In Harm's Way: African Counter-Insurgency and Patronage Politics

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In Harm’s Way: African Counter-Insurgency and Patronage Politics

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This article explains why contemporary African regimes choose different counter-insurgency strategies and why they tend not to be population-centric. We argue that strategies correspond to the ways in which incumbent regimes in Africa deal with different segments of political society through patronage. Incumbents seek varying levels of accommodation with rebel leaders, or try to eliminate them, according to rebels’ historical position within the state. This variation reflects differences in perceived political threats posed to incumbents. We classify these threats as high, moderate or low, which are associated with counter-insurgency strategies of group control, insurgent control and insurgent elimination, respectively.

It is common among scholars and policymakers to assert that in contemporary civil wars, states and rebels fight each other to control and govern non-combatants. In this conventional view, rebels fight to protect their communities from external assault and rely on civilians for support. Effective counter-insurgency in turn focuses on out-governing rebels by providing basic security and social services to prevent rebels from retaliating against people who provide essential information about rebel membership and whereabouts. Separating rebels from non-combatants – a critical measure of success in counter-insurgency warfare – enables states to identify and pursue rebels to the point that they are defeated. This population-centric approach to counter-insurgency guided the US military’s ‘surge’ strategy in Iraq. In 2009 the commander of US forces in Afghanistan wrote: ‘Our strategy cannot be founded on seizing terrain or destroying insurgent forces; our objective must be the population.’ Guerrilla warfare’s classic treatises from Mao to Che assume that rebels seek the sympathy and support of civilians. The standard vision is that successful counterinsurgents must follow suit and ostensibly tap into non-combatant networks for information needed to sever rebels from this essential linkage to local communities.

Counter-insurgency in Africa presents a very different picture. Most African states lack the institutional capacity to launch extensive counter-insurgency programs to out-govern rebels. There are numerous ‘ungoverned spaces’ in which rebels can seek refuge, particularly in the hinterlands of Africa’s porous boundary...
regions. With these things in mind, Africa’s institutionally weak states should be especially vulnerable to rebel challenge. Many foreign aid programs are built on the assumption that extending effective governance is an essential element of state security. US strategy in Africa, for example, incorporates multi-agency civilian and military assistance to African governments to strengthen state institutions to provide security to citizens, manage local and regional conflicts, and to exercise surveillance over border regions.

Yet, very few African rebels have succeeded in overthrowing governments. Only about 10 per cent have been unambiguously victorious, like Uganda’s National Resistance Army (NRA) and the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). ‘Victory’ takes on more ambiguity considering the internal fragmentation that accompanied the ‘success’ of groups like the recent Séléka rebellion of the Central African Republic.

The paucity of clear success is striking given the sheer numbers of rebel groups in Africa from the past several decades. Not all of them sought to capture capitals and install a reform agenda. Some wanted secession; others wished to carve out a warlord fiefdom while a few fought to protect their communities from rebels and soldiers alike. Yet, Africa’s myriad rebels still posed threats to incumbents and had to be managed in one way or another. An investigation into Africa’s 150 odd cases of rebellion shows that at least 30 per cent of them did not survive their wars, irrespective of motivation. Angola’s União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (UNITA) crumpled following the death of Jonas Savimbi in 2002. Sierra Leone’s Revolutionary United Front (RUF) failed to overthrow a series of weak regimes.

Either African rebels are bad fighters or rulers in institutionally weak African states have discovered surprisingly effective alternative means of waging counter-insurgency warfare. In many cases, regimes defeat rebels outright or make rebel victory next to impossible. Effective counter-insurgency in Africa also fights and co-opts rebels simultaneously, erecting few boundaries between ‘rebel surrender’ and incorporation into the state’s authority structures. Nearly 40 per cent of Africa’s insurgencies have ended in ceasefires or peace agreements. Some involved international mediation, like the 1992 Rome General Peace Accords that ended the war between Mozambique’s Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (RENAMO) and the Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO) regime. Others like the 1988 Peace Accord that ended the Ugandan People’s Democratic Army’s (UPDA) rebellion, were home-grown affairs.

A common factor to Africa’s counter-insurgency strategies is the striking scarcity of population-centric approaches. An extreme example was Sudan’s campaign in Darfur in the 2000s, which did not include efforts to out-govern rebels by providing non-combatants with services or protection. Instead, the campaign included civilian repression and selective mobilisation of local militias, which developed in symmetry with increasingly fragmented rebel forces.

We argue that regime counter-insurgency strategies in many African states are extensions of patronage-based regime strategies for exercising authority outside of warfare. These strategies reflect the nature of rebellion contemporary in Africa,
which tends to crowd out more ideologically committed rivals as rebels pursue goals that have little to do with competing with the state to govern non-combatants. This exposes rebel groups to regime strategies that do not rely on building stronger state institutions or winning over public support. Instead, strategies aim to co-opt rebels through amnesty and settlements, or to defeat them through the use of armed proxies such as local militias and rebels from neighbouring countries. This logic follows the key actors that are ‘in harm’s way’. Rather than armed forces or the civilians they ostensibly protect, at risk here are African regimes, which match political and military responses to the level of threat posed by different types of rebels. Rebels that pose the greatest threat to incumbent regimes are those drawn from the very political fabric of regime-run patronage networks. These political insiders are met with the least coercive and most co-optative counter-insurgency strategies. The most coercive, militarised counter-insurgency strategies are reserved for rebels that comprise political outsiders, or those that arise from outside regime-based patronage networks. We find that regimes in Africa are shrewd, innovative and flexible in how they fight rebels and thus prove to be much more durable than most observers would expect against their rivals.

In what follows, we situate our argument in the broader literatures on counter-insurgency, African militaries and insurgent violence in Africa. We then provide a comparative framework that explains why the political strategies for dealing with insurgents are not population-centric, but correspond directly to how incumbents deal with different segments of political society. Empirical evidence from Uganda then illustrates the links between patronage politics and counter-insurgency. By patronage politics, we refer to how individual rulers project and maintain political authority by dispensing and withholding access to privilege, wealth and status within state politics. This means that the goals of African rebels are often as much about accessing these authority networks as they are about replacing them. This article therefore addresses variations in how incumbents manage the violent overtures of these actors as a strategy for achieving these goals. We conclude with the broader implications of our findings.

COUNTERINSURGENCY, AFRICAN ARMIES AND AFRICAN REBELS

Scholarship on African counter-insurgency as a distinct category is scarce and both traditional and contemporary literature on the subject has limited relevance to Africa’s political context. Scholarly work on African militaries and insurgent violence focus on the means available to Africa armies and the motives of rebels and do not provide a full picture of why regimes choose different approaches or why civilian populations are relatively marginal to the wars between these actors, even if civilians experience significant consequences of these wars.

The dominant approach of ‘out-governing the rebel’ evolved from a doctrine based on experiences from past wars and across armies. Military officers from the late 19th and early 20th centuries wrote foundational works on counter-insurgency in contexts where their armies fought and helped set up government administrations
in the places they controlled. Other authors drew from the experiences of Britain and France in colonial territories such as Malaysia, Algeria, Kenya and Northern Ireland. The works that inform current policies also reflect US experiences in Vietnam and the Philippines. John Nagl refers to these rebellions as a ‘special kind of revolutionary war’ and stresses the importance of military ‘organizational culture’ in separating rebels from non-combatants.

David Kilcullen critiques these classical approaches in light of a shift in contemporary insurgency. He and others recognise that while the more classic forms of rebellion persist – those that seek to overthrow incumbent regimes – a new approach must deal with localised threats that are potential extensions of an ideologically driven ‘global insurgency’. This requires widening the political scope of counter-insurgency into regional and global contexts, utilising propaganda networks, and for longer periods. Kilcullen also notes that ‘counter-insurgency mirrors the state’ insofar as it reflects regime type. Yet, his approach still assumes that civilians matter and that rebels are insulated from the regime politics.

In both classic and contemporary approaches, standard prescriptions include population-centric ‘statebuilding’ measures such as training local armies, building up state institutions to provide services to non-combatants and limiting government corruption. Even scholarly analysis that downplays the autonomous role of ideological agendas ties violence to variations in spatial control and degrees of success in competitive statebuilding projects.

A recent RAND study supports this observation. It tests 20 practices – both classic and contemporary – against 30 cases studies and finds that the most effective strategies use a combination of approaches that recognise the relevance of population-centrism. Even when insurgents do not depend on civilians for tangible support, the authors call for ‘additional areas of emphasis’, like ‘hearts and minds’ strategies to enhance government legitimacy. These recommendations embrace contemporary practices that favour the ‘beat cop’ and ‘cultural awareness’, which are unmistakably population-centric. But the study does not make any statements about why regimes choose one combination of approaches over others.

Thus, classic and contemporary approaches fail to consider that rebels and incumbent regimes engage with one another in a significant fashion beyond battlefield clashes to control territory and people, and beyond the reach of outside interventions. Dominant approaches devote little attention to how the strategies that regimes use to keep themselves in power are extended to dealing with rebel challenges, or consider why otherwise rational leaders would resort to patronage or other devices that would seem to undermine their institutional capabilities to address rebel threats. They also do not consider the latitude that really exists for regimes that are otherwise extremely dependent on foreign patrons to act against rebels. The preoccupation with non-combatants as the focus of conflict ignores the real political relationships that can exist between incumbent regimes and rival sources of power situated in individual rebel leaders or within entire groups. Moreover, the large number of African rebel groups incorporated into incumbent regimes through political settlements suggests an alternative dynamic is at play.
At the level of African militaries, few studies account for how they have strategically engaged with rebels and non-combatants as extensions of regime survival. Much of the literature attributes institutional weaknesses to historical antecedents such as pre-colonial social and political structures. Others consider colonial armies and anti-colonial insurgencies as providing templates for modern African militaries. And the most common work on African militaries has focused on their role in regime politics. By the 1980s, the problem of coups d’etats became almost a caricature of African politics as armies displaced democratic regimes to ‘restore order’ to the state, seldom stepping down once in power. Individuals such as Idi Amin and Sani Abacha loomed large as indicators of a broader pattern of what Samuel Decalo called an ‘authoritarian syndrome’. African militaries came to be viewed as weak, incompetent and unable to formulate, much less execute coherent counter-insurgency strategies on behalf of regimes that feared their own military forces as much as they feared rebels.

A more sanguine view holds that African militaries are modestly strengthening their institutional capacities by participating in regional cooperation and peacekeeping operations. But there still have been few attempts to explain counter-insurgency effectiveness or the large-scale failure of rebels in the African context. Why African regimes are able to use a variety of tactics against rebels with a high degree of success is seldom explained. Empirical evidence finds that even severely disorganised and impoverished regimes in Africa have a surprisingly solid record of either defeating or incorporating rebels.

On the rebel side of the story, scholarship on rebel governance shows how these actors erect rudimentary political structures to control territory and locals in order to satisfy basic needs such as food supply and recruitment. This builds on previous literature that tied rebel organisation to non-combatants through shared social structures, mass sentiments and norms. A look at historical cases shows that African rebels devoted a great deal of attention to governing non-combatants. In the 1960s and 1970s, Amilcar Cabral’s Partido Africano da Independencia da Guine e Cabo Verde (PAIGC) developed a population-centric strategy that used cadres of educated urban youth to mobilise the rural population for revolution, carving out extensive ‘liberated zones’ rooted in local culture. In the 1980s, Uganda’s NRA cultivated grassroots loyalties and at times developed dependency upon civilians. Yet, by the 1990s, mass mobilisation and governance diminished as strategies to control civilians and gain their acceptance. Rebel-controlled zones more often became generators of mass civilian flight rather than sites of reciprocity arrangements between rebel leaders and communities. Sierra Leone’s RUF and the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) were emblematic of such ‘new wars’ – those without ideological narratives, lacking popular support, resource-driven and highly predatory, situating rebels at the juncture of state weakness, globalisation and increasingly privatised violence. Political economy models of conflict followed suit, seeing private gain as the prime mover of war and central to how rebels chose their strategies. In this view, natural resources gave these rebels the income that they needed to attract followers and to fight without developing supportive links to...
non-combatants. Jeremy Weinstein used this insight to explain variation in rebel violence against civilians, arguing that when rebels have access to outside resources, rebel ‘consumers’ crowd out ‘investors’, truncating a leader’s need for ideological conditioning of fighters and permitting indiscipline in order to maintain the membership of low-commitment members, or ‘opportunists’.43

This literature on civil wars and insurgent violence dovetails with the prevailing logic of counter-insurgency – that civilian support and cooperation is required for rebel success, irrespective of rebel motivations. But it is not clear just how much support is required for success.44 Equally, while this work does address relations between rebels and non-combatants, it tells us little about what to expect from regime counter-insurgency strategies. It does not take account of what happens when rebel and government forces commit atrocities and do not seek material or political support from non-combatants as part of their war fighting strategies. Non-combatant motivations to support either side of a conflict vary. Their choices can reflect how well they feel they are being ‘governed’. But they can also reflect a profit motive, the lack of an alternative, coercion or fear of reprisal. Many non-combatants simply flee to avoid these choices, a prominent feature of Africa’s wars without rebel-governed ‘liberated zones’.45

The decline in importance of civilians for rebels reflects distinct patterns of Africa’s civil wars and African politics more generally. Rebel governance, or lack thereof, is a marker for more salient structural issues that historically situate rebellions within Africa’s political society and its institutions. The argument that follows recognises the tendency for both rebels and armies to downgrade the importance of civilians, which contrasts with the dominant counter-insurgency literature. But it also diverges from the work on civil wars and insurgent violence in identifying the principal cause of decisions to forego population-centric strategies. Rather than military means or rebel motives, what matters here is the political character of regimes in states with very weak or failing institutions. This argument privileges the role of pre-war political networks in determining regime strategies. It starts with the simple observation that rebels in these states tend to confront armies that are highly fragmented and may be politically disinclined to pursue population-centric strategies when fighting rebels.

COUNTERINSURGENCY IN AFRICA

Population-centric strategies are not often used nor are necessary to achieve the aims of African regimes. African counter-insurgency strategies tend to be rebel-centric, in which the relations with non-combatants vary considerably according to the on-going relationships between a rebel group and state authority. Non-combatants are still at times targets for control or co-optation. They can be recruited to fight on behalf of the state. Or they can be ignored as the incumbent regime pursues rebels directly. It is important to note that none of these strategies presupposes a government or a rebel effort to protect and administer these populations as part of war-fighting strategies. These regime strategies build on the politics of patronage
that characterises the on-going exercise of political authority in these countries, and
is now applied to the task of countering rebel challenges. Counter-insurgency in this
kind of regime thus is an extension of existing strategies of rule, albeit in more
violent and less certain circumstances.

At first glance, many African militaries pose considerable threats the regimes
that they are supposed to protect. Even so, military power in the hands of patronage-
based regimes in Africa is capable of undertaking counter-insurgency campaigns.
But as extensions of the politics of incumbent regimes, their behaviour reflects the
dependence on non-institutional means of exercising power, and reliance on
controlling channels of patronage and the distribution of these resources. Counter-
insurgency strategies of African states are therefore endogenous to regime politics.
This means that the ways in which rulers manage domestic rebellion correspond to
the ways in which they deal with threats to their authority from different segments of
the political society that are not necessarily at war with their regimes. This kind of
politics reflects pre-war strategies of the incumbent regime to control its own
members and the population at large. Counter-insurgency in this context is not about
military doctrine or winning wars in purely military campaigns. It is about bringing
recalcitrant rebel leaders and non-combatants into the orbit of state control through
coopperation, for example, by drawing specific groups back into political society
through restoring linkages to local notables. A key point is that rebellions that
involve groups with formal and informal historical linkages to regime networks will
be treated differently from rebel groups that do not. Incumbent regimes will seek
varying levels of accommodation with rebel leaders, or try to eliminate them,
according to these historical institutional positions within the state. This variation in
strategies reflects differences in degrees of perceived political threats they pose to
incumbent rulers. We classify these perceived threats as *high*, *moderate*, and *low*.
These categories correspond to the counter-insurgency strategies of group control,
insurgent control, and insurgent elimination, respectively (see Table 1). The cases
that follow in the next section illuminate distinct sets of tactics associated with each
strategy.

Rebel groups with close ties to state authority often possess intact, complex,
state-interdependent networks. These groups pose a higher threat to incumbents, and
are costly to eliminate. Often these rebels represent entire ethnic, regional or
religiously affiliated groups within political society. Group control therefore
involves bargaining and negotiation with rebel leaders in order to co-opt them, as
well as demobilising any potentially broad support they may have from civilians.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threat level</th>
<th>Counter-insurgency strategy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Insurgent elimination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Insurgent control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Group control</td>
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While involving non-combatants, this strategy nevertheless remains rebel-centric and not population-centric. Alternatively, rebel groups that contain previous elites but are historically disconnected from the incumbent regime pose a threat for the same organisational reasons as groups with direct ties. But because these groups are several steps removed from state authority, there is no salient overlap between the rival political networks of rebel and incumbent, and threats are only moderate. These moderate threats are therefore dealt with through a strategy of insurgent control, where rebels are targeted for co-optation and civilians are largely ignored. Finally, political outsiders pose low threats and present few risks to pursuing their military elimination, which involves military action that targets insurgent resources and vulnerabilities on the battlefield, while ignoring civilians.

Strikingly, it is rare to find contemporary African regimes competing with rebels to out-govern non-combatants as part of a counter-insurgency strategy, because non-combatants are not central to struggles over the control of patronage networks and their resources. Most African regimes are only concerned with rebel ties to non-combatants insofar as it means rebels will seize resources that regimes need to maintain their political networks. These regimes usually face factionalised and often violently divided domestic political networks that leaders manipulate to assert authority. Dissatisfied regime insiders may decide that rebellion is a good way to negotiate an elevated position in existing political networks. Effective counter-insurgency strategies in most wars in Africa focus on limiting these challenges to patronage networks and the material resources that rulers need to make these networks run. As noted above, this terrain of politics is the underlying causal factor that leads to the formation of rebel groups that forego population-centric strategies. This type of political strategy weakens and disorganises state agencies, including armies and security forces, imposes serious limitations on these states’ capacities to pursue population-centric strategies when they fight rebels. Since their armies and militias are organised and fight much like the rebels, all sides are prone to committing atrocities against non-combatants. Violence of this sort is an indicator of a patronage network-centric rather than a population centric form of rebel war.

Regimes treat true political outsiders differently. Such rebels pose a different kind of threat to regimes because they actually do try to administer non-combatants in areas that they control and offer ideological programs in which there is no role for the incumbent political establishment. This kind of rebel is surprisingly rare in Africa, in part due to the difficulties of finding the political space to organise these alternatives in the context of dense patronage networks. But when these outsider rebels do appear, regimes adopt a strategy of elimination, as co-optation is more costly and difficult when confronted with hostile newcomers to the political system. Given the weak military capacities of these regimes, they will sometimes seek external military assistance, claiming that the ideologues are dangerous anti-system rebels, such as Islamic extremists, secessionists or in league with drug traffickers and others to attract support from powerful non-African backers.

More typical are rebels that form when a dominant, established group experiences a sudden status reversal within the state’s inter-group political
hierarchy. Their leaders articulate the perception that ‘one’s group is located in an unwarranted subordinate position on a status hierarchy’ based on that group’s historically perceived ‘right of control’ over the state apparatus.\textsuperscript{46} If successful, this kind of rebel will now ‘be the group perceived as farthest up the... status hierarchy that can be most surely subordinated through violence’ in competition among political factions.\textsuperscript{47} This political historical proximity of the group to state privilege puts these rebels in a distinctly hostile relationship to the incumbent regime. Regimes thus respond to this kind of rebel through strategies that prioritise management of rival sources of power and authority.\textsuperscript{48} Even regimes in fragmented states will seek to organise and dominate existing networks of social control in order to assert authority, gain more security and ensure survival. In this context where regimes have long lacked direct command and discipline over state security agencies or the capacity to mobilise the population, they continue to pursue the politics of negotiation, selective targeting and playing local power brokers off one another to dominate and incorporate rebels when they can and eliminate other rebels if they must.\textsuperscript{49}

In African states, this political realm is not structurally distinct from the rest of society.\textsuperscript{50} Authority rests upon the ‘informalisation of politics’, where rulers regulate access of society to resources and distribute them down vertical networks in exchange for personalised political support.\textsuperscript{51} The ‘instrumentalisation of disorder’ ensures power can be extended within the weak institutionalisation of political practices.\textsuperscript{52} This strategy stands in contrast to global norms that prescribe the management of conflict as involving the strengthening of formal institutions, a version of population-centric counter-insurgency. In the informalised political context, disenfranchised members of previous and current regimes determine most rebels’ relationships to state authority. Such actors will have political access, knowledge and military skills that serve as leadership conduits in the patronage-based political system, and this contributes to the structure and organisation of their rebel movements, factors well known to incumbent state militaries.

The capacity of pre-war regime politics to shape rebel behaviour lies in the tendency of the patronage-based political strategy to co-opt and shape the social networks and relationships into which rebel groups normally would try to integrate as part of population-centric strategies. The Maoist concept of guerrilla war saw these social networks as isolated from regime politics, an insulation that protects rebels from the military and security forces of the state as leaders recruit and organise followers. These networks eventually became the framework for establishing liberated zones in China as well as in Africa’s anti-colonial struggles. But in contemporary states where regimes rule through dense patron–client networks in lieu of effective state institutions, these social networks are incorporated into day-to-day politics. Among the many who are subordinate members of these political networks, toppling this kind of regime and seizing state power is best accomplished through removing one’s superiors in this network. Conversely, the pursuit of the classic rebel guerrilla strategy through mobilising non-combatants in population-centric rebellion becomes exceedingly difficult when so many social
relationships upon which guerrilla forces presumably rely are dominated by patron–
client networks with ties to the capital.

The irony of this situation in many parts of Africa is that the politics that makes
these states so weak in institutional terms – through granting privileges, including
protection from prosecution for misdeeds on the basis of political loyalties, the
tolerance of corruption, the appointment of officials without regard for experience or
training – also makes these states particularly effective at inhibiting the
development of population-centric rebels. This is true in spite of the vulnerability
of this kind of regime to replacement by its own agents, whether from subordinate
officials or by people who hold no official title but play important roles in the non-
bureaucratic networks of patronage and control. This kind of politics, rather than
scrambles for lootable resources, plays the crucial role in shaping rebel and counter-
insurgency strategies. As the examples below show, the bulk of contemporary rebel
groups in Africa reflect the political strategies of the regimes that they fight,
including in how they interact with non-combatants. It is fairly common, for
example, for wars in Africa to feature state forces and rebels that are equally
factionalised and that prey upon non-combatants in similar ways.

COUNTERINSURGENCY IN UGANDA

Recent conflicts in Africa show a significant degree of variation in counter-
insurgency strategies. Consider the case of Uganda. Of the country’s 29 rebellions
recorded by the Uganda Amnesty Commission Report, not a single group seized
power.53 During the 1990s, Yoweri Museveni’s National Resistance Movement
(NRM) government fought several of these groups simultaneously but deployed a
range of approaches. Against the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), the government
pursued a modal strategy of group control. Alternatively, the Allied Democratic
Front (ADF) prompted insurgent elimination. For the West Nile’s rebellions, the
Ugandan government opted for a strategy of insurgent control.

Methodologically, Uganda provides a defined geographic area and relatively
short time span. Holding the state and regime constant (Uganda and the NRM since
1986), these cases provide a high degree of variation across rebel groups’ political
profiles and corresponding counter-insurgency strategies. Each group received
backing from the Sudanese government, claimed similar grievances against the
NRM, and were highly predatory. These controls address potential explanations
rooted in rebel motivations to govern civilians. And while the capacity of the army, the
Ugandan People’s Defense Force (UPDF), may have been limited, it nevertheless
demonstrated relatively stable and sophisticated forms of fighting multiple rebel groups
at the same time, but did so differently depending on the group.

Group Control

The campaign to defeat the LRA in northern Uganda came closest to the population-
centric form, but not out of concern for the protection of civilians. Non-combatants
were caught between both violent rebels that unleashed waves of human rights
abuses and widespread brutality on the part of Uganda’s military. Rebel fighters preyed on upon ethnic Acholi non-combatants and relied upon kidnapping to acquire recruits. Violence against non-combatants was also designed to embarrass and discredit the regime. This was arguably a population-centric rebellion, but one designed to communicate to incumbent elites rather that demonstrate legitimacy to civilians and gain popular support. On the government’s part, rather than trying to win the loyalty of citizens to undercut support for rebels, the strategy of group control sought to demobilise non-combatants to demobilise rebels.

From the perspective of the regime in Kampala, the LRA posed a high threat as an extension of a firmly established ‘lineage’ within Ugandan political society. Precursors to the LRA rebellion reflected the dissatisfaction of ethnic Acholi leaders over their removal from historically dominant position in state politics. Displaced from the capital by Museveni’s forces in 1986, Acholi members of the former regime fled north and regrouped as a rebellion called the Ugandan People’s Democratic Army (UPDA). True to prediction, this group, which contained top elites from the recently expelled regime, quickly entered into a political settlement with the new regime once its resources ran dry. More significant, however, was the decision of intransigent fragments of this group to form a series of rebel groups. Alice Lakwena’s Holy Spirit Mobile Forces were viewed as bizarre outsiders and met with a strategy of insurgent elimination. By the early 1990s, Joseph Kony’s LRA emerged as the dominant rebel group.

Over the course of this transformation, rebellion in northern Uganda was perceived by those in the capital as a problem that had not been solved by co-opting the UPDA. Also, by the mid-1990s, the Sudanese government began supporting the LRA to undermine Uganda’s support for the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA). Complicating matters further was the changing profile of the LRA’s organisation and leadership. While initially containing a number of cadres from the former regime, Joseph Kony, a primary school dropout, was emblematic of a political outsider with negligible connections to the country’s political establishment. This status meant that the usual patronage tools to reintegrate rebel leaders into the political establishment were less helpful for addressing this challenge. Still, because the LRA fought in Acholiland, the group continued to reflect the broad, historically contentious political relationship northern and southern elites. To many in Museveni’s circle, these ‘outsider rebels’ seemed to aggravate a ‘northern problem’ insofar as they posed the threat of attracting support from a broader population that felt itself to be historically marginalised from the country’s politics, an arena where Acholi elites were once dominant.

The Ugandan government pursued a strategy of group control against the LRA, which included both peace talks and fighting them in the bush. Talks in 1993–94 showed that Museveni was willing to accept former government soldiers as negotiators. A general amnesty bled the LRA of fighters. But Museveni was always reluctant to deal with Kony in particular, whom he viewed as a political outsider. The parallel approach sought to weaken LRA forces by militarising and isolating northern Uganda with media blackouts and the process known locally as panda gari,
where soldiers swept the north engaging in arbitrary arrests, torture and extrajudicial killings.\(^{58}\) Government officials also recruited local ‘Arrow Boys’ to augment the army, a tactic that was abandoned as their recruits proved difficult to control. These militias prompted LRA reprisals against non-combatants, drew the army into intra-Acholi disputes, and Uganda’s government realised that the LRA’s persistence was related to these political divisions within Acholi society.\(^{59}\)

Following Museveni’s electoral victory in 1996, things took a population-centric turn when the army began herding Acholi civilians into ‘protected villages’.\(^{60}\) This tactic attempted to demobilise segments of Acholi society that were also weakening government control over the area. Removing non-combatants from areas of LRA operation made sense in this situation whereas in the other cases, including those below, counter-insurgency strategies were best described as ‘political network-centric’ in approach. But ‘protected villages’ were not a classic population-centric strategy of providing security and services in order to win non-combatant support. In moving Acholi civilians into camps and making services available through international relief agencies, the strategy was designed to deprive LRA rebels of sources of supply and give a free hand for the military to pursue rebels.\(^{61}\) This drained the countryside of non-combatants and allowed the government to keep careful watch over these people under the guise of protecting them.\(^{62}\) Interestingly, in areas of LRA operations outside Gulu District, the UPDF did not forcibly displace non-combatants. Outside Acholiland the army actively recruited local youth as auxiliary forces, or ‘Local Defence Units’ (LDUs), to provide internal security while the army pursued the rebels, which reflected the less politically ‘problematic’ nature of non-Acholi areas. In summary, the strategy of group control meant that the government’s war against the LRA provided a justification for ongoing state oppression against the Acholi as a whole.

**Insurgent Elimination**

Of Uganda’s simultaneous conflicts, the one between the UPDF and the ADF in Southwest Uganda bore the fewest traces of population-centrism. Based in the mountainous borderlands with the Democratic Republic of Congo and backed by the Sudanese government, the ADF was not required to cultivate ties to non-combatants for support. Violence was as predatory as the LRA’s, but was interpreted by some as a short-term signal of commitment to its patron.\(^{53}\) In response, the Ugandan government went after the ADF with a full strategy of insurgent elimination. This meant military operations that bypassed non-combatants and maintained an orientation towards rebels that offered no patronage and no room for accommodation.

For the Ugandan government, the ADF should have posed a high threat as Sudan’s government sought to expand its strategy to destabilise Uganda by opening up a new front from DRC.\(^{64}\) But the group’s organisational anatomy and the political status of its members determined otherwise. The ADF was made from the detritus of three rebellions that had no meaningful ties to Uganda’s political establishment. First, the National Army for the Liberation of Uganda (NALU) grew in part from
disenfranchised veterans of 1950s-era Ruwenzururu revolt against colonial rule – outsiders to Museveni’s NRM. Although former government official Amon Bazira led the group, he had severed his political networks and was refused amnesty. Second, the National Democratic Army (NDA) was associated with a small crop of army deserters and the urban ‘Bwaise’ gang culture. Finally, the Ugandan Muslim Liberation Army (UMLA) drew from radicalised, urban Muslims linked to the Tabliq Youth Movement. This group’s attack against the Buseruka police station in February of 1995 was met with a swift military response.

Remaining fighters scattered into Zaire and Sudan where they found anti-Museveni networks orchestrated by the Sudanese Army Security Service. Although ADF operations were extensive, its leadership and agenda were never clear. Critical in this analysis, these rebels did not present an alternative political program to non-combatants. Rather than fighting to gain access to existing political networks and the resources associated with them, the rebellion operated at the behest of these outside interests. And although the group’s different factions may have harboured varied grievances against the NRM regime, infighting was commonplace. The ADF was beholden to Khartoum’s regime’s political priorities, which left these rebels without the capacity to develop their own local powerbase.

Due to these factors the ADF was, in contrast to the LRA, considered a low threat to the NRM regime, which pursued a heavy-handed operation to eliminate the group. Unlike the LRA campaign in Acholiland, the UPDF recruitment of LDUs was systematic and militias were deeply integrated. Moreover, the conflict’s 175,000 internally displaced were not corralled into UPDF-run camps. Government-forced population movements were not seen as a distinct strategy to deprive the ADF of a civilian support base or to keep watch over a specific ethnic group that posed a threat to the government. What is more is that the ADF’s titular leader and key outside organiser, Jamil Mukulu, exposed the group’s linkages to transnational networks associated with Al Qaeda, enough to place the ADF on the US Terrorist Exclusion List after 9/11. With the ADF now branded as a terrorist organisation, Museveni had a public face to foreclose any accommodation with the rebellion. The UPDF pursued the ADF across Uganda’s western border onto Congolese soil until the group was declared defeated in 2007. More recently the group has resurfaced in Eastern DRC but as an adjunct to Congolese rebels.

Insurgent Control
Rebels from Uganda’s West Nile Region posed a moderate threat and were met with the strategy of insurgent control. Both the West Nile Bank Front (WNBF) and the Ugandan National Rescue Front II (UNRF II) were residual extensions of West Nile’s fleeting dominance in Ugandan politics, albeit historically ‘two regimes removed’ from the NRM and complicated by their relationship with their Sudanese sponsor, who preferred malleable proxies. Operating out of Sudan they were outside both the UPDF’s reach and the orbit of potential civilian support. They had little concern for the day-to-day affairs of governing, and the refusal of ordinary West Nilers to support them led to a general pattern of violence against non-combatants,
including forced recruitment of fighters. Insurgent control, this middle ground between group control and insurgent elimination, targeted rebels militarily alongside accommodation strategies that had a limited role for key non-combatants, but not for West Nile’s general civilian population.

Although the West Nile region was politically peripheral to the NRM, its rebellions posed a moderate threat as their leaders were drawn from Amin-era politics that predated Museveni’s regime, and had a potential power base. During Amin’s rule, the military was stocked with West Nilers and became the primary tool of his personal authority. Shortly after Milton Obote overthrew Amin in the late 1970s, many of these officials fled the reconstituted government army, which exacted reprisals on West Nile soldiers and civilians alike, making nearly half of the region’s population refugees in Southern Sudan and Eastern Zaire. Out of these camps grew rebellions that represented different ethnic factions of West Nilers: the Kakwa and Madi-dominated Former Uganda National Army (FUNA) and the Ugandan National Rescue Front (UNRF), comprised largely of Aringa. Both groups fought back against Obote’s reinstated regime in the early 1980s, and also against one another. As FUNA disintegrated, UNRF leader Moses Ali negotiated a power-sharing arrangement with Museveni before he came to power. Thus, by the time the NRM established itself in Kampala, there were ex-officials remaining in Sudan and those that regained access to state institutions. In the 1990s, these two groups of West Nilers coalesced around the WNBF and the UNRF II, respectively.

The WNBF’s leader was former Amin official Juma Oris, who after 1978 had become alienated from other West Nile elites and fought as a mercenary for the Sudanese army. As a rebel leader, Oris was more a middleman for the Sudanese government, which fought the SPLA by pooling resources and shuffling fighters between all of its proxies, including the LRA and ADF. The bulk of WNBF’s fighters were unemployed youth that had spent years as refugees. Many upper rebel cadres were former military officers and aside from shared experiences in Amin’s regime or as refugees, ethnic factions from the Amin era persisted within the WNBF’s organisation. These divisions manifested as confusion over the group’s goals, ranging from reinstating Amin to power to declaring West Nile and independent state. This tendency to factionalise was not lost on counterinsurgents, which capitalised on the ability to peel off those seeking clemency despite Oris having severed his own access to Uganda’s political networks.

The UNRF II arose independently of the WNBF but still contained a small knot of Amin-era functionaries that had closer political ties to the NRA by virtue of the earlier absorption of the original UNRF. The failure of the NRA to honour certain provisions of this settlement prompted a group of ex-rebels to decamp to Zaire and organise the new rebellion. This time it was led by former army official Ali Bamuze, who surrounded himself with Aringa functionaries drawn from Kampala’s professional bourgeoisie. As one of the many Khartoum-backed rebellions, the UNRF II also operated out of bases in South Sudan. Yet, its members explicitly sought to negotiate themselves back into the state on better terms for themselves and for West Nile as a whole, which eventually was reciprocated by Museveni.
The dynamics of the WNBF and UNRF II played into the hands of counterinsurgents, which sought to stop both rebellions while ensuring their power bases were properly managed within the context of Uganda’s ruling elite coalition. Control of both WNBF and UNRF II focused on dealing with rebel leaders and their options through both coercion and co-optation. This did not necessarily involve winning the widespread support of non-combatants despite the region’s ongoing political marginalisation and ripe conditions for political grievances against the state. Still, the UPDF did not militarise the region nearly as much as they had in neighbouring Acholiland at that time. Despite establishing a military presence in and around West Nile’s main displaced camps, population movements were not orchestrated by the army like they were in Gulu District. On the battlefield, the rebels took advantage of the porous border with Sudan and used sanctuaries in Eastern Equatoria from which to launch their attacks. In response the UPDF enlisted the help of Museveni’s neighbouring allies, the anti-Mobutu Banyamulenge in Zaire, and the SPLA in Sudan. An offer of a blanket amnesty supplemented this military pressure, which haemorrhaged disgruntled fighters that were short of food and medicine despite Sudanese resources. This amnesty provided opportunities for fighters to join the UPDF and maintain rank. Defection left the WNBF vulnerable to a rout by the SPLA in Yei by March of 1997.

The control strategy made only limited use of LDUs. The UPDF granted some requests from civilians for arms, but with some scepticism given the history of the region and the disorganised nature of local militias. Even so, this approach reflected the government’s ability to co-opt young men in its war effort, which had the added benefit of being able to balance and control the potential flow of recruits into rebel hands. On the civilian side, traditional West Nile authorities were hostile to both rebellions and accepted the UPDF strategy. Having languished in refugee camps throughout the early 1980s, this war-fatigued population simply did not wish to participate directly, as they had been the targets of state repression at the hands of Museveni’s predecessor. Thus, insurgent control meant leveraging collective resistance to armed insurgency into brokering deals with rebel leaders, exemplified by the Aringa-Obongi Peace Initiative Committee (AROPIC) that brought the UNRF II into dialogue with the NRM.

In summary, these cases illustrate the Ugandan government’s tendency to downgrade the role of civilians in fighting rebels, an empirical reality that stands in contrast to the dominant view of much of the counter-insurgency literature. If civilians had mattered, one would expect to have seen a common population-centric strategy irrespective of rebel group, but this was not the case. Not only were population-centric strategies not critical to defeating Uganda’s rebels, the LRA case demonstrated unsuccessful attempts to recruit local militias. Different tactics reflected different strategies, a close look at which shows what mattered most to Ugandan counterinsurgents was not non-combatants, but how useful patronage could be depending on the rebels they fought. Some individual tactics may have tangentially involved non-combatants, but strategies varied between groups (see Table 2). The differences between these cases offer compelling evidence that the
threat level posed to incumbents, seen as a function of a rebellion’s political profile, was most salient to counter-insurgency in Uganda. Strategies and the level of patronage made available were associated with varying degrees of political connections of rebel leaders to the NRM and to previous regimes.

LESSONS FROM AFRICA

African regimes like Uganda’s NRM consider themselves ‘in harm’s way’ to varying degrees when considering counter-insurgency strategies. Rebels pose not just military threats but fundamental political threats that vary in tandem with their historical position within political society. This approach to understanding counter-insurgency in contemporary Africa stands in contrast to conceptualisations of rebel challenges as emanating from leaders and followers who are marginal to and distinct from the regime politics that they seek to overthrow. While political outsiders are found among Africa’s contemporary rebels (like the LRA), many groups contain key former insiders from the prevailing political establishment. This tendency for rebels to emerge from and fight to control patronage networks exposes them to regime counter-insurgency strategies.

These strategies do not require strong state institutions and regimes often forego efforts to protect and administer non-combatants. Instead, regime strategies focus on selective uses of tactics to segregate, coerce, co-opt and demobilise rebel rivals and in some cases, entire groups ostensibly represented by these rebels. Tactical moves and strategic directions thus trace pre-war patron–client relationships, albeit reshaped as regime and rebel forces fight for control over the resources and the significant relationships that make up these networks. Therefore, the main contribution of this study shifts attention away from civilians as the ‘centre of gravity’ of these conflicts and towards the bare bones of regime politics in such countries. This consideration illuminates an important dimension to counter-insurgency that is often eclipsed by disproportionate attention paid to contemporary cases where third party occupiers like the USA dominate the scene.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threat level</th>
<th>COIN strategy</th>
<th>COIN tactics</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Group control</td>
<td>Heavy regional militarization Forces relocation of non-combatants Use of militias limited to non-Acholi Ongoing negotiations Amnesty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Insurgent elimination</td>
<td>Light regional militarization Limited use of militias Cross-border pursuit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Insurgent control</td>
<td>Moderate regional militarization Use of militias Ongoing negotiations through local leaders Amnesty</td>
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TABLE 2

UPDF COUNTERINSURGENCY APPROACHES

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threat</th>
<th>COIN strategy</th>
<th>COIN tactics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LRA</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Group control</td>
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<td></td>
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A key lesson of this examination is that effective counter-insurgency need not focus on providing services or even protecting non-combatants, although there are many good reasons to do these things if resources and political will permit. Organisationally capable militaries also are not essential components of successful counter-insurgency strategies that employ the political tools of patronage politics, provided that the overall context of elite coalition splits and of rebel leaders who fight for improved positions within this incumbent coalition occupy the attentions of rebel recruits and crowds out would-be outsider challengers. Understanding how counter-insurgency works under these particular conditions requires taking seriously the centrality of regime politics, and in particular, the relationship between regime insiders and their political networks, with rebel commanders and fighters. It is hard to derive specific recommendations from ‘classics’ of counter-insurgency that are based on experiences from other regions and from conflicts from decades earlier in Africa. Specific knowledge of the personal backgrounds and connections of individual rebel commanders and the real networks of political authority in weakly institutionalised states provides more guidance.

This survey of the different kinds of rebel threats and corresponding counter-insurgency strategies is built upon these important variables while also relying on comparative case studies from Uganda to illuminate particularities in each case. Further research should cast a wider net around a larger set of African cases. In addition to gauging the infrequency of population-centric counter-insurgency strategies, this future work ought to pay particular attention to ‘off-the-path’ regime strategies that do not necessarily correspond seamlessly with the political profile of rebellions. For instance, the Khartoum regime’s war against the SPLA, a rebel group that was by many measures comprised establishment Southern Sudanese, was a protracted affair that often bordered on touching another category of counter-insurgency – that of group elimination. The obverse was true in Sierra Leone, where liberal internationalist peacemakers did not understand the nature of the RUF rebellion as political outsiders. When attempts to shoehorn them into the prevailing political establishment through a settlement failed, it became clear that the preference of the regime in Freetown had always been insurgent elimination. Scholars and policymakers can apply such observations of the pitfalls of bad strategic choices to contemporary efforts to manage rebellions in countries like Mali and the Central African Republic, and in places like Somalia where the relationship between regime politics and the organisation and behaviour of militias is less clear.

Lessons from Africa should be relevant to other places where state institutions are weak and political struggle focuses on control over patronage networks. Elements of these lessons appear in the evolution of counterinsurgent warfare in Iraq and Afghanistan as field commanders learned that at least some segments of the rebels that they faced were better understood in terms of their links to the existing political establishment. Afghanistan’s President Ahmed Karzai repeatedly uses his patronage relationships with local families to control areas and co-opt challengers. American commanders frequently find that government appointees undermine US military operations and are less than enthusiastic about building
strong state institutions. Karzai and his local political clients negotiate with rebels, using promises of patronage to exploit the ambitions of some of their leaders and cultivating these to exacerbate rivalries in rebel ranks.105

As the evidence in this essay shows, African regimes fight rebels in this way too, as offers of patronage to attract and manipulate the ambitions of rebel leaders is one of the few tools that are within their grasp. Their success is surprising, given the numbers of regimes in very weak and failing states that manage to survive rebel challenges in contexts where it would seem to be easy to convince groups of non-combatants that they should take up arms and overthrow their corrupt and violent rulers.

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NOTES

11. Data collected from Uppsala University’s Department of Peace and Conflict Research; http://www.pcr.uu.se/data/
29. Ibid., p.xxi.
30. Ibid., pp.32–81.


47. Ibid., p.25.


52. Chabal and Daloz (note 50) p.13.


57. Lucima (note 15) p.35.


64. ‘Why Does Zaire, Sudan Team Up against Uganda?’, *New Vision* 4 Dec. 1996.


73. ‘Using Hammer on Western Rebels, but Small Stick on Kony & Co.’, *The Monitor* 21 Nov. 1996.


82. See Bernard Rwihururu, *Cross to the Sun: The Fall of Idi Amin and the Ugandan Army* (Kampala: Netmedia 2008).


84. ‘Who is behind the West Nile rebellion?’ *Sunday Vision* 17 Sep. 1995.


91. Interview with former UNRF II functionary, Kampala, Aug. 2011.


96. ‘2,000 Killed in Bloody Ambush’, *New Vision* 17 Mar. 1997; Prunier (note 70) p.133.