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Armed groups' modes of local engagement and post-conflict (in)stability

Insights from the Ethiopian and Somali civil wars

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Abstract: What distinguishes post-war governments that succeed in establishing a stable political order and prevent recurring conflict from those that do not? This comparative study considers the specific threats that typically lead to the collapse of the post-conflict political order to offer new hypotheses on the conditions that affect post-war governments' ability to sustainably restore stability. The threats considered include (i) fragmentation of the main actors in the conflict, (ii) inadequate demobilization, and (iii) enduring dependence of the post-war government on local brokers. Post-war regimes are more vulnerable to such risks after wars in which the dominant armed groups have established themselves by co-opting local power structures and drawing on existing socio-political networks, as this process redistributes power from the central to the local level. Empirically, this paper uses a novel dataset documenting the practices through which rebel groups may alter local power structures to highlight the connection between this wartime process of transformation and patterns of conflict recurrence. In addition, it contrasts the transition of the Tigray People's Liberation Front from rebellion to government in Ethiopia in the 1990s with the trajectory of the armed movements in Somalia that also overthrew the incumbent military regime but then failed to establish a viable state.

Key words: conflict recurrence, post-war regimes, armed groups, Ethiopia, Somalia, comparative study

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1 Introduction

Some governments emerging from civil conflicts manage to durably restore stability and create political conditions under which a sustainable peace can be achieved. In other cases, however, the efforts of post-conflict governments to assert their authority fail to consolidate the post-conflict order, and conflict resumes. Existing perspectives on civil war recurrence emphasize that stability requires a military hegemon capable of deterring further challenges. They also suggest that the failure of many negotiated peace settlements can be tied to commitment problems preventing disarmament. Such analyses offer important insights into the determinant of civil war recurrence and matched observed trends: war recurrence is more likely after settlements than after government or rebel victories. At the same time, these arguments leave important patterns of variation unaddressed. Not all conflicts that end with a victory are followed by period of prolonged stability, and not all settlements fall apart. Understanding the threats that post-war governments may face even after the actors that took power proved capable of defeating their adversaries, and identifying the resources that have allowed some of the governments that emerged from negotiated settlements to withstand the turbulences of the post-conflict period, has important implications for the design of recovery and post-conflict state-building programmes.

This paper first examines the specific processes through which the post-conflict order typically unravels, considering three mechanisms in particular: (i) the fragmentation of the ruling coalition or its constitutive entities, (ii) inadequate demobilization of non-state armed groups, and (iii) governments' dependence on local power brokers. Focusing on the processes often involved in the resumption of conflict suggests that patterns of civil war recurrence depend in part on how wartime political processes have redistributed power between the central government and local power structures. When wartime politics has deconcentrated power to the benefit of local authority figures and social organizations, the coalitions underpinning post-conflict regimes, even those formed by victors, often have difficulties avoiding fragmentation, enforcing demobilization, and ruling autonomously. When, on the contrary, civil wars undermine local power structures, even if these wars end with negotiated settlements, post-war governments are better positioned to mitigate the risks of fragmentation and re-armament, and less reliant on fragile, costly alliances with local elites. The effect of conflict on the distribution of power between the central and the local level results from wartime modes of local engagement, and specifically from the dominant actors in a war establishing their support base by co-opting or transforming local power structures. When actors in a war replace existing power structures with new institutions at the local level, for instance replacing traditional leaders with revolutionary councils, they not only create conditions conducive to greater power concentration after the war but also develop, through the institutions they create, new levers of governance that post-war governments can capitalize on.

To assess this hypothesis, I use a new dataset documenting armed groups' local political practices to identify differences in the modes of local engagements of actors that took part in recurring versus non-recurring conflict. In addition, I compare the local political strategies of the dominant insurgent movements during the civil wars in Ethiopia (1974–91) and Somalia (1981–91). Through this comparison, I show how critical differences in their approaches contributed to the two countries' divergent trajectories, in each case after a rebel coalition ousted the incumbent regime.

2 Threats to post-conflict stability: existing perspectives

What sets apart post-war governments who establish stable political orders from those who fail to do so? Under what circumstances are civil conflicts most likely to resume? Dominant explanations for civil war recurrence have chiefly considered the role of two factors: (i) the ability of victors to deter new challenges and (ii) the ability of parties to a settlement to credibly commit to the terms negotiated. Both sets of explanations provide important insights into the conditions that can foster stability after a civil conflict. But they do not account for the full range of possible outcomes, failing to explain the resumption of civil conflicts even after a first phase that ended with a decisive victory, or the stability of some negotiated post-conflict political arrangements, even in the absence of enforcement mechanisms.

2.1 First type of threat: deterrence failure

Realist explanations for peace emphasize the need for a sovereign authority capable of achieving military hegemony, arguing that only such an authority can quell or durably deter further violent challenges. This perspective on the conditions for stability dates back to English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who argued that a durable peace requires a military conquest capable of imposing a new social order (see Hobbes 2016 [1651]). There are multiple examples of such a process unfolding in recent or more distant history. In Sri Lanka, the successful military operations that the government launched between 2006 and 2009 allowed it to take control of the de facto capital city and of the military bases of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), thereby asserting its dominance over the insurgents. These operations killed thousands of civilians, but, unlike the peace agreement that had been signed in 2002, they ended a war that had started over 25 years ago when the LTTE explicitly admitted defeat in 2009 (Bhattacharji 2009). In some cases, victorious insurgents can establish a new, durable political order. In China, the Communist Party has controlled the country since the Red Army's victorious campaigns, waged between 1946 and 1949.

More generally, the type of security dilemma that can trigger the recurrence of civil conflicts is more likely to emerge in the absence of a clearly dominant military actor. Such conditions may prompt military actors to attempt to consolidate their position by taking steps to achieve military hegemony, or various subnational communities to determine that their security is a matter that they should take into their own hands. Different investigations, including Fearon's (2004) examination of the determinants of the duration of civil wars, suggest that conflicts are more likely to remain settled when they end with a military victory. Toft (2009) also finds that enduring peace is more likely after wars that end with one side's decisive victory. Nevertheless, to reach a more complete understanding of patterns of post-war stability, it is important to look beyond the military equilibrium that emerges at the end of a conflict. A war ending with the victory of one side may create conditions more favourable to stability. Nevertheless, it does not constitute a guarantee, nor a necessary condition for it to be achieved.

A war ending with one party defeating its adversaries may create conditions that are more favourable to stabilization, but it does not guarantee it. After Mujahideen troops moved into Kabul and the Soviet government of Najibullah collapsed in 1992, violent confrontations promptly resumed. A peaceful political order can fail to emerge even after government forces prevail over their challenges. In 1996, after seven years of brutal counterinsurgency campaign, the Indonesian government claimed to have fully eliminated the Free Aceh Movement. Three years later, the insurgents launched new attacks in spite of a growing presence of government forces. In Aceh, military successes failed to produce a sustainable order (Ansori 2012). These examples suggest that stability requires more than a sufficiently large power differential between victors and losers, and

that deterrence failures do not fully explain the resumption of some conflicts after one side initially prevailed.

2.2 Second type of threat: misaligned incentives and commitment problems

Another way to make sense of patterns of civil war recurrence is to consider how actors capable of violence will resort to it when they perceive that such a strategy best serves their interests and abandon it when it is no longer the case. This type of incentive already plays an important role in the onset of civil conflict. For instance, Bates (2015) argues that, starting in the 1980s, violent conflicts multiplied in a range of countries in Africa, including Rwanda, Sudan, Liberia, and Congo, because the incentives of state elites changed. Economic volatility and democratization shortened their time horizons, prompting them to prioritize short-term gains, even if the pursuit of these gains turned violent and destabilized their country. Similar incentive-based mechanisms can also explain how conflict comes to end. Driscoll (2015) argues that warlords in Georgia and Tajikistan were aware that access to foreign aid depended on the stabilization of their countries. This incentive was enough to motivate them to forego violent competition for power and spoils and, instead, strike enduring bargains.

Peace settlements fail when some parties renege on the terms negotiated and opt to re-arm themselves to pursue more favourable ones, becoming peace ‘spoilers’ (Stedman 1997). Do such failures occur because the terms of these settlements do not offer a path preferable to violent struggle for all parties involved? Some studies suggest that this is the case, highlighting how flawed settlement terms can leave some core grievances unaddressed (Fortna 2003; Paris 2004), with inadequate power-sharing provisions being a common deficiency of these terms. (Hartzell and Hoodie 2003). Other studies argue that while settlement terms that are misaligned with the incentives of some of the parties that negotiated them can trigger new rounds of violent conflict, settlements typically do not fail because negotiators could not agree on terms that were acceptable to all parties. Rather, settlements break down because even after an agreement that all prefer to war has been reached, actors cannot commit to complying with its terms. They do not want to disarm knowing that no institutions exist to force their adversaries to do the same (Walter 2002). Violence persists largely because of this insecurity (Toft 2009; Werner and Yuen 2005).

External enforcement can support stabilization. In Nepal, the implementation of the Comprehensive Peace Accord signed in 2006 between the government and the Unified Communist Party, which put an end to a ten-year conflict, has succeeded in part because of the direct involvement of the United Nations Mission in Nepal (Wagle and Jackson 2015). But the success of peace agreements does not appear to be entirely predicated on external enforcement. In El Salvador, the Peace Accords signed thirty years ago between the government and insurgents have also ended the civil war, and allowed for the conversion of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front from a rebel force into a political party (Sprenkels 2018). Söderberg Kovacs and Hatz (2016) find that of all the non-state actors who signed peace agreements between 1975 and 2011, about a third successfully transformed into political parties, meaning that they abandoned violent strategies and pursued power through non-violent means, primarily elections. Some but not all of these groups emerged after an intrastate peace agreement that involved third parties as mediators or signatories. However, these forms of involvement are not equivalent to guaranteed enforcement.

These trends suggest that mechanisms beyond reliance on external enforcement may be available to the governments established through negotiated settlements that can facilitate the emergence of a stable post-conflict order. Discussions of the determinants of civil war recurrence tend to focus on how conflicts ended and whether one side prevailed. They emphasize how victories are associated with deterrence effects that are absent when conflicts end with a settlement, and how

settlements are always threatened by the insecurity of the parties that negotiated them. Such arguments highlight important mechanisms, and matched observed trends: conflict recurrence is less likely after a victory than after a negotiated settlement. Nevertheless, the connections between how a conflict (or its first phase) ended and the risk of recidivism should not be overstated. First, these differences can be subtle. Some victories are achieved not through military means but through successful negotiations that allow one side to induce defections among its opponents. Conversely, some settlements can operate as face-saving mechanisms in contexts where one party has clearly prevailed (Driscoll 2015). Furthermore, the explanatory power of arguments hinging on the implications of victories versus settlements remains limited. Cases of conflicts that ended with one side's clear victory can still vary considerably in their long-term evolution. So do cases of conflicts that ended with a negotiated settlement. Advancing our understanding of the drivers of post-war instability beyond deterrence failure and commitment problems requires zooming in on the specific processes through which the post-conflict order tends to unravel.

3 How the post-conflict order unravels: core processes

Three mechanisms are typically at the root of the disruptions that trigger new rounds of violence after the first phase of a conflict has ended: (i) the fragmentation of dominant actors in this conflict, (ii) unsuccessful processes of demobilization, and (iii) gaps in the government's capacity for governance that perpetuate its dependence on local actors. These processes preclude the concentration of power—both political and military—that stabilization requires. They not only reduce the likelihood of rival actors pursuing non-violent means of negotiation but can also give rise to new patterns of conflict.

3.1 Fragmentation

The fragmentation of insurgent groups can lower the threat that these groups pose to the regime in place. But governments facing fragmented insurgencies also have greater difficulties achieving uncontested victories or negotiating stable settlements. The enduring violence in Mindanao in the Philippines illustrates these challenges. In the late 1980s, the government of the Philippines engaged in negotiation with the original insurgent group, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). However, this process failed to quell the violence largely because it did not include a splinter insurgent organization, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which had formed ten years earlier when the government had reneged on a previous agreement. Creating the conditions for negotiating a stable settlement proved to be an elusive quest, as the insurgent organizations in Mindanao further fragmented. While the MILF lowered its demands and started to pursue autonomy rather than full independence, a new radical splinter faction, known as the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, formed. Overall, peace agreements negotiated with Moro movements, including the MNLF and the MILF, have been particularly fraught because of weak cohesion of these groups and the repeated formation of splinter factions that characterizes the conflict (Latif et al 2020; Tajima 2010). As peace talks between the government and some of the armed groups operating in Mindanao were underway, other groups, including Abu Sayyaf, continued to emerge. There are currently at least three distinct jihadist groups operating in Mindanao (Hwang and Schulze 2018).

The fragmentation of insurgent movements leads to recurring conflicts, not only because of confrontation between government forces and new splinter factions but also because of rivalries pitting insurgent factions against each other. Using data on the organizational features of rebel groups and the evolution of civil wars, Ishiyama and Batta (2011) observe that 'organizationally incoherent' groups are associated with a greater likelihood of conflict resuming. This is in part

because such groups may lack the ability to implement the provisions of the settlements they negotiated, leading to new rounds of conflict between the initial adversaries. But a substantial share of war recidivism is connected to insurgent organization splintering or formerly allied factions turning against each other. This is often the result of internal disagreements on post-conflict power-sharing or rent redistribution. Peace is then threatened by new patterns of internecine conflict.

Finally, this type of splintering does not befall only organizations that challenge the state. Organizations that have gained power may also break into rival faction, and such fragmentation can threaten the stability of the post-conflict order even more than disunity within insurgent factions. In South Sudan, a power struggle between two factions within the party in power—the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement—triggered a new civil war in 2013, only two years after the country achieved independence. This war lasted over five years, and led to severe food insecurity rising to the level of famine, while forces on all sides engaged in abusing civilians. To this day, peace has not been restored to South Sudan, even though over 12,000 peacekeepers have been deployed (Sundberg 2019). Overall, the multiple channels through which fragmentation can shatter the post-conflict order and trigger new patterns of conflict suggest that the risk of conflict recurrence is closely tied to the inability of initial adversaries to maintain their unity.

3.2 Failed demobilization

Failed or stalled demobilization is another important factor contributing to recurring cycles of conflict. It is one of the drivers of the enduring violence in the North Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of Congo. The National Congress for the Defence of the People (CNDP by its French acronym)—which has been engaged in the conflict since the mid-2000s—was established and led by Laurent Nkunda, a former officer of the Congolese Rally for Democracy (Goma faction) who had refused to see his troops integrated in the national army after 2003 (when the transitional government was formed) (Stearns 2007). In 2009, Nkunda was arrested and the remaining troops of the CNDP signed a peace agreement with the government, agreeing to join the national army. But four years later, hundreds of these fighters formed a new rebel group. Citing the government’s failure to implement the peace agreement signed on 23 March 2009, it took the name M23. They turned against the government because they refused to redeploy in other parts of the country outside of Kivu (Broache 2014).

Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programmes have at times received considerable support from the international community, particularly around 2005 when new policy guidelines were developed (Hanson 2007). The goals of such programmes are clear: they aim to support stabilization by curtailing the coercive capacity of violent actors and to promote security by preventing former fighters from preying on civilians. But studies show that these programmes have been implemented with varying levels of success (Hanson 2007). Poor implementation, which means that political actors can easily revert to violent strategies, can be a prelude to war recidivism.

3.3 Dependence on local power brokers

Another important dimension that contributes to the fragility of post-war governments and to recurring conflict is the deficiencies of the state institutions, which induce post-war governments to outsource core governance functions to local power brokers. Post-conflict governments face two main tasks. First, to rebuild the country, they must provide a range of basic services. But they must do so without the benefits of state institutions that could organize and support this effort. Second, they must dismantle the violent institutions that challenged the state during the war. But these institutions can be the most effective structures operating in post-conflict states. In practice, it is not infrequent for post-war governments to rule by negotiating with local power structures as

they lack the capacity to administer local communities directly. In some cases, the local power brokers that post-conflict governments negotiate with are traditional community leaders who have long been in their roles. In other cases, the war has dimmed the political relevance of traditional local elites, and new local power brokers have emerged. These could be former rebels and army commanders or the leaders of new illicit economic networks. Whether the local power brokers that post-conflict governments bargain with are well-established or relatively new actors, they are often the very organizations that not long ago had mobilized against the state (Themnér and Utas 2016).

These arrangements, and the limits on state autonomy that they impose, can undermine post-war stability in different indirect but consequential ways. First, maintaining these alliances is costly, which means there are fewer resources that post-war governments can allocate to recovery. This economic impact matters for stability: individuals who are dissatisfied with their own economic situation and local economic trends may be more likely to join armed groups (Walter 2004). Second, such alliances have a political impact: they may preclude meaningful political reforms and genuine opening of the political space. This matters because unyielding barriers to political participation can be another predictor of civil war recurrence (Walter 2004). The dependence of post-war governments on local elites also threatens stability in a direct manner. In such contexts, little can be done to prevent local power brokers to revert to violent strategies should the alliances they have negotiated with the government turn sour.

Civil war recurrence is more likely when dominant actors lack cohesiveness, when post-war governments are unable to enforce demobilization, and when these government rule through brokerage. On the contrary, stability necessitates that groups in power as well as their adversaries be able to preserve their unity, which makes it possible for demobilization plans to be executed. It also requires that post-war governments build up their capacity to rule autonomously. Existing perspectives on civil war recurrence emphasize the implications of the position of wartime adversaries relative to one another at the end of the conflict. Did a clear victor capable of militarily dominating its rivals emerge? Or can these adversaries credibly commit to a settlement? Considering the specific processes fostering or hindering post-war stabilities suggests that the redistribution of power between central and local actors matters as much as the distribution of power between adversaries.

4 The legacy of wartime modes of engagement with local power structures

What factors determine how vulnerable the political order emerging in the aftermath of civil conflicts is to fragmentation, how likely new governments are to enforce demobilization, and how dependent on local power brokers these governments tend to remain? I argue that the intensity of these threats to post-war stability depends in part on how the war has bolstered or undermined the position of the local power structures that compete with the state for social control. These local political processes are in turn conditioned by how dominant actors have engaged with these local structures. Civil conflicts in which main actors rely on local power structures to establish their support base tend to amplify the influence of these rivals of the state. In contrast, governments forming in the aftermath of civil conflicts—during which key actors replaced old power structures with new institutions—are better positioned to centralize power. The latter type of local wartime engagement creates conditions under which the post-war state can better preserve its unity, enforce agreements on disarmament, and can also rule with more autonomy.

4.1 Variation in wartime modes of engagement with local power structures

Insurgent groups, and actors at war more generally, differ in how they relate to local power structures as they emerge. Many rebel groups have leveraged existing local networks and hierarchies, as Staniland (2014: 23) argues in *Networks of Rebellion*, which shows how ‘insurgent leaders construct organizations by trying to convert prewar social networks into wartime institutions’. In Myanmar’s Shan state, the still active insurgency that emerged in 1958 had initially capitalized on the historical status of the members of the traditional local ruling dynasties, known as the Saophans (Lintner 1984). In South Sudan, the Sudan People’s Liberation Army co-opted the same traditional chiefs that the colonial and postcolonial regimes had relied on to administer civilians in the territories it controlled (Öhm 2015). Across the continent, in Mali and Niger, the successive Tuareg insurgencies between 1960 and 2012 rallied around confederations led by traditional Amenokals (Deycard 2012). But not all rebel groups have leveraged existing local power structures. A diverse set of insurgent movements have instead replaced these structures with new institutions. During the Second World War, the Viet Minh set up underground People’s Revolutionary Committees throughout Northern and Central Vietnam. These committees were meant to replace the council-of-notables and their executive officers, the ‘*huong ca*’, that dominated Vietnamese village structure under the colonial system (McQueen 1968). In Afghanistan, the Taliban started to set up a shadow government around 2003, with representatives down to the local level (Jackson 2018). In particular, by 2010, they had appointed over 500 judges in the provinces they controlled (Jackson 2018). In Colombia, the Revolutionary Armed Forces–People’s Army (FARC by its Spanish acronym) also set up an alternate system of justice in many parts of the territories under their control. In some instances, they started to regulate market transaction and labour relations, including wages (Arjona 2016).

Various types of local power structures may be relevant to the political dynamics of conflict, including clans, tribes, kinship networks, political parties, religious institutions, traditional chieftaincies, gangs, and economic networks, licit or illicit. The examples outlined above reveal that the extent to which armed groups engage with such structures varies between actors and contexts. These distinct modes of engagement and their impact on the distribution of power across society constitute one of the critical political processes prompted by civil conflict. In some cases, civil wars bolster the capacity for influence and political power structures. In other conflicts, even well-established local power structures are overpowered by wartime organizations.

4.2 Effects on the stability of the post-war order

Whether the dominant actors in a war have leveraged or displaced local power structures is an important factor shaping the capacity of post-war regimes to centralize power. These structures can be conceived of as rivals, competing sometimes with each other but particularly with the state for social control, that is for the ability to set and enforce the rules of everyday life. Civil wars commonly change their standing relative to that of state institutions. This matters for the stability of the post-conflict state because the degree to which war has bolstered or undermined local power structures informs post-war regimes’ ability to avoid fragmentation, to enforce demobilization, and to rule autonomously.

To better understand the connections between the modes of local engagement of dominant actors in a war and the likelihood of the post-conflict order unravelling, it is helpful to compare the relationships between the top leadership and field commanders in organizations that have co-opted local power structures and those that have replaced them. In the first type of relationship, rebel leaders form alliances with elites to capitalize on their legitimacy and capacity for influence. When mobilization is conducted through such alliances, the resulting organization typically retains high levels of internal differentiations, based on pre-war local political structures and identities, for

instance reflecting the boundaries between different tribes, clans, regions, or religious affiliations. Because these local elites have an independent capacity for social control that dates back to the pre-war period, they cannot easily be replaced. Should rebel leaders try, they may lose the faction that these elites ‘brought’ with them. Crucially, these elites retain an exit option. If they find themselves at odds with the top leadership or if they determine that their alliance with the insurgent movement no longer serves them in the local arena, they may opt to depart. They may refuse to continue fighting, join a rival organization, or start a new one, which is how splinter factions form. Because in such organizations local elites hold on to their capacity for influence, the armed groups remain vulnerable to fragmentation both during and after the war. In contrast, when groups establish themselves by displacing local power structures, the resulting organization is more immune to this kind of risk. The field officers that are appointed to lead combat units or administer specific areas owe their authority over their men or the communities they are in charge of to the organization that put them in this role. More generally, status and influence are more impersonally defined in these groups, and individuals cannot retain them outside of the organization.

The immediate post-war period is a phase during which the cohesion of an armed group is tested. When an armed group’s survival is no longer at stake, the solidarity between the different factions that constitute it can often subside (Woldemariam 2018). These groups must navigate intense internal competition, triggered by concerns over how the profits of peace are going to be shared not only between but also within groups. Such challenges can be more easily weathered by groups whose cohesion does not depend on the robustness of their alliances with local elites and the networks these elites control. When groups have developed autonomous organizational resources, the defection of mid-level commanders, who do not have a following loyal to them personally, does not constitute an existential threat, either to the wartime organization they have built or to the post-conflict regime.

For similar reasons, demobilization is also more difficult when the key actors in a conflict have leveraged rather than displaced local power structures. Such conflicts reinforce the political power of local elites, which they then remain eager to maintain in the aftermath of war. The dissolution of the combat units they control would undermine this power, and local elites in such contexts are likely to resist disarmament and demobilization efforts. When, on the contrary, armed groups replace local power structures with their own institutions, they create a system in which fighters and members are loyal to the organization itself rather than to specific figures and rules trump personal ties. Once the leadership commits to demobilization, it has both the legitimacy and the institutionalized chain of command required to enact it.

Finally, for post-war regimes to rule autonomously they need to centralize power. But again, when these regimes have been established by groups that depend on the support of subnational elites, it is risky for them to attempt to wrestle power away from these elites who often control factions that have not disarmed. In contrast, armed groups that adopted strategies of transformation of local power structures have already weakened these elites, creating conditions more favourable to the centralization of power. Equally importantly, through the wartime institutions that these groups set up to consolidate their support base or maintain control of their territories, they have already developed the kind of organizational and administrative capacity that direct rule requires.

5 Preliminary empirical investigation

To investigate these connections between wartime modes of local engagement and conflict recurrence, I use novel data on the political practices of rebel groups, and compare the rates of adoption across groups involved in conflicts that have recurred and conflicts that have not. A first challenge in implementing this comparison is to define conflict recurrence. This section describes the criteria used to do so as well as the rebel political practices documented. It then presents descriptive statistics on the differences in wartime modes of local engagement between groups involved in recurring versus non-recurring conflicts.

5.1 Documenting conflict recurrence and post-conflict instability

Instances in which a civil war was followed by a durable and secure peace are relatively easy to distinguish from cases in which countries' post-war trajectories have been more turbulent. But it is harder to make distinctions between cases characterized by varying degrees of instability. Should a brief period of peace followed by renewed violence be treated as a lull in a single conflict or an instance of recurrence? Similarly, should the overthrow of a short-lived government installed after the initial phase of a conflict be considered as an episode in an ongoing war or the beginning of a new one? How long should peace last before we can say that the post-war regime has achieved stability? For the purpose of this study, I adopted the following classification rules:

- A conflict has ended (and subsequent rounds of violence therefore mark the beginning of a new conflict) if a settlement was negotiated, a new regime was established, or the war is no longer coded as active in the Uppsala Conflict Data Programme dataset for at least two years.
- A post-conflict regime has secured a stable peace if there are no active conflicts for at least ten years.
- Cases in which the post-war regime has consolidated its power but a subnational conflict is still active are generally not treated as instances of war recurrence unless the subnational conflict constitutes an existential threat for the new regime.

In some cases, such as after the victory of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia or the independence of Eritrea, the post-war regime appears stable, but engages in considerable violence against civilians. One limitation of the approach I follow here is that it does not distinguish between such instances and cases of actual peace and recovery. Examining the determinants of post-war regime violence is an important goal for future studies.

5.2 Documenting rebel modes of local engagement

Data on local political practices of armed groups

To capture differences in rebel modes of local engagement, I documented a range of practices that may allow rebel groups to either replace or co-opt local power structures. The dataset covers the political practices that some armed groups have adopted and that produced the most meaningful shifts in the distribution of power within communities in the territories they control, producing lasting impacts on local politics. More specifically, the dataset includes six variables documenting practices of political transformation that can allow rebel groups to transform local political systems, as well as two practices typically embraced by armed groups that have co-opted local power structures. Table 1 presents the practices of political transformation and political co-optation coded.

Table 1: Practices of political transformation and political co-optation

Variable	Coding criteria
Political transformation	
Attacks against old elites	A group is coded as having conducted attacks against local elites when they removed elites from their position or there are documented instances of elites fleeing rebel governance.
Creation of local councils	A group is coded as having created new local councils or institutions of representation when the literature documents instances of such institutions being established.
Reform of the judiciary system	A group is coded as having transformed local judiciary systems when it has introduced new courts, rules, processes, or personnel.
Redistribution of land	A group is coded as having redistributed land when either holders of large estates are expropriated and their assets reallocated, or collectivized holdings are constituted.
Social empowerment of groups treated as subalterns	A group is coded as having promoted new social norms when its discourse and institutions has enfranchised, at least in theory, groups that pre-war systems treated as subalterns (women, youth, minorities).
Systematic propaganda	A group is coded as having engaged in systematic propaganda if it has appointed specific agents in that role, or developed dedicated tools, trainings, or media to bring forth a new political system and extinguish the legitimacy of the old one.
Political co-optation	
Promotion of norms and identities tied to traditional structures	A group is coded as having promoted traditional norms when it has legitimized its struggle by appealing to tradition, norms of solidarity with one's in-group, and other obligations associated with a shared identity.
Mechanisms of indirect governance	A group is coded as having implemented mechanisms of indirect governance when it has delegated critical functions—such as the acquisition of material resources, recruits, or intelligence—to local elites.

Source: List of variables compiled by the author.

Sample selection and limitations of the dataset

These practices have been coded for a subset of the cases listed in the Non-State Actor (NSA) dataset, coded by Cunningham et al. (2013), which itself includes all insurgent organizations involved in civil conflicts since 1945. More specifically, I coded the practices of datasets that met the following criteria. First, the insurgent organizations had to be coded in the NSA dataset as having controlled territory during the war. Second, it had to meet at least one of following conditions: (i) its mobilization capacity (the size of the armed forces they could raise) matched or exceeded the capacity of the state; or (ii) the organization was active for at least two years. Applying these criteria yields a subset of 126 rebel organizations.

The resulting dataset has a number of limitations. Because rebellion is a clandestine activity, it can be difficult to ascertain and the range of practices that some insurgent organizations deployed is likely underestimated. Because overall more information is available—both in academic and non-academic publications—about conflicts that involved Western powers, this risk is greater for organizations involved in conflicts that did not. The dataset also does not capture variations over time or space in the political practices enacted.

More generally, an important limitation of the overall approach of this study is that it examines differences in the mode of engagement of insurgent groups only. State armed forces may also differ in their approaches to local power structures, and these differences also matter for the redistribution of power during the war. While an analysis built solely on the effect of insurgent

strategies on local power structures can offer insights into how these processes shape the post-war order, the contributions of state wartime strategies of local engagement also merit attention.

5.3 Recurrence by type of conflict termination

This study builds on existing investigations of the determinants of civil war recurrence that emphasize how the likelihood of recurrence depends on how conflict ended. Table 2 presents the share of insurgent groups in the sample involved in a recurring conflict, by type of conflict termination.

Table 2: Share of groups involved in recurring conflict, by type of conflict termination

Ending of conflict in which the group was involved	Share of groups involved in recurring conflict (%)
Agreement	38
Government victory	6
Rebel victory	20
Low activity	39
Overall	29

Source: author's compilation based on a new dataset documenting rebel political practices.

When a group is involved in a conflict that ended with an agreement, it is also more likely to be involved in a conflict that recurred, particularly relative to groups involved in conflicts that ended with a government victory. This is also the case when groups were engaged in conflicts that ended in low activity (violence abated without any agreement being negotiated). These trends are in line with the argument that the resumption of violence is more likely after a settlement than after a victory. At the same time, many groups were involved in conflicts that ended with a settlement and did not recur, and others in recurring conflicts that followed government or insurgent victories. To determine the contribution that wartime modes of local engagement made to these patterns, I compare the practices of groups in recurring versus non-recurring conflicts, considering differences between groups involved in conflicts with similar types of ending. Table 3 shows these comparisons for practices of transformation and co-optation.

Table 3: Average number of practices of political transformation and co-optation

	Recurring versus non-recurring conflict	
	Conflict did not recur	Conflict recurred
Political transformation adopted (out of 6 practices coded)		
Agreement	1.60	0.00
Government victory	1.53	3.00
Rebel victory	3.42	0.00
Low activity	1.53	1.20
Overall	1.93	0.66
Political co-optation adopted (out of 2 practices coded)		
Agreement	0.27	0.89
Government victory	0.33	2.00
Rebel victory	0.25	2.00
Low activity	0.53	0.73
Overall	0.36	1.00

Source: author's compilation based on a new dataset documenting rebel political practices.

The average number of practices of transformation adopted is higher in groups involved in conflict that did not recur (1.93 practices adopted out of 6) than in groups involved in recurring conflicts, which is consistent with the hypothesis that wartime political processes that transform local power

structures create conditions under which post-conflict order tends to be more resilient. This pattern is similar across conflicts with all types of ending. Conflicts that ended with a government victory are the exception, since the Free Aceh Movement, the only group involved in the only conflict that recurred after a government victory, set up new institutions before being defeated. Conversely, the average number of practices of co-optation is consistently greater among groups involved in recurring conflict (1 practice out of 2 coded for groups in recurring conflict versus 0.36 for groups in non-recurring conflict). This pattern also conforms with the hypothesis that when actors at war rely on local power structures, threats to the post-conflict order are heightened.

6 Insights from transitions from rebellion to government in Ethiopia and Somalia

The evolution of the post-war order in Ethiopia and Somalia after insurgent groups overthrew the incumbent regimes in each country illustrates the connections between the modes of local engagement of armed groups and the risk of conflict recurrence. In Ethiopia, a rebel coalition led by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) overthrew the regime of the Derg. That same year, the two dominant armed groups at the time in Somalia—the United Somali Congress (USC) and the Somali National Movement (SNM)—ousted the regime of Siad Barre in Somalia. In spite of these parallel chronologies, the post-war trajectories of the two countries have been remarkably different. This is apparent in how international observers have characterized these two countries. Ethiopia was often referred to as ‘bastion of stability’ in the turbulent Horn of Africa, while Somalia has been seen as the archetype of a ‘failed state’. These characterizations mask complex realities. Nevertheless, the post-war regime in Ethiopia was able to consolidate a new political order that lasted over two decades, while the successive governments that formed in Somalia after 1991 failed to assert their authority over most of the country’s territory. This is in part because the dominant armed groups in the two conflicts adopted distinct modes of local engagement. During the war the TPLF built an extensive governance infrastructure that replaced the old local elites and offered the victorious group the levers needed to rule autonomously. The SNM and the USC, on the other hand, enacted strategies of recruitment and local engagement that further empowered clan-based political structures, initiating a process that led to their own fragmentation.

6.1 The victorious Ethiopian insurgency

During the last stages of the war in Ethiopia, the TPLF created a coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF), that incorporated political organizations from the different provinces of the country. The TPLF formed this coalition not through alliances with existing armed groups, but by manufacturing its own allies. This was achieved largely by helping captured officers that the TPLF had rallied to its cause to establish their own organization. The leaders of these satellite parties were unlikely to leave the coalition as they owed their status to the central committee of the TPLF (Verhoeven 2016). The process through which the EPRDF consolidated its power was not always seamless, and led to clashes with established armed groups beyond the borders of Tigray. Nevertheless, this approach proved effective in fostering a cohesive, stable political settlement. These clashes did not put the existence of the regime at stake the way an internal defection would have (Vaughan 2015). The EPRDF governed from the end of the transition period in 1995 until its dissolution in 2021. The rebel forces and the combatant units who had fought for the Derg were successfully integrated to form one of the most effective armies on the continent. The EPRDF was also able to turn around the dire economic situation it had inherited from the Derg era. Fifteen years after the end of the war, Ethiopia was growing faster than any non-oil-dependent African economy (Lefort 2015). During this phase, the government was generating and attracting resources that could be allocated to poverty reduction programmes (Geiger and Goh 2012). These progresses were achieved even as productivity gains remained

limited, because the state was autonomous enough to intervene strategically in the Ethiopian economy, without being primarily or exclusively concerned with protecting political alliances.

The achievements of the EPRDF government built on the TPLF's strategy of local engagement during the war in several ways. First, this strategy, combined with the reform enacted by the Derg, had considerably impaired the position of old subnational elites, creating a political vacuum that the EPRDF's governance system came to fill, or at least ensuring that these elites could not coordinate an effective resistance to the EPRDF's political project. Before the onset of the war, Tigray was under the control of local 'noble' landowners. After the coup that brought the Derg to power, these landowners launched a reactionary resistance movement (Clapham 1988). When the TPLF established its first base in Tigray, there were, in addition to this conservative rebellion, leftist insurgent groups operating in the area, which were also larger and better equipped. Despite its numerical inferiority, the TPLF treated both as rivals and rapidly came to engage in military confrontations with them until it successfully pushed them out of the region. By the early 1980s, the TPLF had become the dominant insurgent group in Tigray (Young 2006). The formation of the EPRDF can be seen as a continuation of this effort to expand without forming alliances with existing entities.

Second, once in power, the EPRDF built on two pillars of the wartime governance system that the TPLF had established while the conflict was still active: the election of village councils (known as '*baitos*') and the redistribution of land rights that these groups enacted (Young 2006). Once in power, the EPRDF replicated them in other parts of the country, systematically combining the process of local state-building with that of expanding the party. This allowed the TPLF-led ruling coalition to maintain its hegemonic political position for over two decades (Vaughan 2015). The reform of land rights, which the coalition continued to expand to other areas, also contributed to the stabilization of the country, as it meant that most demobilized fighters could be assigned a plot. Finally, during the internal crises that arose after they took power, the central committees of the TPLF and the EPRDF continued to rely on the practices and methods they had adhered to during the war, including the practice of 'criticism and self-criticism', and the procedures organizing their debates and public votes. This rule-based culture also helped create a context conducive to effective demobilization and preserve the committees' unity in the face of internal dissent.

6.2 The disintegration of the Somali insurgent movements

In Somalia, the insurgent movements who had fought against the regime of Siad Barre failed to take over the state. Rather, competition between these groups prompted a succession of new wars. While the nature of these wars has evolved, stability continues to be elusive in Somalia. The series of international interventions launched to improve security and rebuild state structures has largely failed to achieve their goals. This includes the humanitarian UN interventions conducted between 1992 and 1995, as well as the Ethiopian and African Union Mission to Somalia in 2006–07 (Williams 2013). The disintegration of the early rebel groups led to the emergence of new forms of insurgencies, including a new generation of Islamist armed groups and militias.

In the north of the country, the SNM had emerged as an uncontested winner in 1991. Its leadership promptly declared the independence of Somaliland, a move that local communities supported. Yet, the emergence of an SNM-controlled government in Somaliland did not prevent the splintering of the organization. This fragmentation resulted in part from disagreement within its leadership on the issue of independence. The creation of an independent government for Somaliland was the preferred option of clan elders and guerrilla leaders who had closer ties to the organization's support base. Other members of the central committees favoured the formation of a national government based in Mogadishu in which they would have a prominent role

(Compagnon 1998). Eventually, clan elders took over the government formation process in Somaliland, distributing roles based on clan affiliation. Mistrust and lack of funds soon precipitated a crisis, and the competition between clans turned violent following disputes around the demobilization process and the integration of the clan militias into a Somaliland army. This further undermined clan elders' control over ex-rebel forces, to such an extent that they could no longer prevent militias from turning against their own clan.

The USC is the other insurgent movement that played a role in the collapse of the regime of Siad Barre. Since its inception, it lacked organization coherence and could be best described as a loose coalition of sub-clans. Clashes multiplied between these factions as a result of the rivalries between leaders of the organizations, and particularly between Ali Mahdi Muhammad, who had been appointed interim president, and General Mohamed Farrah Aidid, who had been elected chairman of the organization (Compagnon 1998). The USC leadership also contributed to the violence and destruction in Mogadishu after the fall of the regime by condoning revenge killings against other clans. Like the leadership of the SNM, it had little control over its militias and was unable to prevent the looting of the national capital (Bakonyi 2009). The clan elites with whom these militias were affiliated lacked the authority to give demobilization orders that would be followed and, to preserve their position, resisted their dissolution anyway.

While the SNM initially attempted to rally supporters from different clans around an inclusive political project, both the SNM and the USC ended up organizing themselves around clan structures. Clan-based representation came to dominate all wartime politics and sub-clans armed themselves strategically to defend and improve their position under this new violent equilibrium. During the early history of the SNM, some of the founders of the organization sought to establish it as a structure open to diverse clans and pursue the establishment of an equally inclusive new political regime. However, the leadership of the SNM was soon divided between those who supported this project and those who prioritized bolstering the position of the Isaaq clan that dominated the movement. Efforts to ensure that the SNM would remain a multi-clan organization failed in part because of the incumbent regime's skill in fostering mistrust between clan-based factions and arming them against one another (Compagnon 1998). But these efforts were also abandoned relatively promptly because intra-clan solidarity proved to be a more effective lever of mobilization than appeals to broader political goals. In her work on patterns of violence in Somalia in the late 1980s, Bakonyi (2009: 6) explains how the SNM transitioned from a relatively small guerrilla movement into a large insurgency by 'embedding [itself] in the moral economy of the clan system'. SNM members were sent by their leadership to their particular sub-clan within the Isaaq clan-family to request support and remind them of their obligation to assist fellow clan members in distress (this obligation, primarily economic but may extend to political support, is sometimes referred to as '*Qaaraan*') After such an appeal has been made, supported elders and those who withhold support risk lasting damage to their reputation. Because elders played such a critical role in this process, the SNM's successful appeal to norms of solidarity within and between Isaaq sub-clans transformed the internal structure of the organization until its central committee included almost exclusively Isaaq clan elders. This also affected the movement's armed forces. The SNM's military wing had originally been established as an integrated force with a clear command structure. However, by the late 1980s it had become 'a decentralized networks of Isaaq clan and sub-clan militias' (Bakonyi 2009: 8).

The result of these wartime political processes in Somaliland was the emergence of a governance system that shared some of the features of a modern bureaucracy, but remained dominated by traditional clan-based elements. The SNM had a written constitution, distinct departments, and codified procedures for decision making. But by the late 1980s, its leadership was dominated by clan elders. This dual structure was institutionalized when Somaliland declared its independence and became jointly governed by a House of Representatives and a House of Elders ('*Guurti*).

Bakonyi (2009: 2), who characterizes this trend as a ‘re-emergence of localized governance structures’ highlights how it hinders any shift from clan-based political representation.

The internal structure of the USC largely followed the same clan-based blueprint as the SNM. The USC was created as the conflict was already active and its leaders never articulated a clear political programme (Ingiriis 2019). The military forces of the USC were composed of former army members of the Hawiye clan and other smaller Hawiye militias. With the weakening of the incumbent regime already visible, Hawiye sub-clan elders anticipated that the political influence of factions without their own may suffer in the future, and therefore they started to mobilize fighters from their constituency, which helped fuel the growth of the USC. But these were recruits over whom the USC top leadership had little authority. Bakonyi (2009) talks about a process of ‘clanization’ of the insurgent movements that was already well advanced when these movements advanced on the national capital. Compagnon (1998) suggests that the battle of Mogadishu was as much a showdown between Hawiye clan militias and Darood elements of the Somali army as it was a confrontation between state and insurgent forces. Insurgent strategies in Somalia reinforced the relevance of clan structures, exacerbating pre-existing fault lines, and ensuring that any government would remain beholden to the priorities of clan leadership.

7 Conclusion

Dominant arguments on the drivers of civil war recurrence tend to focus on the implications of how a conflict ended. They highlight the ability of victors who have achieved a hegemonic military position to deter further challenges and how commitment problems may undermine settlements. But the fact that countries can relapse into war even after a victory or achieve stability even after a settlement invites us to nuance and expand our understanding of the political processes that fuel recurring conflict, or, on the contrary, support the emergence of stable post-war states.

By examining the specific processes through which post-conflict political order typically comes undone, and by exploring the connections between wartime modes of local engagement and patterns of conflict recurrence, this paper suggests that the stability of the post-war order depends at least in part on whether the efforts of actors at war to consolidate their support base have empowered or weakened local elites.

The role of local elites, and particularly ex-rebel commanders, in shaping the post-war order has been a topic of debate among conflict scholars. Some arguments connect the resilience of ‘warlords’ to state failure. In contrast, others suggest that ‘hybrid’ forms of governance in which local leaders, traditional or not, play a substantive role may be more robust and more effective than the replacement of these forms of governance with institutions resulting from conventional state-building approaches. The findings from this study suggest that after conflicts characterized by political processes that reinforce local power structures and the influence of local elites, threats to the stability of the post-war regime are higher. But further research is needed to build a more comprehensive theory explaining variation in the redistribution of power between the central government and local power brokers during conflict, and how this redistribution may constrain or support sustainable state-building in the aftermath of conflict.

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