Rebels to Political Parties: Does Funding Matter?

Non-state actors can achieve political power two ways - war or political participation. Many times, these options are juxtaposed to one another in a manner that negates one upon the acceptance of another. But, what happens when a group decides to transition from a position of violence against the government to trying to join a government? The transition from rebel group to political party has been seen in many countries, from the Zapatistas in Mexico to Fatah in Israel. These attempts vary in success and prosperity. The qualities and goals of a military power and a political party are different and the transition that the group must go through to put their military ways behind them and enter the political sphere can be a challenge. If a rebellion is funded through illicit means, a problem can arise when entering the government. Moreover, the manner in which a rebel group treats civilians during the conflict has also been seen to impact the rebel group in varying ways. The interaction between the civilian population and the rebel group can potentially lead to a successful or a failed transition into a political party.

If a rebel group relies on the civilian population for profit (i.e. needing civilians to mine the diamonds or grow crops), then the rebel group may treat the population differently than if they do not need them to financially sustain their rebellion. If the rebel group relies on popular support to obtain the necessary funds to continue the rebellion, their actions may differ than if popular support is not needed. Profiting from oil exportation or booty futures are examples of this. If the funding stream that the rebel group relies on is unable to continue post conflict, there is a possibility that the now political party may not have the necessary support from the people that it needs to win in an election. If a rebel group receives support because they employ civilians in their illicit activities, there’s a possibility that if the illicit activity ceases, so too will their support.

These are all potential hazards that rebel groups must face when transitioning into a political party. Taking a look at these transitions in the post Cold War era of international politics, this project seeks to answer the question how does the funding of a rebel group influence their ability to become a political party? This will be accomplished through a quantitative analysis that combines the datasets from Marshall (2014) and Conrad, Walsh, and Whitaker (2015).