Autonomous Decisions: Why Do Militant Groups Conduct Simultaneous Electoral and Armed Campaigns, and Why Does the Government Allow It?

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Abstract:

Few studies address the militant group decision to participate in elections while also using violence during a civil conflict — a terrorist campaign or a civil war — or the government decision to allow them to do so, which is perhaps even more puzzling. I generate a theory about when militant group and government incentives converge on this outcome of simultaneous electoral and armed campaigns. I posit that electoral participation occurs when the potential risk to the government of allowing the militant group to participate in elections is low, which is the case when the competition between the two sides is limited. This occurs in cases of territorial conflict, in particular, but also, within these cases, when the constituencies that both sides are competing for are constrained to a small percentage of power in the state. In these cases, participation provides some benefit for the side that performs to its expectation but with limited consequences for the government regardless of the outcome. The cost of banning the militant group, and both sides’ beliefs about their relative strength, are the other important factors in these decisions. I test the empirical implications of this theory and alternative theories through an analysis of (1) an original dataset of militant group electoral participation worldwide from 1980-2010, and (2) newly-released archival records regarding the case of the Provisional Irish Republican Army’s simultaneous electoral and armed campaigns in United Kingdom, beginning in the 1980s.