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## INSURGENCIES: COMPETITION FOR RESOURCES AS AN EXPLANATORY VARIABLE

*Over the course of recent years, we have witnessed a proliferation of scientific articles that defend a stance explaining the nature of and the violence committed by insurgent movements, focusing on factors of an economic sense. The intention in this discourse is to set forth a different focus; not one inspired by greed and preying on public and assets arising from the conflict, but rather on the result of a rational choice that is agreed on by an insurgent group when it sees its survival threatened and it loses its monopoly situation over the population from which it aims to win support for its cause .*

*Insurgency, political violence, armed conflicts, natural resources, Afghanistan, Kandahar, Sudan, South Sudan, SPLM.*

## INSURGENCIES: COMPETITION FOR RESOURCES AS AN EXPLANATORY VARIABLE

### Introduction

In recent years we have been witnesses, in the field of studies into insurgent movements, to how a growing number of scientists defend a stance explaining the nature and the violence committed by these groups; not so much focused on the political and social factors that, at the end of the day, are those that have traditionally dominated the analysis related to the different groups of insurgents, but rather, in addition, those others of an economic nature.

This is the paradigmatic case that Paul Collier (2000 and 2003) has made about the trend and overall structure of civil wars, from 1965 to the middle of the nineties. The author concludes that there are issues of a population and wealth distribution nature that promote the origin and promote the existence of this type of conflict, in which insurgent movements proliferate. As the author points out, there are economic benefits (opportunism that generates an economy focused on the short term, the increase in criminality, the alteration of the common market patterns or monopoly situations), guided by the greed of the people involved, which are imposed on those factors that could contribute towards complaints, grievances and collective objections and whose origin lies in divisions of an ethnic or religious type, or as a consequence of the application of repressive policies by the authority in power.

The intention of this discourse is to set out a focus that is differentiated from those studies (we are referring especially to those of Collier, Hoeffler and Sambanis) that prefer to explain the violence committed by the rebel movements as a product that is the result of the pillaging by those involved in the conflict. To do this, we start from a different concept, in which violence is sometimes the result of a rational choice that an insurgent group carries out when it sees its survival threatened.

### Resources and competition

The type of relationship that an insurgent group or faction maintains with the po-

pulation that it seeks to gain support from (whether by means of financing, recruiting soldiers for combat or as a source of information) is very much conditional upon the possible existence of rival groups that compete to capture these resources. In contexts in which there is no rivalry due to the “extraction” of resources, it is simpler to consolidate, as well as carry out the centralised control of the community. We are referring to those situations in which it is unnecessary to make use of coercive measures, nor to commit violence on the civilian population<sup>1</sup>.

Following this line of argument, exactly the converse will take place in those cases in which there is effective competition –or the sensation of a threat– owing to the loss of control of these resources, whether amongst insurgent factions or due to the intervention of the particular government. In these scenarios, the levels of violence will, in all probability, be higher. This is a Darwinian process in which there is no role for the character of the *primus inter pares*, in which power relationships are, in turn, understood as a zero sum game.

Having reached this point we have to wonder why there is greater freedom of action for those insurgent groups that operate in the circumstances indicated. In seeking to find an answer to this question, we start from the basis of a set of specific limitations that place conditions on the relationship between the insurgency and the population that wishes to feed off it.

The scarcity of resources, in many of the scenarios that entail a conflict between insurgent groups, generates incentives to reach contractual agreements with the inhabitants of that territory. These include the provision of certain services such as, for example, security, education or medical care. If the rebels do not come up to the mark when it comes to providing these services in a satisfactory way, it is likely that the population would tend to run away from the insurgents. If, on the other hand, they are able to successfully manage the provision and guarantee of these basic services, a *quid pro quo* is established in which everybody wins. At the same time, this monopoly situation enables the insurgency to make use of a constant source of supplies.

Competition however, changes the relationship that the insurgents establish with the local population. It especially affects the decision-making that is carried out within the different factions that make up the movement, which are more disposed to coercion, precisely because of a consequence of the existing rivalry. Under these circum-

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<sup>1</sup> While this is not the subject of discussion in this article, it is important to make two qualifications on this point. Firstly, these contractual relationships are mostly based on the insurgency providing social care to the population that it seeks to gain support from. However, this provision of services of a different nature such as educational programmes, health, employment, caring for the victims of a dispute, and whose objective is to offer the friendly face of the insurgency as well as the creation of client networks, starts from one fundamental premise: the existence of liberated areas that enable this. Secondly, when we are talking about violence being committed, we are referring to the provision of the use of auxiliary tools. These are instruments that feed the insurgency such as terrorism, as a consequence of the asymmetry of forces.

stances, the different groups may be forced to modify the logic of their priorities in the short term, with the aim of guaranteeing their own survival. In addition to the difficulties of supply, arising from a possible scarcity of resources, of the parties that impose themselves on the situation or the particular situation of illegality of the insurgency, there is now the aggravating factor that arises from the presence of rival or competing groups.

Hence the pre-eminent issue is going to be ensuring the group's survival, a circumstance that is going to place conditions on the length of time that the insurgency lasts for. The contractual relationships that we referred to before require long-term investment. Then again, capturing or monopolising resources –something that is fundamental for then strengthening each insurgent faction or group- requires the application of methods that lead the most efficient of these to carry out, at least in the short term, a priority form of use of its force.

This competition leads to a certain degree of bias when it comes to differentiating between those goals that we may consider to be intermediate, which in turn have a bearing on the consolidation process, with the ultimate goal that all insurgencies seek, which is the overthrow of the political authority in power or the establishing of an alternative political order.

In particular, the State plays an interesting and particular role in the dynamic that is generated between the insurgency and the population, inasmuch as it may take the pace of the direct rival of the former, whether by setting coercive actions underway, or implementing reforms aimed at managing the conflicts that have given rise to the social or political division. In any of these cases, the goal is always the same: to isolate the insurgency from the population.

When the latter occurs (we are referring to the fact of introducing changes that represent a threat to the cause that the insurgency asserts, and that is used as a base for the social broadening of the particular group), it is likely that attitudes are adopted that crystallise in an increase in the level of violence committed against the population. In this way, the authority in power becomes converted into one father competitor for capturing resources and gaining the obedience of the citizens, either by granting different classes of rights to groups or promoting feelings of autonomy and belonging for those communities over which the insurgency aims to have an influence and/or a presence.

### **Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement: an archetype**

One particular case, which enables us to provide an example of what is stated above, is the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). It is true that certain factors, such as the end of the bipolar outline and the withdrawal of external support (in particular that provided by the Government of Ethiopia), have a very particular

bearing on the change of attitude and the degree of violence committed on the Sudanese population by the insurgent faction<sup>2</sup>. But the element that acted as a lever, at the same time allowing for the metamorphosis of this movement, was its monopoly status in extracting resources, during the end of the 1990's and the start of the XXI century. This was in a period in which, in turn, a drastic reduction in the quantity of rival factions with which the SPLM was in open conflict occurred.

The SPLM was created following a split by former members of the Sudanese army, who came together to fight against the Khartoum Government. Since its beginnings, it has been plagued by internal struggles. Most of these arose due to old rivalries and disputes about the leadership of the rebels, and because of the decision of John Garang, who was leading the SPLM at that time, to proclaim the insurgency's primary goal to be the formation of a united Sudan, before opting for self-determination as its main line of argument<sup>3</sup>.

We can divide the history of this movement into three periods, whose development enables us to trace the change in behaviour that this insurgent faction underwent in relation to the south Sudanese population in greater detail<sup>4</sup>:

1. The first of these runs from its appearance on the scene, in 1983, until 1993. This decade is characterised by the intense rivalry that arose between the different competing parts. This was a situation that, together with a context of scarce resources, did not guarantee the necessary flow of supplies and resources needed for the SPLM. This phase also coincides with certain militias (those of the SPLM) that were poorly organised and falling apart<sup>5</sup>, and so access to these was quite uncertain in the best of the scenarios. At the same time, the conduct that the group demonstrated towards non-combatants was extremely violent. Some

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2 The strength of this support (we are especially referring to state sponsorship) usually materialises in the form of refuges, training camps, military advice, armaments; as well as the provision of tangible resources, which do not necessarily follow an exclusively military aim. This is the case of the financing, which may cover the demands, associated with both the supplies for fighting and that of those others intended for the maintaining of the political apparatus or attention to the most basic necessities of the "troop". This circumstance takes on particular significance when we consider conflicts that entail a prolonged war strategy, so that the moral of those who fight in the insurgency does not drop away and in this way stopping desertion amongst the ranks taking place).

3 Garang was aware that in laying out a separatist agenda, which was what encouraged the first Anyana rebels at that time during the course of the first Sudanese civil war and that brought the north into conflict with the south, was a mistake. He knew that Mengistu, the leader of the Provisional Military Administrative Council in Ethiopia (also known as the Derg), would not provide its support to an armed group that sought self-determination when he himself was facing a similar problem in his own territory.

4 Metelits, Claire. *Inside Insurgency*, New York, New York University Press, 2008. pp. 31-79

5 It had not been a month since its gestation when a group of veterans, who made up the rebellion of the "southern people" for independence and who supported the idea of the secession of the south, decided to abandon the movement.

acts were recorded that can be assessed as atrocious: amongst these, summary executions, systematic violence against women and children in various towns, the kidnapping of minors to use them as soldiers, etc.

2. During the second period, which ran from 1994 and the year 2000, the degree of rivalry that the different factions displayed between themselves decreased. Many of them demonstrated their turbulent attitudes and, with the passing of time, they would end up becoming integrated into the SPLM, in particular those that had grouped themselves together into the element known as the *Sudan People's Democratic Forces* (SPDF). As a consequence of the position of weakness that this faction was relegated to, Riek Machar (leader of the SPDF) decided to bring its cooperation with Khartoum to an end. This considerably fights and arguments that took place amongst the junior ranks, in what is now the territory of south Sudan. Accordingly, the path for the definitive consolidation of the SPLM as a hegemonic movement was levelled and within this, with the passing of the years, it would become a new State on the African continent.

Another element that largely contributed towards the process that we have described was managing the resources that came from the formation of the New Sudan Council of Churches (NSCC). Created in January 1990, its goal was to alleviate the suffering and the poverty that was devastating the population of the areas that had been left under the control of the SPLM. The independence and credibility of the institution that was new at that time was ultimately accepted by various international organisations, despite the links that tied them to the SPLM. Furthermore, the support that it received from the International Community and in particular from the different foreign NGOs, helped the SPLM to gain additional control (these activities were subordinated to the intent and purposes of the insurgent faction). Through their financing, diverse activities were planned and undertaken, such as the provision of essential services to the local population or campaigns to attract capital from new donors.

In 1994, the parties in dispute signed an agreement that endowed the principles that had been approved by means of the *Operation Lifeline Susan* (OLS) in 1989 with official status. This was a consortium of United Nations agencies (fundamentally made up of UNICEF and the World Food Programme) which, together with 39 NGOs of different origins, were operating in the South of Sudan so as to provide humanitarian aid in the regions that had most been devastated by war. At the same time, they sought to alleviate the effects of the drought that kept the country suffering from starvation. Whilst the National Islamic Front (NIF) regime in the north maintained an openly hostile attitude towards these emergency operations the OLS, together with the international donors, encouraged the SPLM to undertake an approach explaining its right to administer the liberated zones in the south, considering that a region that enjoyed extensive autonomy would make the humanitarian apparatus less dependent on the designs of Khartoum, at the same time as being more effective.

This relationship between the SPLM and the external donors produced a more positive perception amongst the faction led by Garang in the population of the south,

which was translated into an increase in its legitimacy, at both the domestic level and with the International Community. In this way, the SPLM managed to establish itself as the sole extractor of resources and the only legitimate force in the territories of the south. It definitively consolidated its position in January 2001 after the signing of a “Memorandum of Understanding”. In that document, this insurgent faction officially became the sole authority endowed with the capacity to establish dialogue and negotiations with the humanitarian aid organisations that were operating in those areas where it exercised its control. From that time onwards, the agencies and organisations that wished to carry out operations in that territory would have to abide by the terms and conditions demanded by the SPLM<sup>6</sup>.

The third period, from 2001 to 2005, was dominated by the peace negotiation process. The SPLM enjoyed a monopoly at that time with no restrictions as regards the local resources, in addition to which there was the aid that came from overseas. During this time, the treatment of the civilian population began to become established following the principles that governed a relationship of a purely contractual nature. It was unnecessary to deal with any kind of competition for capturing resources and so in this way it was possible to deal with the requirements of the external donors which, in turn, demanded palpable evidence of democratic progress in the administration of the territory. The intervention of an international peace-keeping force made it possible for the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) to be signed on January 9th, 2005. Garang, in turn, became vice-president of the Khartoum Government, while Ahmad al-Bashir continued at the helm. Finally, the decision for self-determination was approved by a plebiscite in 2011.

## Final reflections pondered

In summary, the insurgent violence that is committed against the citizens is a response to the threat which, from a rebel perspective, is focused upon the survival of its armed groups. Thus, the fear of succumbing acts as a powerful motivating element to continue committing violent acts. In situations of greater competition, on the other

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6 To the point of giving an ultimatum to the 39 agencies that were working in the region, reminding them that they signed the draft of the Memorandum and that in the event of them failing to meet the requirements of this, they would be made to leave the territory. Amongst other things, this Memoranda stated that the SPLM would have control over the distribution of humanitarian assistance and it required the NGOs to work in line with the goals of the Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association (SRRA), the humanitarian agency of the SPLM, in harmony with the principles that govern humanitarian aid. The SRRA was created in 1985, with the mandate of coordinating and facilitating the aid programmes in south Sudan. Its head office is located in New Cush, and it has other liaison offices in Nairobi, Kampala, Addis Ababa and Loki. At present, the SRRA is coordinating and facilitating the humanitarian activities in 23 counties, spanning a board area of influence, and spreading over nearly 400,000 square kilometres and with an estimated population of 6.5 million. It is available at <http://www.peacebuildingportal.org/index.asp?pgid=9&org=3543>. Last access: August 2012.

hand, the insurgents usually take refuge in facilitating a climate of the intensification of violence, with the sole aim of retaining its position in the monopolised management of resources.

The acceptance of the theories that are focused on resources, which establish a nexus between capturing and utilising them and the degree of coercion used by many armed groups, implies a recognition that it is these resources that drive the conduct of the parties involved. To put this another way: where availability is seen to be high there, we can ask ourselves whether there are also sufficient grounds for the insurgency to establish a contractual relationship with the population.

In stating this, we would like to propose the argument that insurgencies strategically change their time horizons (from the short term to one that is further way in time and vice-versa), regardless of the difficulty or the ease that they have when it comes to claiming those resources as their own. However, as we have sought to show over the course of these pages, the insurgencies may modify their perspective in some cases, based upon one fundamental criterion: whether or not they have a political space to maintain the monopoly that they exercise with relative ease.

A vision of the new wars in which emphasis is placed on the role played by individuals that lack any ideological justification in the development of contemporaneous conflicts has reached a certain degree of standing. The presence of this militia is very often highlighted, based upon the links that they maintain with organised crime networks on an international scale. While this analysis may be useful when it comes to explain some of the violent forms of conduct that have been targeted against the civilian population, this is nonetheless not so pertinent when we analyse certain events that these groups have played a major role in.

As we have stated, the coercive form of conduct that the SPLM carried out against the population of south Sudan during the 1980's and 1990's is in no way related to the almost complete lack of resources at their disposal. Neither in this case is there a significant connection with the networks of organised crime, or the undertaking of unlawful activities, such as drug trafficking or smuggling. Nonetheless, at the time at which the competition for resources began to become re-established, and funds from external donors began arriving, the population's interaction with the movement took elements that are characteristic to contractual relationships. However, this evidence runs contrary to the arguments concerning the abundance of resources and the greed of the parties involved to appropriate it for themselves. These support the argument that violence against non-combatants is more likely in boom times and scenarios.

This circumstance has meant that neo-classical economic theories, focused on the maximisation of the (economic) benefits as the main variable explaining the dynamics of the conflicts, is highly criticised by other trends in research. The latter place greater emphasis on the empirical application that can be attributed to neo-classical logic, as the prime example of the behavioural approach that guides *Homo economicus*, as well as his traditional clumsiness when it comes to administering the inevitable neces-

sity of negotiating with and challenging what is “social”<sup>7</sup>.

The availability of resources, per se, is not an element that the composition of rebel groups depends on. However, the action taken by different governments; the existence of a corrupt system in almost all spheres; the unequal distribution of the benefits that a country gets from the economic activity it generates; the illegal assumption of the capital of the public resources; or the exclusion of groups or minorities that bring about horizontal inequalities are, at the end of the day, elements that are largely conditioned by the origin and transformation of a conflict, as well as the gestation and subsequent consolidation of insurgent groups. To put this in another way, these types of explanations offer us a rather incomplete photograph of a particular conflict, inasmuch as they deny the possibility that the State, or any authority exercising de facto power, is established upon the basis of the factor that gives rise to and perpetuates the conflict. The focus of the analysis solely and exclusively lies on the existence of insurgent movements. This is an analytical shortfall, which in turn implies the denial of the possible existence of repressive and corrupt elites that, in many cases, seek to gain benefit from the war at the expense of the civilian population<sup>8</sup>.

In turn, the serious danger that is run by inferring individual motivations of statistical correlations is clear. The fact that the participants feel attracted by the benefits that arise from the conflict cannot be used as a central argument on which to build a theory explaining the ultimate source of the insurgency. While some make their participation conditional on obtaining particular benefits, others simply become involved due to questions of mere survival or they are compelled to cooperate when they are subject to coercive practices.

In a study carried out in 2007, in the Afghan provinces of Kandahar and Helmand, 80 per cent of those interviewed stated this issue to be the main reason that had led them to make the decision to join the ranks of the rebels. The situation of extreme poverty, in addition to which there is a heavy pressure involved in the necessity of having stable income to feed those families that are normally rather large and the practical non-existence of a job market, are some of the factors that compel many Afghans to adopt a more favourable position towards the insurgency<sup>9</sup>.

Regardless of what is stated above, individual motivations may vary over time, as the conflict develops and evolves. In the same way as has happened on countless oc-

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7 Cramer, Christopher. “Homo Economicus Goes to War: Methodological Individualism, Rational Choice and the Political Economy of War”, *World Development*, Vol. 30, N° 11, 2002. pp. 18-45

8 Ballentine Karen and Heiko Nitzschke. “Beyond Greed and Grievance: Policy Lessons from Studies in the Political Economy of Armed Conflict”, International Peace Academy, 2003. Available at: [http://www.worldpolicy.org/sites/default/files/imported/projects/arms/study/bako5\\_1.pdf](http://www.worldpolicy.org/sites/default/files/imported/projects/arms/study/bako5_1.pdf). With access in 2012

9 Senlis Council. Recommendations for US policy in Afghanistan: security recommendations, 2008. P 37. Available at [http://www.icosgroup.net/static/reports/us\\_policy\\_recommendations.pdf](http://www.icosgroup.net/static/reports/us_policy_recommendations.pdf). with access in August 2012

casions, the disputes initially arising due to social, political or cultural aspects have been completed –and to some extent exceeded- by reasons of a pure financial origin. In this respect, the most representative cases are the guerrillas that came to the ore in Colombia and Angola. Ascertaining these motivations, and the where or when of these, are transferred to a conflict scenario that, in any event, requires a preliminary form of categorisation that is more careful and a subsequent empirical validation.

Additionally, even though the current conflict and criminality overlap on many occasions, it cannot be asserted that they pertain to the same category. While criminal organisations systematically use violence as the only way of obtaining a fast and bountiful financial gain, there is agreement amongst the leading experts on the extent to which the rebels groups subject their participation in economic activities to achieving the political goals that they put forward as the justification for their existence.

It is true that if we establish a classification of the insurgencies, we find a category that that is not so much in line with the classical arguments. This is because their *raison d'être* can be explained by the intention that they declare to undermine the foundations of the state authority, so as to lead the country into a Failed State situation (wholly or partially). This comes well before –as is obvious- taking direct control of the government or creating a new State<sup>10</sup>.

However, most of the definitions provided –through which an attempt is made to set limits to the concept of insurgency with other associated parties, that they have certain similarities to- agree in highlighting the political goal as the differentiating element. This is the case of Daniel Byman who<sup>11</sup>, based upon the definition drawn up by the American Central Intelligence Agency in the 1980's<sup>12</sup>, insists on stressing a series of relevant aspects about the nature of the insurgencies. In particular, and insofar as purely criminal groups are concerned, he points to the fact that their goals are not linked to territorial control or to others that are specifically political.

In this respect, insurgencies may maintain close links with the networks responsible for drug trafficking, or with illegal organisations of another type. However, the organisation's overriding goal is not to devote itself to that type of criminal activity, but rather, conversely, this is used as a one further means of attaining another goal, of a political or ideological nature.

To give another example, Zeeuw defines insurgency as a non-state organisation,

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10 In this respect, consult Jordán, Javier. Delimitación teórica de la insurgencia: concepto, fines y medios [Setting theoretical limits to insurgency: concepts, purposes and resources], in Jordán, J., Pozo, P. y Baqués, J. (eds.), *Actores no estatales y seguridad internacional* [Non-state actors and international security], Madrid, Plaza y Valdés, 2011. P. 122

11 Byman, Daniel. Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements, Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2001. Pp. 4-6. Available at [http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/2007/MR1405.pdf](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/2007/MR1405.pdf). With access in August 2012

12 Available at: <http://www.fas.org/irp/cia/product/insurgency.pdf>. Last access: October 2012

with clear political objectives, which challenges the established state government at the same time as seeking a legitimate monopoly of the use of violence. It uses armed force to do this, with the clear objective of reforming, overthrowing or separating itself from a particular state regime, or that of establishing and fully exercising control over a specific geographical area.<sup>13</sup> Using this definition, the author deliberately places emphasis on the political formalisation of the use of violence, so as to exclude groups such as criminal gangs, transnational networks or terrorist command cells. That is to say, all of those characters involved that do not declare a genuine interest in creating an alternative government, or controlling a particular geographical region within a State.

In summary, and aside from this final conceptual consideration, the debate concerning the prevailing nature of one element over another, as an explanatory tool, has not yet been resolved. Then again, it is also true that we still have to answer the questions from those wonder how –and to what extent- this affects relationships with other political, socio-cultural or identity aspects. The path that has to be followed makes it necessary, in any case, to start from the premise that insurgent movements are, as a general rule, multi-dimensional, rather than emanating from one single cause, and that they therefore need an extensive explanatory framework that goes beyond the dichotomy or comparing economic with political matters.

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13 See de Zeeuw, J. (ed). *From soldiers to politicians. Transforming rebel movements after civil war*. Boulder (Colorado), Lynner Rienner Publishers, 2008.

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