violence between the 1980s and 2000s. The national army failed to combat these groups, and often cooperated with them (López 2010; Romero 2003).

The 1990s were characterized by an unprecedented territorial expansion of all warring sides (Sánchez and Chacón 2006). The FARC became the strongest of all guerrilla groups, while some smaller groups negotiated their demobilization with the government. Paramilitary groups also underwent a tremendous expansion during this period, often allying with narco-traffickers and politicians (Romero 2006; López 2010). Under President

Uribe's first term (2002-2006), many alleged members of paramilitary groups demobilized. Overall levels of violence decreased (Echandía 2011; Restrepo 2005) while human rights abuses by the state ramped up (Noche y Niebla 2008, 2009).

Since 2008 violence by neo-paramilitaries, the so-called criminal bands, has increased (Iris 2009) as well as FARC's hit-and-run operations (Ávila 2013). Although homicides have decreased in the country as a whole, certain regions, especially on the Pacific coast and along the border with Venezuela, currently suffer intense violence. Since 2012, the Colombian government and FARC have been negotiating a peace agreement that, if successful, would put an end to the five-decade long conflict.

4. Rebel governance and pre-existing local institutions in Colombian communities

I argued that resistance is explained by the scope of rebel governance and the quality of pre-existing local institutions. A brief description of variation in rebel governance and local institutions is therefore necessary to investigate civilian resistance in Colombia. I rely on quantitative and qualitative evidence gathered in two samples of local communities.⁷ All quotes and descriptions of civilian-combatant relations come from interviews conducted in both samples; all quantitative data come only from the random sample. The unit of analysis is the community-year. After describing the overall attributes of rebel governance and pre-existing institutions, I turn to specific cases that illustrate the explanatory power of these factors in determining the type of resistance that emerged.

⁷ The first is a random sample of municipalities throughout Colombia, which includes 38 communities and 106 community-armed group dyads. The second sample includes 15 communities that were chosen following more complex criteria, and are not necessarily representative of all Colombian municipalities. Together, these samples include cases in 17 of the 33 departments of the country. I thank all the research assistants who worked on this project between 2005 and 2012 and the many persons who generously and courageously agreed to share with us their memories.

A. Rebel governance

As defined, aliocracy is characterized by an armed actor ruling over public order and tax collection, but not intervening in other aspects of local life; in a rebelocracy, on the contrary, the armed actor goes beyond this minimalist rule to regulate social, economic or political conducts. Overall, around 30% of all cases included in the random sample lived under aliocracy—that is, armed groups did not intervene beyond public order and taxation—while almost 50% lived under rebelocracy.⁸

Describing aliocracy is an easy task since, by definition, we only need to look at public order and taxation. I classify a case as aliocracy if the armed actor did not intervene beyond maintaining public order and collecting taxes. In 67% of all cases of aliocracy armed groups established rules to preserve public order, such as forbidding theft and rape. In about 90% of the cases, they collected some form of contribution or illegal tax from the local population. Some of these contributions consisted of regular payments, while others involved unexpected and more sporadic demands of money, food or goods.

Depicting rebelocracy requires more detailed evidence, given how varied armed groups' intervention is across cases. I briefly illustrate this variation by focusing on armed groups' provision of extralegal justice, their provision of public goods, and their regulations over specific conducts. I classify a case as a rebelocracy if the armed group intervened by creating rules to regulate conduct beyond public order and taxation.

Both paramilitary and guerrilla groups created an extralegal justice system in many

⁸ In the remaining 20% of the cases (dyad-year) the armed group(s) that were present did not rule—i.e. they did not establish any rule to regulate civilian affairs. This was often the case when two or more armed groups were fighting with each other. In other cases, undisciplined groups neglected governing local communities and opted for interacting with locals without establishing clear norms. See Arjona (2013).

areas in which they ruled. Sometimes people would bring their conflicts to representatives of the community first, and only turn to the armed group when the latter failed; in other cases, people would go directly to a militiaman, a combatant or the commander. The types of private conflicts for which these organizations provided third-party dispute resolution included disputes over land borders, damage caused by animals, conflicts over the distribution of inheritances, and even disputes between husbands and wives. Women also asked combatants to force their children's fathers to provide for them, or their sons and daughters to obey them. In 90% of all cases where rebelocracy emerged, the armed group established a parallel justice system.

Ending delinquency and crime—except those committed by the armed group itself—is another key component of rebelocracy. As I argue elsewhere (Arjona 2009, 2013), “social cleansing campaigns” are actually quite successful in garnering civilian support for combatants (see also Taussig 2003; Gutierrez, this volume). In all cases where rebelocracy emerged in the sample, clear rules on the use of violence were established.

Turning to the provision of public goods, there seems to have been great variation both in the extent to which these organizations became involved with public goods and the strategies they chose to promote them. In general, armed actors in Colombia do not engage in the creation of health or education systems as insurgents have done in other countries. Instead, they usually influence how local governmental officials provide those services, and sometimes fund certain projects or pay for satisfying specific needs. Armed groups frequently gave orders to mayors and council members directing expenditures of public funds in infrastructure, education, or health projects. They also intervened directly to build

or repair roads, often by organizing mandatory community work. Overall, public goods were provided or regulated in 60% of all rebelocracy cases.

Armed actors also intervened in other economic matters. The most common were activities related to cultivation, production, and transportation of coca. Although these practices varied across time and space, both the guerrillas and paramilitaries became involved in every step of the production chain. In 98% of the cases, taxes or some other form of economic contribution were collected.

Turning to norms of conduct, both guerrillas and paramilitaries established norms over a wide variety of issues including domestic violence, personal image (such as long hair for men, or skirts for women), sexual conduct, and freedom of speech (what people could talk about in public). More than half of all cases of guerrilla or paramilitary rebelocracy exhibited rules pertaining to *all* these types of conducts.

Politics were tightly controlled under rebelocracy. In about 50% of the cases, interviewees reported that combatants intervened in local, regional, or national elections. Sometimes the guerrillas or paramilitaries decided who could run for mayor or for a council; in other cases, combatants told locals whom to vote for. Yet, voting was sometimes banned. In recent years, researchers have presented systematic evidence on armed groups' involvement in elections, and the Colombian judiciary sentenced several politicians for striking deals with armed actors to win elections (López 2010).

Unlike rebel-controlled areas in other countries, in Colombia rebelocracy rarely meant that the state was completely absent in an entire region. Even in remote areas where the state's armed forces were absent, other agencies were often present. With a few exceptions, neither the guerrillas nor the paramilitaries sought to dismantle the formal local

government altogether.⁹ Rather, they tried to control it by intervening in its decisions and capturing it through the appointment of their own members or allies.

Even though the FARC and the paramilitaries embrace opposite ideologies—the former is a left-wing organization seeking to bring about profound economic, social and political change, while the latter defend the status quo—they ruled communities in very similar ways.¹⁰ Perhaps this is partially explained by the fact that the paramilitaries tried to mimic the guerrilla’s tactics in many ways, and recruited former guerrilla members. It is also possible that they rule in similar ways because they face similar strategic challenges and opportunities.

B. Pre-existing local institutions

I now turn to the second explanatory factor of my theory: pre-existing local institutions. In most of the developing world, the local norms that structure human interaction come from a plethora of sources including the state, religious leaders, tribes, clans, and sui generis organizations. Although the Colombian state is stronger than its counterpart in many developing countries enduring war, there is great variation in the kind and scope of state presence within the Colombian territory (González et. al. 2003): in some areas the state rules more or less in an effective way and counts with substantial legitimacy; in others, it

⁹ In some cases the armed groups ordered mayors to quit their posts or banned all candidates from running in elections. But armed groups rarely expelled all representatives of state institutions and formally abolished the local government.

¹⁰ There are differences between the two, to be sure, but these are not as significant as could be expected. The key differences between the two, based on my fieldwork, are the following: First, the FARC have established rules that favored redistribution of land and increased minimum salaries for peasants, while the paramilitaries have not. Second, they have interfered differently in local and national elections, especially regarding turnout: the FARC have often forbidding voting but not the paramilitaries; both, however, have forced people to vote for a particular candidate. And finally, the FARC seem to have been stricter in terms of establishing a moral code of conduct than the paramilitaries.

performs poorly and ranks low on either or both fronts. In those areas where state institutions are lacking, there are few alternatives and the local population lives under a poor institutional environment; in other cases, however, other sources do provide legitimate and effective institutions.

In the communities I have studied, high-quality institutions were a product of peasants' organization or even *sui generis* schemes to organize local life. Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities were often ruled by traditional institutions and community councils. These patterns lead to substantial variation in the quality of local institutions across and within Colombian regions. Of all sampled communities, 29% had high-quality institutions while 71% had either ineffective or illegitimate institutions.¹¹

5. Partial and full resistance to rebel governance

Resistance to armed group rule in these communities run the full gamut from sporadic, unorganized and hidden events where one or more individuals expressed disagreement or made small requests to deliberate, collective, and open demands that the armed group respect local community institutions instead of imposing their own. The former exemplifies an instance of weak partial resistance, while the latter illustrates a case of strong full resistance. When members of communities where either the guerrillas or paramilitaries ruled were asked about their interactions with these groups, moments of agency came to light almost everywhere. As soon as one scratches below the surface of the official discourse that reigned where armed groups governed, it became evident that civilians found

¹¹ Measuring institutional quality is challenging. I relied on short surveys using vignettes to have a comparable measure across communities, and on more in-depth research on a subsample of communities by combining interviews and secondary data. See Arjona (2013).

ways to express some of their views, complain about certain issues, and even openly defy the new order.

A. Partial resistance

Consistent with the theory, partial resistance was common everywhere, regardless the quality of pre-existing institutions and the scope of rebel governance. I provide evidence of both communities living under rebelocracy and aliocracy; some had low-quality institutions, and some had high-quality institutions prior to the arrival of these armed groups.

Partial resistance within rebelocracy was common everywhere—even in communities formed by recent migrants or mobile workers, where armed groups often fill a vacuum of authority and bring order where it is lacking, achieving great support. In these regions, armed groups usually intervened broadly in local affairs. At the same time, they used violence to punish disobedience and deter defection, and threatened anyone who envisioned local autonomy. Often, local leaders were harassed and hurt. Even though support for rebel or paramilitary governance was common, locals also developed a deep sense of unease, which eventually turned into acts of partial resistance.

While portraying a guerrilla or paramilitary group as a totalitarian ruler that controlled everything, civilians remembered many instances in which they had signaled their disagreement or requested changes. These disagreements had to be voiced under a veil of deference to the authority of the armed actor. Still, in some cases civilians scored important victories.

In a rural community in the Caquetá department—one of the historical strongholds

of the FARC—the state was largely absent and most people were migrants from different parts of the country. There were no state institutions to rely on, and no shared cultural norms. Locals faced a real vacuum of authority. When the FARC arrived to this community, it quickly became the de facto ruler, intervening in social, political, and economic activities, and regulating many types of conducts. Most interviewees agreed that civilians had little autonomy vis-à-vis the rebels. Priests and local leaders said that it was difficult to talk about autonomy. “The control that the armed actor had when I arrived here was total”, said a community leader who came in 1980. Nevertheless, locals found ways to communicate their preferences to FARC commanders and influence some of the ways in which things were done.

A thin line marked the forms of disagreement that were tolerated by the armed group and those that were not. For locals to exercise their agency, they had to learn exactly where that line was. For a local leader, “it was not easy to talk when the guerrilla had just executed someone, especially someone who hadn’t done anything. But the leaders always had their voice about topics that were important for the community and had the capacity to tell the commanders about those problems”. He recounted that he decided to tell guerrilla leaders to change the way they dealt with youngsters attracted by job opportunities generated by coca, and soon became drug-addicts: “the guerrillas killed them without saying a word. In response to the indignation this caused in our community, I said that like those ill with malaria needed care, drug-addicts did too; I said that someone should not be killed because of being ill.” The guerrilla accepted the intervention of the community: drug addicts were not killed anymore, but expelled from the region. Similarly, another leader

said that the community asked the guerrillas not to kill thieves who could not pay back what they had stolen. The guerrillas responded by expelling them instead.

Other forms of resistance involved requests to set up new regulations. A leader in the same area recounted the negotiation between the community and the FARC that led to establishing a “beer bonus”—a tax on transporting, selling, and buying beer that was used to pay the salaries of schoolteachers. Another example goes back to the coca boom of the 1980s, when young men who migrated to the area flirted with married women and even offered them money for sexual relations. These issues were discussed at community meetings with guerrilla commanders and it was decided that there should be a brothel in the area. Some rules were set by the local women—for example, that prostitutes had to stay in the brothel at all times except a few hours on Saturdays; other rules were imposed by the guerrillas—such as requiring that all prostitutes leave the area after three months and never return. In a similar case, another interviewee recounts that taxes on prostitution were established in agreement among the guerrillas, the community, and the prostitutes. It is worth noting that even though locals in this area often embraced FARC’s ideology, partial resistance was still common. As with any political order, subjects may agree with certain political goals of the ruler but still disagree with the specifics of its rule.

Partial resistance was also common in communities governed by alioocracy. This is what happened in an indigenous community in Puerto Gaitán, Meta Department. The paramilitaries arrived to the community peacefully and agreed to respect the community’s autonomy. “He always respected our territory”, an indigenous governor said of Guillermo Torres, the paramilitary commander. “He always said that he was not going to pick on us as we did not deal with *guerrilleros*.” Nevertheless, the paramilitaries did try later to

penetrate the community and extend their influence over it. The community governor explained that the paramilitary commander had suggested they create a cooperative, offering his help and advice; he also offered weapons for defense. But the community always managed to reject these offers. The governor said they knew that if they agreed, their autonomy would have been lost. By finding ways to prevent the armed actor from crossing the line, the indigenous community was able to live under aliocracy and keep the paramilitaries at bay for more than 15 years.

Similarly, in a community in Medio Atrato (Chocó), in the northeast of the country, the FARC came to the locality peacefully, telling the community they were there to protect it. They assured locals that they respected the local authority—in this case, the Community Council (*Consejo Comunitario*). Later, when the FARC's 43rd Front established a permanent presence in the area—day and night—the local council sought the commander to inform him about the statutes that ruled the community. These statutes made it clear that the community was neutral in the conflict and had well defined rules for solving problems among its members. The presence of any armed actor, including the national army, was forbidden in the houses as well as in the school. The demands of the community even included that FARC combatants should abstain from getting personally involved with community members, in particular in romantic relations with local women. The FARC accepted these rules and consolidated an aliocracy, which lasted until other armed groups arrived to the area.

The interaction between the FARC and an indigenous community in Caño Mochuelo (Arauca), in the southwest of the country, was similar. The FARC arrived in the area in 1987. The commander invited the indigenous community to several meetings but

local authorities were emphatic about preserving their own politics and organization. The FARC accepted the decision of the community for about three years. During this time, an aliocracy marked by disciplined combatants, little violence, and minor civilian contributions functioned without problems. Around 1990 a new FARC commander tried to intervene more in local affairs, this time by threatening the indigenous community. The local leaders sought a meeting with the commander and again described their community institutions. The FARC responded by trying to ally with some members of the indigenous community; however, the community realized what was happening and expelled these collaborators from local political organizations. Soon they recovered the FARC's respect for their autonomy and interacted with the group under aliocracy for many more years.

These forms of opposition make civilian-combatant relations fluid, rather than static. As Uribe de Hincapié (2006:64) argues, armed groups' control over the local population is sustained by a "nourished net of micro-negotiations, transactions, contingent agreements, transitory alliances, and intermittent ruptures" that impose some limits on combatants' behavior. To be sure, their ubiquity does not make these forms of resistance trivial: civilians live under difficult conditions where these groups rule, and defying their power, even minimally, may bring disastrous consequences. Yet, these instances show that opposition to the ruler is intrinsic to rebel governance—as to any political order.

B. Full resistance

I argued that full resistance against rebel governance is likely to take place when two conditions are met: (i) the community has high-quality institutions prior to the arrival of

the armed group to the area, and (ii) the armed group attempts to establish a rebelocracy. Armed groups often anticipate this outcome and adapt their strategies accordingly: they learn that rebelocracy tends to trigger resistance in these communities, leading to a costly confrontation with locals that may end up endangering the group's control over the territory—usually the groups' main goal. Therefore, combatants often abstain from establishing rebelocracy in communities with high-quality institutions, opting for alioocracy instead (Arjona 2010). Since it is not common to find armed groups establishing rebelocracy in communities capable of collective resistance, full resistance against rebelocracy is rare.¹²

Yet, in some cases armed groups do attempt to establish rebelocracy in communities with legitimate and effective institutions—perhaps because they miscalculate locals' capacity to resist, or because the territory has such strategic importance that the group tries to impose tight social control over the population, even if that requires sustained violence and an open confrontation with the community (Arjona 2014). In these cases, the theory presented in this paper suggests that communities would rely on their shared norms to organize resistance against rebelocracy.

Empirically, it is very difficult to isolate instances of resistance against governance from those against violence. Usually full resistance leads to violence, which in turn either eliminates or further fuels resistance. Yet, in my fieldwork I have found several instances of open, organized resistance that started against armed groups' ruling attempts even before violence erupted. All of them have taken place in communities that had a history of high-quality institutions. In the remaining of this section I focus on an indigenous community in

¹² Indeed, most cases of organized resistance in Colombia have emerged after prolonged, intense violence, as opposed to armed groups' attempts to establish rebelocracy.

the Cauca department to illustrate how high-quality institutions can propel collective resistance against armed groups' ruling attempts, and sustain it despite harsh violence over a long period of time.

Located in the southwest of the country, Cauca is home to approximately half of Colombia's indigenous population. After building a strong, ethnic-based movement, the indigenous communities of the region consolidated a system of local governance widely supported by their members (Troyan 2008). The core of this movement was the Regional Indian Council of Cauca (CRIC), created in 1971 and representing the majority of Cauca's indigenous population, most of whom belong to the Nasa and Guambianos ethnic groups. The movement sought to recover and defend indigenous land, strengthen the *cabildos* (autonomous village councils), disseminate knowledge about indigenous laws and ensure their implementation, preserve indigenous history, language, and norms, and train teachers in order to ensure education according to their indigenous culture and language (Sandoval 2008:42). The organization's impressive record of land recovery and formal political organization testify to its success. Regarding land recovery, by 2005 there were "about 115 *cabildos* and 60,000 hectares of recovered land"—all the land that belonged to the indigenous *resguardo* (indigenous territories or reserves) in the colonial era (Hristov 2005:99). In terms of self-governance, the *cabildos* were the ultimate authority in the *resguardos*, and indigenous norms were generally supported and valued as an essential part of their identity. Norms established by these local authorities were massively obeyed by community members.

Cauca has endured the presence of several armed actors over the years, especially the FARC. The movement has publicly rejected the presence of all armed actors (rebels,

paramilitaries, and the national army) in their territory, opposed their social control, refused recruitment of indigenous peoples, and demanded respect for their culture and territories (Caviedes and Caldón 2007): 92). Despite being persecuted and victimized, these communities have sustained their resistance and mobilized against threats to their territory, community, and self-governance (Caviedes and Caldón 2007; Rappaport 2007; Sandoval Forero 2008). Recently, they expelled FARC members as well as soldiers of the Colombian army from their territories, leading to tensions with both the government and insurgents (El Tiempo 2012).

The case of Toribío, one of the sampled communities and a *resguardo* that is part of the CRIC, illustrates how legitimate and effective norms allowed these communities to defy armed groups' rule and violence. According to my interviewees, the FARC arrived in Toribío in the early 1980s. In those early years, there was constant tension between the FARC and the community, but the *Cabildo* remained the undisputed authority for most residents. The FARC attempted to rule local life extensively, establishing rules over many spheres of life. Yet, the population disobeyed many of the group's rules. As an interviewee explained, "They [the FARC] imposed norms... but civil society didn't really follow their rules. So, over time, the rules disappeared" (interview by author, 2006).

The Cauca department became more strategic for the armed actors. In 2005, an analyst stated bluntly: "that who dominates the Colombian Massif [where Toribío is located] will determine the course of the war" (FIP 2005). As the FARC fought intensely to control the area, attacks against Toribío became more frequent, aiming to keep the police away. The FARC also sought to subdue the population—as a Nasa leader put it, "because of the autonomy that we have expressed... an attitude that they have not liked and for which

they have always seen us as a threat” (García 2005). But despite this violence, resistance prevailed.

In 2004, Vitonás Noscué, the mayor of Toribío and a prominent indigenous leader, traveled to the Southern department of Caquetá. On his way back to Cauca, a FARC commander stopped him. “Why haven’t you quit your post as mayor since we, the FARC, gave the order that all mayors quit?” Noscué replied: “Precisely for that reason. Because you do not give us orders. You are wrong because you were not the ones who elected us, it was the community and it is the community we obey.” The commander decided to kidnap the mayor, who assured the guerrilla that the Indigenous Guard would soon rescue him (Neira 2005).

The Indigenous Guard was a nonviolent, civil defense organization created in 2001 by indigenous peoples in Cauca to protect their communities and territories from armed actors. Community members of all kinds—men, women, teenagers, and elders—volunteered to join the Guard. It was supervised by the *cabildo*, and had about 6,000 members. It alerted communities when armed actors were present, recovered bodies, and rescued kidnap victims (Ballvé 2006). After Noscué was kidnapped, about four hundred members of the Indigenous Guard scoured the mountains until they found the FARC and Noscué. Armed only with their ceremonial canes that symbolized the authority of the Guard, they surrounded the FARC and demanded the immediate release of Noscué. The FARC had no choice: killing four hundred people would have been too costly politically, and it would have probably triggered a draconian response from the state.¹³ They let

¹³ To illustrate, one of the largest attacks by the FARC killed 119 civilians in a rural area in the Chocó department in 2002. This event received massive attention by the media, political groups, NGOs, and international actors. The reputational effects of the attack were clearly large. The José María Córdoba bloc, the FARC unit responsible for the attack, made a public statement lamenting the event.

Noscué go (Neira 2005). The Guard also saved others. For example, it impeded kidnappings and recovered kidnap victims on many occasions, including some who were not members of their communities (e.g. Caracol 2011).¹⁴ As of 2013, this community still maintains its struggle. It publicly demanded all armed actors, including the national army, to abandon its territory. Last July, after the army decided not to leave, at least one thousand community members got together to physically remove the soldiers from their territory (LSV 2013).

Another example of full resistance comes from a small community in the natural park known as Nudo Paramillo. Migrants created this community in the 1970s in a remote, rough-terrain land without any state presence whatsoever. It took people at least one day to reach their municipal capital, Tierralta. Yet, the community was well organized. It operated a large productive cooperative with clear rules to solve problems and engaged in many collective efforts to provide public goods and build infrastructure. At one point, it collectively owned more than one thousand cows.

The strength of this community's organization allowed it to pursue the guerrilla commander to demand respect for their own rules, despite being in a very remote area, far away from any state authority, and unarmed. Even though the FARC's ideology resonated with the precarious situation of these peasants, they did not want to be ruled by the rebels. According to one of the community's leaders, "at the beginning [the FARC] tried to rule over everything. They came to our meetings. They told us what we could do, where we could go, and when. We could not let this happen. We had been our own rulers for years". To stop the FARC from seizing power over their local cooperative, the community decided

¹⁴ The NASA movement, the Indigenous Guard, and Toribío have been awarded several prizes, including the National Peace Prize and the Equator Initiative Prize of the United Nations.

to talk to the commander. “We told [him] very clearly that we did not want militiamen in the area. That it was not needed. ‘If what you need is some information, we will give it to you. But we do not need orientation or guidelines. We don’t need any of that. We know very well what we need to do.’ And at the end, the commander agreed”. After a long discussion that included threats and insults, the guerrillas agreed to respect the cooperative and avoid intervening in its affairs. They would still require some contributions, and if civilian cooperation with the army were to be discovered, the deal would end. As with Toribío, this case illustrates how high-quality institutions are put to work to organize and sustain collective resistance against rebelocracy.

6. Conclusion

This paper presented a theory of civilian resistance against armed groups’ rule. I argued that rebel or paramilitary governance limited to the spheres of public order and tax collection tends to trigger only *partial resistance*—that is, opposition to some aspects of rule, without demanding its removal. However, when rebel governance expands beyond public order and taxation, the response of local civilians depends on the quality of the local institutions in place prior to the arrival of the armed group to the area. Communities with high-quality institutions are more likely to engage in *full resistance*—that is, they oppose the group’s rule altogether, while communities with low-quality institutions are likely to engage in *partial resistance* only. Original evidence from the Colombian armed conflict illustrates the plausibility of this argument. The presence of resistance does not imply, of course, that it is always successful in securing autonomy or reducing victimization in the community. The internal organization of the armed group, competition with other

organizations, and the strategic value of the territory are also likely to shape armed groups' willingness to tolerate demands for autonomy (Arjona 2013).

The phenomenon of civilian resistance against rebel or paramilitary rule brings to the fore several puzzles that have been neither tackled theoretically nor documented systematically. Yet, they warrant attention. To start with, the very existence of resistance (either partial or full) implies that the dominant approach in the academic literature that civilians are deprived of agency in areas where armed actors rule is flawed. Even though people are forced to cooperate with combatants and find it difficult and risky to defy them, civilians often find ways to influence, even if minimally, the new social order that emerges under the rule of these organizations. Understanding how civilians respond to the presence of armed actors can also illuminate rebel behavior, as insurgent organizations are likely to take civilian responses into account when planning their strategies (Arjona 2010). Denying such agency not only obscures our understanding of what happens on the ground in war zones, but also reduces our capacity to identify and study the heterogeneous effects of war on communities and individuals.

Second, the possibility of civilians uniting to defy a violent actor—and succeeding—is rarely taken into account when theorizing civil war violence, analyzing counter-insurgent policies, or designing non-governmental wartime intervention to prevent violence or attend victimized communities. Yet, this phenomenon could have important implications on all three fronts.

Theories of civil war violence need to confront several questions. If communities can confront violence under certain circumstances, how do armed actors respond to it? Do guerrillas and paramilitaries learn to anticipate resistance? Do they consider it when they

select their strategies? Does resistance shape armed actors' choices of whom they target, what form of violence they use, how intensely they inflict it, and when they use it?

In terms of policy, strengthening local institutions and community mechanisms for working together could be a viable policy to protect communities. In fact, some have argued that resistance is a significant means to prevent violence and stop atrocities (Megret 2009). Yet, others warn us that resistance can be futile heroism and often terribly costly (García Villegas 2009). It remains to be seen whether communities that engage in full resistance end up being more or less victimized, and how often they succeed in preserving their autonomy from warring sides. Both positive questions about the causes and consequences of resistance and normative questions about whether it should be promoted require further research.¹⁵

Moving beyond civil war, resistance to armed actors speaks to more general questions about risky collective action and organized political behavior. It also sheds light on questions about the origins of political order and its stability. Civilian adaptation to a context of violence and rebel governance speaks directly to relations between ruler and ruled, as well as the creation and destruction of different forms of political order. Unarmed civilians committed to a collective effort to limit the intervention of an armed actor in their community can deeply influence how guerrillas and paramilitaries exert territorial control. These, often implicit, negotiations between ruled and ruler lie at the core of a central question about the conditions for political order.

¹⁵ See Kaplan (2013) for an example of new research in this direction.

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