From Rebels to Politicians. Explaining Rebel-to-Party Transformations after Civil War: The case of Nepal

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Abstract

Acronyms and Abbreviations

BLM	Bray, Lunde, and Murshed
BS	Ballentine and Sherman
CCOMPSA	Coordination Committee of Maoist Parties and Organisations of South Asia
Cf.	Compare
CH	Collier and Hoeffler
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CPA	Comprehensive Peace Agreement
CPI (Maoist)	Communist Party of India (Maoist)
CPN/M	Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist)
CPN/ Unity Center	Communist Party of Nepal (Unity Center)
DFID	Department for International Development (United Kingdom)
EIU	Economist Intelligence Unit
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
ICG	International Crisis Group
IISS	International Institute for Strategic Studies
INSEC	Informal Sector Service Center
KKV	King, Keohane, and Verba
PG	People's Government
PLA	People's Liberation Army (Maoist)
RB	Riaz and Basu
RIM	Revolutionary International Movement
RNA	Royal Nepalese Army

1. Introduction

1.1. Puzzles

One of the most urgent questions of our time is how to build sustainable peace in societies recently shattered by civil war. It is a question that occupies many ordinary

following circumstances. First, only three years ago, Nepal still was a "royal militarist dictatorship" and the CPN/M a rebel group (Skar 2007, 359). Second, the CPN/M's popularity should have been rather low, reflecting the fact that its rebellion had caused not only the death of more than 13,000 people, but had also exacerbated the economic crisis of South Asia's poorest nation (Bray et al. 2003, 120; hereafter BLM; Srestha and Uprety 2005). Finally, major international powers such as India and the United States who, considering the CPN/M a terrorist group

and economic survival but also a possibility to attain its objectives by political means, such as, the redress of their own as well as their constituents' marginalisation or grievances (cf. Lyons 2002, 227-229; Zartman 1995). By implication, once the factors that explain a rebel-to-party transformation are known, policy-makers can possibly derive the conditions necessary to facilitate such a transformation and thus to contribute to the two overarching processes of peace-building and post-war democratisation.

1.3. The Argument

Building on the recent theory developed by Söderberg (2007), this study assumes that rebel groups, like any other organisation, depend on the mobilisation of support and resources to ensure their survival and reach their objectives. Rebel groups transform into political parties when they are able to successfully adapt their wartime mobilisation strategies to the peacetime context.

Whether they are willing and able to do so depends – so this paper argues – on the absence or presence of three factors. While this study agrees with Söderberg that the group's *popular support* and its *internal cohesion* are factors critical to the transformation, it expands the theory by an economic incentive argument: the group's ability to gain *access to resources*.

In summary, it contends that a rebel group is most likely to transform into a political party when it has high levels of popular support, a high degree of internal

1.4. Road Map

This study is organised into five chapters. Followi

a rebel group is a non-state organisation with clear political objectives that contests the authority of the government through armed violence and with the aim of overthrowing it.

2.1.2. What is a Political Party?

According to A. Ranney in the *International Encyclopaedia of the Social and*

2.1.3. What is a Rebel-to-Party Transformation?

The Concise Oxford English Dictionary defines a transformation as "a marked change in nature, form, or appearance." More than a superficial alteration, a transformation induces a fundamental change in nature, not only in degree. In a rebel-to-party transformation, these fundamental changes occur along two different dimensions: structural-organisational and behavioural-attitudinal ones (de Zeeuw 2008, 12). Under the former category falls the demilitarisation of organisational structures and the development of a party organisation; the latter case deals with the democratisation of decision-making processes and the adaptation of strategies and goals (ibid, 14-15).

The inherent problem with the concept of transformation lies in its double nature. It is both an *outcome* (cf. definition of a political party) and a *process* of ongoing socialisation with democratic behaviours. In this study, the outcome dimension is called the 'formal' transformation and the process dimension 'informal' transformation. The focus of this study lies on the formal transformation that takes place in between the signing of a peace agreement and the first post-war elections (cf. Lyons 2005, 10). The first post-war elections define the end point because at this

2.2. Two Perspectives on Rebel-to-Party Transformations

While rebel-to-party transformations have been a real-world phenomenon for some decades now, they have penetrated the academic world only recently. Two strands of literature mention rebel-to-party transformations *en passant* while accounting for the bigger picture of *peace-building* and *post-war democratisation*. Since only a handful of scholars devote themselves more explicitly to this subject, the process of theory building is still in its infancy. Before looking at the theory, its place in the peace-building and post-war democratisation literature is examined.

2.2.1.

war, that is, the *"status quo ante"* (Keen 2000, 22), the transformation can raise deep-seated conflict causes to the level of political discourse.

In brief, in the particularly fragile implementation period, the transformation helps

In summary, rebel-to-party transformations are an i

2.3.2. Assumption of Rational Actors

An assumption underlying this theory is that of rational actors. Weinstein, in his theory of the industrial organisation of rebellion, argues that "individuals are rational and that their actions reflect deliberate decisions designed to maximise payoffs." (Weinstein 2007, 40) To be sure, outrageous acts of indiscriminate violence like the cutting of children's limbs by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels in Sierra Leone raise the question of how much rationality one can accord such rebels (Keen 2002). Yet on the other hand, their decisions to negotiate peace, give up arms, and take up the challenge of continuing their struggle through peaceful, political means certainly are neither random nor irrational choices: based on weighed cost-benefit analyses, they are strategic and obey logic (Weinstein 2007, 38; Zahar 2003). Bearing the transition from guerrillas to politicians in mind, Shugart sums this up, saying

> "that the decisions by regime and rebel leaders alike to seek a democratic 'exit' from a conflict are based upon rational calculations of the possibilities and limitations inherent in playing the competitive electoral game versus continuing the armed conflict." (Shugart 1992, 121)

2.4. Deriving Explanatory Factors from Theory

In attempting to explain the transformation, it is imperative to identify those factors that may best, i.e. most directly and immediately, explain the outcome "rebel-to-party transformation". The theoretical building blocks that meet this requirement are the subject of this section.

2.4.1. Popular Support

No political party can survive without supporters. While a rebel group has the freedom to decide whether to engage cooperatively with civilians or not, for a political party in a multi-party democracy this is not a matter of choice but of necessity. It is a group's ability to mobilise popular support that measures its success in survival and attaining its objectives (Lyons 2005, 36).

Yet, perhaps it is problematic to draw conclusions from the popular support a group received during wartime when coercion and survival-seekers' pragmatism distorted people's real preferences and extend those conclusions to the peacetime situation when these distortions may have disappeared (Kalyvas 2006, 115,124-129). While it is true that once coercion has disappeared civilians' patterns of support may shift, it is equally the case that civilians remain pragmatic, rational actors who care most about their present well-being (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2004, 179).

Thus, support is likely to be a function of both "old loyalties and immediate concerns" (International Crisis Group 2008a, 17; hereafter ICG), that is, the civilians' past and present experiences with the rebels (cf. Weinstein 2007). If positive, with the rebels acting as state-building "stationary bandits" who provide goods and services, civilians will tend to support them; whereas in the opposite case, with rebels seen to be acting as "roving bandits", plundering instead of building, civilians' trust will be broken (Olson 1993; Mkandawire 2002, 199-202). Thus, assuming a path dependency in terms of trust built, popular support at the moment of the peace negotiations probably will be a function of the relationship between rebels and civilians during the war (Lyons 2005, 37).

However, former rebels and civilians do not exist in a vacuum. Therefore, as in a political zero-sum game, the former rebels have to compete for popular support against their political competitors (Ryan 1994). Provided they have a better understanding of the needs of the common masses, they will find a niche in the political spectrum and become a political party.

Following from the above, this study hypothesises that: *the more popular support a rebel group enjoys at the moment of the peace process the more likely it is to transform successfully into a political party.*

Yet this study departs from this line of argument since it assumes from a theoretical standpoint, that for the transformation to be accepted both by the rebels themselves and by civil society, it must, above all, be an endogenous process (cf. Riaz and Basu 2007, 178, hereafter RB).

Also from a methodological viewpoint the 'international legitimisation' hypothesis is questionable. Having premised her analysis upon the rebel group's capability to

post-war democratisation processes to the little mosaic of rebel-to-party transformations, and finally to draw those factors from the theory most suited to explain this phenomenon. In the next step, it is apposite in a methodology chapter to convert these theoretical factors into measurable observations so as to be subsequently able to apply the theory to the case study.

3. Research Design and Method

3.1. Case Study and Method

The case has been selected because it conforms to the study's two purposes, i.e. to provide a theoretically grounded explanation for the recent transformation of the CPN/M in Nepal and to expand the recent theory of rebel-to-party transformation. Given this double objective, the case study bears marks of both an interpretative single case study and a confirmatory least likely crucial case study (Gerring 2007,

them empirically measurable (Söderberg 2007, 52). The results collected from these indicators serve as the basis for inferences about the veracity of the theory (ibid).

3.2. Operational Definition of the Rebel-to-Party Transformation

Empirically, the 'formal' transformation translates into the fielding of candidates, the party's peaceful participation in democratic elections, and the claiming of seats in these elections (cf. de Zeeuw 2008, 12-17).

3.3. Operationalising the Explanatory Factors

Popular Support

Popular support can be captured empirically as follows. First, a look at the past relationship between the rebel group and civilians is likely to be indicative of the rebel group's support base. This relationship includes whether the rebels used violence towards civilians in an indiscriminate or selective way, and whether, in the territories under their control, they behaved as "stationary", state-building rebels or rather as "roving", looting rebels (cf. Olson 1993; Mkandawire 2002). Second, with a view to the more recent past and present, the way the rebels fare vis-à-vis their political opponents in catering to the immediate demands of the population is likely to be reflected by recent public opinion polls (cf. Manning 2007, 255; Ryan 1994).

Group Cohesion

To capture the degree of group cohesion at the moment of the peace process two complimentary indicators, one long-term and one short-term, are appropriate. First, as seen in the theory (2.3.2), a group is more cohesive the greater the commitment of its members (cf. Mowday, Porter, and Steers 1982). Commitment, in turn, can be proxied by the kind of recruitment process and the composition of the membership (cf.

Weinstein 2007, 127-128). Second, the number of public splits and factions formed at the moment of the peace negotiations also clearly indicates the degree of group cohesion (cf. Zahar 1999, 85-86).

Access to Resources

One way of operationalising this variable is to estimate the rebel group's *actual* resource wealth and its *potential* resource wealth before and after transformation and then to compare the two estimates.[3] The observable elements of this comparison include, on the one hand, estimates on the evolution of financial and material support from the diaspora, illegal activities, and taxation as well as on the costs of war (cf. CH 1998; BS 2003; BLM 2003). On the other hand, they incorporate estimates of the financial situation of parties-in-government, assuming reconstruction grants from the international community, and possible peace dividends from the economy channelled to the state via official taxation (cf. Zartman 1995, 337-338).

3.4. Materials and Sources

Research for this study used book, academic journal, policy report, newspaper, and online sources. It is noteworthy that the scholarship on the Maoist insurgency in Nepal is not free of partisan bias.[4] Equally, finding reliable information on any rebel group's finances is problematic – so it was here.[5] While challenging, these problems were not insurmountable. Rather, they encouraged even more critical fact-finding and

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[3] BLM in their study on behalf of the United Kingdom (UK) Department for International Development (DFID) actually use a similar method to compare the Maoists' expenditure and their sources of finance (BLM 2003, 121-123).

[4] Compare Misra's portray of the Maoists as "Robin Hood of downtrodden Nepalis" (Misra 2006, 227), with Giri's, calling them "impractical old-fashioned revolutionaries" (Giri 2008, 277).

[5] BLM rightly note that "it is impossible to obtain accurate figures on the level of financing raised by the CPN-M today." (BLM 2003, 121)

creative thinking. They are thus not believed to have had a bearing on the reliability of the findings (cf. Söderberg 2007, 58).

End of Chapter Signpost

Having both laid out *what* the study aims at explaining in terms of its theoretical background (chapter 2) and *how* it is going to do this (chapter 3), now the time has come to actually apply these tools to the case study of the CPN/M in Nepal. It will start out with a brief chronological résumé of the civil war and the peace process to provide the contextual background before sketching out the value of the *explanandum*, i.e. the nature of the CPN/M's transformation (cf. George and Bennett 2005). Ultimately, in a theoretically focused yet also descriptive analysis, the case is scrutinised as to the value of the explanatory factors (cf. Söderberg 2007, 55).

4. Case Study Nepal: the Transformation of the CPN/M

4.1.

this time, the elected governments and the king never succeeded in forming a united front against the Maoists (EIU 2007, 4). Therefore, in May 2002 King Gyanendra, losing patience, sacked the elected government, thus commencing an era of "royalist military dictatorship" (Skar 2007, 359).

The situation changed yet again in unexpected ways. In February 2005 after the king's second coup, the CPN/M formed a historic alliance with the seven major political parties of Nepal (SPA) against the monarchy (Ogura 2008, 7; Baral 2006, 178). In separate yet combined efforts, they organised massive public demonstrations in Kathmandu and across the entire country, forcing the king to step down on April 24, 2006 after 19 days of protest (EIU 2007, 8). Subsequently, the parliament, in its first session since its dissolution in May 2002, st

CPN/M has undergone in recent years, especially in the period from the peace negotiations in November 2006 up to the CA elections in April 2008.

It could be argued that the CPN/M, in a strict sense, never had to transform since it has always been a political party. Indeed, it is correct that the CPN/M came into being in March 1995 when

> "two radical factions of the CPN (Unity Center) and its open political front, the UPFN, led respectively by Prachanda and Dr. Baburam Bhattarai, formally changed their party name to the CPN (M)" (Ogura 2008, 7).

Yet it is equally the case that the very reason for this party formation was to realise what other Communist factions had failed to do earlier, that is, to launch an armed insurrection. Therefore, from the moment of its inception the CPN/M was formed with the purpose of mounting a violent rebellion - which after quitting parliamentary politics in the same year, it actually did only several months later.

Hence, this point does not derogate the CPN/M's recent transformation from a predominantly military to a predominantly political organisation. This change from a war-time to a peacetime institution has occurred both on a behavioural-attitudinal and a structural-organisational level (cf. definition in 2.1). On the behavioural-attitudinal front, Ogura points to the CPN/M's new political strategy adopted in 2006 when, in the pursuit of its CA election objective, it started to consider only peaceful means legitimate, that is, either continued negotiations or mass demonstrations (Ogura 2008, 38-39). On the structural-organisational level, while during the war the organisation fell into three parts, the Party, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and the People's Government (PG), there has been a clear shift in emphasis towards the Party following the peace process in 2006. This has been particularly apparent since the PLA laid down its arms to be monitored by UNMIN peace-keepers and the parallel

state structures, including both the alternative government and juridical system were dissolved (Ogura 2008, 41-42).

In summary, the "new" CPN/M both relies on democratic instead of violent means and has fielded candidates so successfully that it actually won outright the first elections it ever participated in (ICG 2008a, 17; 2008b, 3; EIU 2008b, 1). Thus, meeting the requirements of the minimal definition of a political party (cf. 2.1), the CPN/M has actually 'formally' transformed.

4.3. Explaining the CPN/M's Transformation

Having acknowledged the CPN/M's apparent transformation, the legitimate question arises of *how* this actually came about. In the following section the transformation is explained by applying the three factors derived from the theory to the case of the CPN/M.

4.3.1. Popular Support
Use of Selective Violence

Following Mao's teachings on guerrilla warfare, the

February 2006 when the Maoists deliberately obstructed the municipal elections, assassinating several candidates, these acts were certainly very gruesome yet they were targeted, selective and thus predictable (Amnesty International 2006). Following recognizable patterns, the selective use of violence is less likely to undermine popular support.[6]

State-Builders

Another interface for rebel-civilian contact is the governance of territories under rebel control. Unlike other opportunistic rebel groups, the CPN/M is known for establishing parallel state structures called PGs (Raj 2004, 92-93), providing protection, services and infrastructure as well as its own court system in exchange for taxation (Sharma 2004, 46; Shneiderman and Turin 2004, 100). In a bottom-up approach, the CPN/M further established similar parallel power structures at the district, the regional, and up to the national level (Ogura 2008, 19). For instance, People's Houses of Representatives in each region were designed in an effort "to enable autonomous governance by local people" (ibid).

In a context of a much accentuated Kathmandu-centred urban bias and the simultaneous weak performance of the Nepalese state in terms of service delivery (RB 2007, 21), building local governments closer to the people was perceived by many as a desirable innovation worthy of support (cf. Sharma 2004, 53).

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[6] With regard to disturbing reports about the Maoists' use of unarmed civilians as human shields on the battlefield two explanations seem plausible (BLM 2003, 110). Either these acts are selective as the victims are considered "traitors" or they are war tactics which take precedence over selectivity. At any rate, as long as the Maoists succeed in generating a "*perception of credible selection*" their support should not be affected negatively (Kalyvas 2006, 190).

Illegitimate Political Opponents

The CPN/M's popular support can certainly not be meaningfully estimated in isolation from its political opponents. To begin, one of the fiercest opponents to the Maoist cause, King Gyanendra, did not fare well in terms of popular support during the peace process. Indeed, according to three opinion polls carried out by

none (Sharma and Sen 2006, 25). When asked under which circumstances they were ready to accept the CPN/M as an open political party 80% responded with "if they lay down arms forever" compared to less then 10% who would never accept them (ibid, 26). Corroborating this favourable popular verdict, another separate survey by the *Annapurna Post*

162-163), based on the candidates' "dedication to t

equally poignant yet very different criticism was articulated against Prachanda's leadership. In fact, the Communist Party of India (Maoist) accused him of weakening the communist revolutionary project by joining the interim government with the "comprador bourgeois-feudal parties" (Interview with CPI (Maoist) representative Azad in Nayak 2008, 467).

However, neither the dispute between the top two party leaders nor the strained relationship with the Indian comrades actually led to the much-expected split in the party (ICG 2008c, 3). Whether this can be attributed to either Mao's doctrinal emphasis on discipline (Weinstein 2007, 29-30) or to the unity-criticism-unity principle of the CPN/M is open to debate (Pathak 2005, 175). What is certain is that "throughout the tortuous peace process it has maintained a united front…" (ICG 2008c, 2)

In short, a pool of recruits characterised by a strong attachment both to Maoist ideology and to the CPN/M's inclusive social agenda combined to the absence of factionalising indicate the CPN/M's strong group cohesion.

4.3.3. Access to Resources
CPN/M's estimated 'balance of payment'

The CPN/M encompasses, according to cautious estimates, around "6,000-7,000 combatants, a militia of 25,000 and 100,000 sympathisers" (EIU 2007, 11). Running this tremendous organisation involves maintaining offices, military equipment, infrastructure, transportation, as well as communications systems (Lyons 2005, 42). In 2003, BLM estimated "that the movement probably need[ed] less than 5 billion rupees [$65 million] annually to sustain its current level of activity." (BLM 2003, 121) To address these needs, the CPN/M relied on four major sources of income: donations,

especially from the diaspora; taxation of occupied territories; extortion of businesses, industry, and individuals; and bank robbery (Pathak 2005, 166). According to an article in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* from August 24, 2002, the CPN/M was able to raise between $64 and $128 million in 2001-2002 (cf. Raj 2004, 87; International Alert 2006, 412; BLM 2003, 121). "When compared to their estimated expenditures, this implies that thus far the CPN-M has had sufficient resources to underwrite its insurgency." (BLM 2003, 121)

While these sums made the CPN/M "one of the wealthiest insurgencies in Asia" (Raj 2004, 87), they presumably neither matched the CPN/M's growing expenditures after 2001 nor the resources it would dispose of once a party-in-government.

Growing Costs of War after 2001

In fact, the CPN/M accumulated these resources during a period when the costs of war had not yet attained the levels of the 2001-2005 period. It is a well documented fact that following the involvement of the RNA in 2001 the fighting considerably intensified, for the first time making the number of battle deaths per annum skyrocket to more than 1,000 (Harbom 2007, 59). Indeed, the Maoists' military capacities started to be seriously challenged when King Gynanendra, enjoying the full backing of the 9/11-shocked international community in his fight against terror, received

from the US, and "transport helicopters, vehicles and anti-land mine technology" from the UK (International Alert 2006, 409). As a result, the RNA was able to expand its fighting force from around 69.000 to 80.000 soldiers in this period (IISS quoted in EIU 2007, 14).

Breakaway of Sources of Income

As becomes clear, the CPN/M's need for resources to close the apparent gap with its opponent increased in the 2001-2005 period.

At the same time, three further factors concurred which aggravated the already existing resource strain. First, in 2001 as a measure taken in the War on Terror, the "Indian government deployed its security forces along the Nepali border and banned the CPN (M)'s sister organisation in India", which

Potential Resources as Party-in-Government

At the same time, comparing the estimates of CPN/M's actual resource situation as a

rebel group to its potential one as a party in government, it becomes clear that for a

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary

Following a debate on the theory of rebel-to-party transformation, this study selected three factors most likely to *explain* the phenomenon. In the next step, these factors were operationalised and applied to the case study

acting rebel group to transform, since the rebels can anticipate the level of future electoral support based on their current level of popular support.

Group Cohesion

The second hypothesis was: *the greater the rebels' group cohesion at the moment of the peace process the more likely it is to become a political party* (Söderberg 2005, 7).

A recruitment pool of ideologically committed and socially marginalised people with few other prospects of success in Nepalese society lies at the heart of the CPN/M's high level of group cohesion. Only against this background can it be understood that even in the face of both stark internal and external criticisms the group remained united instead of factionalising and was thus able to survive the turbulent process of rebel-to-party transformation. The rationale linking group cohesion and successful transformation would be that an internally united group is more likely to have the necessary organisational capacity and discipline to become a political party.

Access to Resources

The third hypothesis was that *the more limited the rebel group's access to resources at the moment of the peace process, the greater the economic incentive of transforming into a legitimate political actor will be* (cf. Weinstein 2002).

with the prospect for peace expanding the resource base of the Nepalese state, seizure

Also, they confirm the lessons drawn from two empirical cases in which the presence or absence of economic incentives was a critical factor: Renamo's transformation success in Mozambique hugely benefited from financial inducements from the international community, while in Sierra Leone the RUF's failure to transform may be partially explained by the limited international munificence (Söderberg 2007, 185-187). Thus, in terms of policy, economic incentives, such as post-conflict reconstruction funds and resource pools earmarked for political party development, may encourage rebel groups to transform.

While other studies found international legitimisat

5.3. Outlook

Indeed, this study makes its claims on the basis of a literature review and a single case study. In light of this obvious limitation, it would be desirable to corroborate the findings both in terms of breadth and depth. A multi-method approach, including cross-case comparisons and statistical analyses could test and expand the findings (cf. Söderberg 2007, 204). Similarly, in terms of depth, the collection of primary data through interviews would be helpful to further consolidate the findings regarding the CPN/M's economic rationale for transformation.

Another interesting avenue of research would be the examination of cases of 'greedy' rebel groups' transformation into political parties. Due to an absence of economic interdependence with the population, greedy rebels oftentimes maintain rather bad relations with civilians, thus enjoying little popular support (cf. Weinstein 2007). They also generally have better access to resources, making transformation less attractive for them. *A priori*, they are less likely to transform into political parties. If rebel groups that successfully transformed in the absence of popular support and economic motivations could be found, then our theory would most likely be falsified.

With regard to the future of the CPN/M, it will become increasingly important, once the euphoria over the recent CA elections victory and the subsequent abdication of the monarchy wears off, to live up to its new identity as a political party. This includes seeking consensus in a factionalised Constituent Assembly and demonstrating both capability and willingness to govern (EIU 2008b). Time will demonstrate whether the CPN/M's rebel-to-party transformation was just a short-lived episode on the political stage or whether it truly paved the way for sustainable peace in Nepal's war-shattered society.

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