



# CRISE:

Centre for Research on Inequality,  
Human Security and Ethnicity

# IN BRIEF

## Processes of violent political mobilisation

### Conflict and violence

A critical pitfall when dealing with political violence is to equate it with conflict. While political violence generally does signal the existence of a pre-existing conflict, most conflicts do not trigger violent confrontations. Statistically, political violence remains a rare and localised phenomenon. Why it happens deserves specific analytical attention. Crucially, one should not conceive of political violence as a higher degree of conflict, but rather as a process that follows its own lines of logic. Root causes of conflict, such as horizontal inequalities (HIs) or the collapse of the state after decades of neo-patrimonial governance, may certainly heighten the risk of political violence, but they do not fully *explain* it. One very obvious reason for this is that perpetrating violence requires not only particular weaponry but also, and more importantly, special individual dispositions and organisational skills. To illustrate this point, historical examples abound that demonstrate the leading role played by veterans or ex-combatants in igniting political violence: General Robert Gueï's coup d'état in Côte d'Ivoire in 1999 immediately followed a mutiny of military units formerly on duty in Central African Republic; and the initiators of the 2007 Tuareg rebellion in Niger all had a military background. Less anecdotal, a 2010 statistical analysis suggests that partition violence in post-Second World War India might have been greater in districts where veterans endured prolonged exposure on the frontline during the Second World War (Jha and

Wilkinson, 2010). Political violence is generally carried out by specialists. One needs to know, therefore, who these specialists are and what are their behavioural logics.

These users of force might or might not be joined by (as yet) non-specialists of violence. The factors that drive their enlistment do not necessarily coincide with those of their leaders. Hence the conditions for followers' participation in armed violence are something else to consider. Furthermore, once combatants have joined up, they are likely to live through radically new experiences that change their attitudes, the way they make decisions, their opportunities and the people they interact with. As a result, the reasons why they stay (or step down) generally stem from different causes than those that made them join. These individual changes are paralleled by similar changes in the organisation in which they have enlisted. This, then, is another matter to look at: armed organisations have varying trajectories, affected by factors from inside (such as troop morale and divisions among leaders) and outside (such as a government's attitudes and armed groups' relations with civilians).

Efforts to address these issues must be based on micro-level evidence, which has only begun to be collected systematically in recent years. CRISE has contributed to this process. In parallel with initiatives to conceptualise HIs and measure the role that they play in precipitating violent conflict, CRISE has explored the micro foundations of political violence, with substantial investigations in Nigeria and Niger. The former assesses an ethnic militia, the O'Odua People's Congress (OPC), while the latter evaluates a short-lived rebel group, the Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice. The results of this work have been discussed and contrasted with observations from elsewhere in the world.<sup>1</sup> Most of the work of CRISE on perpetrators of violence considers *organised* violence—that is, it excludes spontaneous violent outbursts such as riots, although, importantly, riots should not be considered as devoid of organisational logic. The perpetrators of violence we have interviewed in Nigeria and Niger are long-term members of groups whose goal was, at the time, primarily to perpetrate violence against governmental security forces. Yet they had also participated in episodes of communal violence, as the Nigerian case shows.<sup>2</sup>

### Participation in organised violence

Formal membership of a group implies that a recruitment process is in train to select militants, according to particular recruitment principles. The recruitment of militants

can be represented as a 'matching process': future recruits, if not totally coerced, elaborate some expectations before joining. At the same time, insurgent leaders have specific strategic needs: they want loyal, competent and obedient followers. In most cases, they do not welcome everyone in their ranks as the absence of control on recruits could threaten the group's chance to last and undermine its military efficiency.

Analyses of participation in armed groups often put participants into two alternative categories: 'rebels with a cause' and 'lumpen youths' lured solely by opportunities to make a quick fortune. The perception of rebellions as primarily quasi-criminal activities has gained greater currency following civil wars involving the confiscation and transfer on an immense scale of extractive industry rents, as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), the Niger Delta and Sierra Leone. In addition, a third view of recruitment insists on the pre-eminence of pure coercion of recruits, as exemplified by the horrendous waves of abductions in Sierra Leone and Uganda. It is crucial to understand that none of these patterns of violent engagement is actually empirically wrong: forms of armed violence are highly diverse. Alternative theoretical models should not necessarily be seen as rivals. All groups, in fact, are driven to some degree by opportunism and ideological attitudes. Yet, one has to acknowledge that gauging the respective weight of greed or ideology with

respect to the motives of militants is like chasing chimeras: it involves a methodological stalemate. However, although beliefs are not observable, forms of behaviour are, and one has to make sense of their variety, by looking at the particular contexts in which they emerge.

Weinstein (2006) has made the most advanced attempt in this direction. His account of the 'industrial organization of violence' grants rebels' fundraising activities the determining role in shaping recruitment strategies and violent forms of behaviour. His typology consists of two polar organisational strategies, labelled as 'activist' or 'opportunistic'. Weinstein argues that the proportion of politicised activists and opportunists within a rebellion stems directly from the financial constraints confronting rebel leaders. Financially well-endowed rebellions tend to attract recruits driven by immediate prospects of profit, whereas financially-constrained rebellions have to attract recruits who can be mobilised using non-material social bonds and are less focused on swift material benefits. Patterns of violence can be derived from this model: opportunists display relatively less discipline and are more likely to perpetrate atrocities than their more ideological counterparts. The ability to sustain rebellion over time among the poorly-endowed category depends on civilian support, and hence this type of rebellion makes more use of targeted violence and less use of mass violence against civilians.



Malian militants patrolling near their camp of Tigha, north of Kidal, Mali, during a 2006 rebellion.

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While useful for classification purposes, CRISE research shows that Weinstein's typology is an analytical cage (Tarrow, 2007). Its study of the OPC demonstrates that the group's success was jointly sustained by significant pre-existing social connections and numerous opportunities for economic gain among followers. The OPC functions as a club goods provider or as a restricted 'moral economy' whose members, tied to each other via a dense web of mundane transactions, enjoy self-insurance in an environment that is perceived as unsafe. Social capital and regular business contacts intimately mingle to ensure the continuation of the militia. Unequivocally, the majority of the OPC's followers do not display socio-demographic characteristics that resemble short-term quasi-mercenaries, nor are they dedicated ideologues. The OPC's success in terms of recruitment is largely based on the government's failure to deliver public goods to its vulnerable constituency, which therefore looks to the militia to secure the benefits of employment and insurance that the government fails to provide.

As for Niger's Tuareg rebels, CRISE research points up another form of 'matching process' between rank-and-file troops and their leaders. The rebellion was triggered by ex-combatants in previous rebellions who were excluded from peace arrangements. But these ex-combatants—also identified as agents of cross-border trafficking—were soon joined by revolutionary sections of Tuareg youth, with quasi-socialist ideas and lifestyles, locally known as *ishumar* (from the French word for 'unemployed'). Yet, these youths demonstrated highly conditional support for their leaders, who had a great propensity to factionalise among themselves and to pursue self-interested objectives. The Tuareg rebellion owes its existence to circumstantial alliances and a percolation of grievances provoked by local micro political dynamics and longstanding economic disenfranchisement of some sections of Tuareg youth. In particular, the *ishumar* bitterly resents not having access to jobs in the mining sector in the Agadez region because of what Tuareg youth considers as ethnic discrimination. *Ishumar* did express 'moral outrage'<sup>3</sup> in response to the way they think their people are treated. Moreover, one decisive factor in the *ishumar*'s decision to join the rebellion was the national army's heavy-handed repression of civilians. Reasons to join may actually not always be profoundly motivated; the decision might be a natural step in the course of events, when, for example, protection against aggression is urgently needed (Kalyvas and Kocher, 2007).

No single reason emerges therefore that explains enlistment in violent groups. Instead, there is a series of logics that are only decipherable when one looks carefully at the context in which they appear. Critically, these logics

change as the conflict unfolds. They are largely endogenous and contingent and reflect the adaptive capacities of agents, should they be men, women or 'child soldiers'.

## The dynamic of armed organisations

As the Niger case illustrates, the counter-insurgency tactics of a government, when they impact on civilians and are indiscriminately repressive, can fuel armed opposition rather than stop it. But repression is not the sole card in the hands of a government. Negotiation with insurgent leaders, generally accompanied by promises of private benefit, is particularly efficient in the African political context where the distribution of power and resources follows neo-patrimonial channels. Generally, violent groups are then incorporated into existing networks of political patronage. There are now solid grounds to believe that the abundance of rents derived from natural resource exploitation helps to perpetuate such short-sighted arrangements.

Most Nigerian militias are connected in some way to official political figures and may become powerful coercive tools servicing personal ambitions during elections, as blatantly shown in 2003 and 2007 (Human Rights Watch, 2008). In Niger, arms were laid down following Libyan President Muammar Gadhafi's financial intervention in the conflict. While direct distribution of material compensations to combatants may have an immediate benefit as violent confrontations cease, this short-term payoff is likely to be outweighed in the long run for three key reasons. First, financial deals favour the criminalisation of politics and the use of mass violence as a way to extort rents. In the Niger Delta, criminal forms of behaviour, manifested through hostage-taking or 'oil bunkering', are now deeply entrenched in the local political economy. Extra-legal forms of governance ossify and harm developmental prospects. Second, financial deals with insurgents are very likely to provoke greater anger among those left aside. Payments to communities hosting oil-producing facilities in the Niger Delta trigger endless cycles of demands, as well as disputes over the legitimacy of the claimants. The 2007 rebellion in northern Niger also clearly illustrates this point: its leaders were all middle-level commanders of the previous rebellion whose demands remained unaddressed. Increased banditry or, worse, alliances with transnational Al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorist groups present in the area may be due to the lame peace settlements implemented in northern Niger. Third, financial deals prevent any genuinely reformist agenda from emerging (Reno, 2002). In northern Niger today, the rebellion has officially ended but structural policies promoting fairer and more transparent use of extractive rents, once central to the rebels' discourse, are nowhere to be seen.

## Policy implications

Although the message conveyed here is one of analytical modesty and avoidance of mono-causal explanations of mobilisation for violence, there are still lessons to be learned from a policy perspective. Contextualising and unpacking the logics at play in a conflict lay the ground for fine-tuned intervention. By way of example, CRISE's findings in Nigeria highlight how the absence of provision of basic services by the state fuels enlistment in ethnic militias. Self-insurance mechanisms proposed by the OPC have been the main drivers of engagement of grass-roots militants, even superseding hopes of immediate material rewards. The majority of those who have joined have families, run licit—although informal—businesses, and aspire to 'neatness' and 'togetherness'—that is, solidarity—all characteristics that many ordinary Nigerians share. These are not fundamentally antisocial attitudes or worldviews that should be eliminated by force. Quite the opposite, provision of economic and physical security to populations might be the best way to prevent such groups from sustaining their activities and contesting the state's monopoly on coercive means.

Similarly, the concerns of the Tuareg *ishumar* echo fairly standard and widespread aspirations for transparent access to jobs, fair use of extractive rents and cultural recognition. Interestingly, the *ishumar* probably would not have participated in violent action had some specialists of violence (unsatisfied veterans) not given them the opportunity to do so. This is another lesson: followers and leaders should be offered specific policy packages to end hostilities. In all cases, long-term solutions should be privileged, such as by: following up on disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programmes through more classic microcredit schemes, helping legal economic activities to establish durable roots; generating employment opportunities; and addressing the underlying HIs. In this way, no 'reserve army' of unemployed youth is made available to serve the rent-seeking interests of veterans turned smugglers. More often than not, short-term solutions are adopted that only stop violence temporarily. As one Tuareg interviewee noted while commenting

ironically on the amounts offered by the DDR programme in Niger, designed in the aftermath of the rebellion in the 1990s: 'that's not much money, but it still can pay for two AK-47s'. Finally, adequate attention should be devoted to the 'demand side' of political violence: the reasons why people join involve a complex mixture of push and pull factors. Pull factors are extremely powerful in the specific political economy of the Saharan region, based on growing illegal cross-border trafficking. This situation requires coordinated regional policies to prevent roving bandits and their political and military accomplices from instituting local forms of governance exclusively shaped to protect criminal interests.

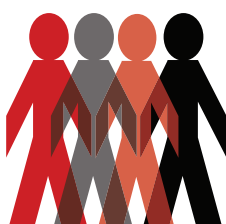
—Yvan Guichaoua, CRISE and Yale University

## Endnotes

- 1 The results, based on fresh data and analytical innovations, were presented at a workshop in Oxford in March 2009 that gathered together prominent specialists in the field.
- 2 CRISE's Nigeria work relies on a quantitative survey that included 170 rank-and-file soldiers whose profiles, biographies and motivations were recorded. It also involved open-ended interviews with militia leaders, Nigerian scholars and officials. The more sensitive Niger research employed qualitative research methods, including interviews with civil society representatives in Niamey and Agadez and repeat discussions with combatants outside of Niger.
- 3 See Wood (2003).

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This document is an output from a project funded by UK aid from the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for the benefit of developing countries. The views expressed are not necessarily those of DFID.