BOOK REVIEW

Janet I. Lewis. *How Insurgency Begins: Evidence from Uganda and Beyond*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 272 pp. 18 black and white illustrations. 3 maps. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $34.99. Paper. ISBN: 9781108790475.

This book makes an important contribution to the literature on civil wars by focusing on the initial stages of rebel group formation in weak states. Drawing upon quantitative analysis as well as field research in Uganda, Lewis argues that many rebel groups do not survive beyond their initial formative stage. Instead, they often dissolve due to lack of popular support, or get crushed by state security forces while still too weak to offer resistance. Why do some rebel groups make it past this formative stage, while many others do not? Lewis finds that beyond necessary material resources, armed groups depend critically upon a specific type of support from local civilian populations during the early stages of rebel group formation: secrecy. Her major contribution is to highlight the importance of the informational environment to fledgling armed actors, which shapes these groups' calculus as they seek to become established rebel groups. This includes the spread of information among local populations about the group's capabilities—"rumors," as Lewis terms it—plus ensuring a level of secrecy that will prevent security forces from detecting the rebel group's emergence in time to crush it.

Lewis notes that instances of rebel groups that do not survive beyond their formative stage are seldom recorded in scholarly databases; the only way to register their existence is to trace them via interviews with local populations and careful readings of local news sources.

According to Lewis, rebels form groups in their home regions, usually among co-ethnics, because this is where they are most likely to enjoy an "informational advantage." Lewis is agnostic about whether rural populations support rebels because of shared ethnic kinship ties; instead, she focuses on how rumors travel more effectively among ethnically homogeneous populations. Before a rebel movement has established itself, these rumors influence what Lewis terms "ethnic narratives," which can magnify rebel groups' reputations, bearing information about their capabilities and political platform. During this critical stage, rebel movements will use violence selectively while they attempt to spread this information, while concentrating their efforts on gathering information about local populations' allegiances, and the state's capacity for repression.

In an insurgency's embryonic phase, Lewis argues that gaining the informational advantage matters more to rebels than sustaining an armed campaign.

Thus, nascent rebel movements will be less likely to target civilians indiscriminately, because they rely on civilians for information and depend on them not to betray rebels to state forces. In later stages of armed group formation, however, when rebel groups are more deeply entrenched, they become less reliant on civilian populations and thus more likely to target them. Likewise, Lewis highlights the state's ability to access civilian information networks as a determinant factor in shaping its counterinsurgency capacity. In particular, state intelligence services' ability to cultivate local spy networks proves decisive in the early detection of rebel movements, which can then be eliminated before taking root in the rural hinterland.

Two key concerns arise from this book: Firstly, Lewis's conception of ethnicity as a useful organizing principle for spreading information, but one which does not otherwise meaningfully shape the human terrain from which rebel movements emerge, remains unconvincing. Lewis's model relies upon her characterization of how information travels within kinship groups. Yet in operationalizing kinship, she ignores some of the foundational literature on how and when rural populations in the Global South incubate rebellion. Lewis's framework bypasses established explanations of how kinship and solidarity have undergirded rebels' strength within their ethnic hinterland; for example, James C. Scott's (1977) insights about how oft-overlooked "informal ties" among rural populations are reinforced by shared memories as well as cultural and oral traditions ("Hegemony and the Peasantry" *Politics and Society* 7 (3): 267–96). Like so many works premised upon rational choice theory, this book elides the significance of ethnic identity as a complex source of ties that bind. Secondly, Lewis's book limits itself to explaining the emergence of insurgencies in *weak* states, which raises an obvious selection problem, since weak states are, by definition, prone to splintering and typically lack a monopoly on the use of force within their territory, making them especially vulnerable to rebellion. Moreover, in a global era of accelerating state weakness, the distinction between strong and weak states seems to be increasingly in flux, defying simple characterization.

Nevertheless, Lewis's study is compelling, and it bears important policy implications for detecting and preventing insurgencies before they become violent. It reinforces our understanding of why weak states failed to neutralize rebel movements such as Nigeria's Boko Haram or the jihadist insurgency in Mozambique during their formative stages, leaving them to metastasize into major security threats. Lewis warns that if we overlook examples of rebel groups that failed early, we risk misreading the onset of insurgency by locating it at the moment when violence becomes widespread, and thus misunderstanding the factors that lead to it. Overall, in addition to her modelling of armed group formation, Lewis's book provides much detail about the Ugandan case, including an overview of the interaction between nascent armed groups and the communities among whom they emerge. Unlike many books on civil wars in the Global South, Lewis's study brings to life the experiences and insights of local people, including Ugandan civilians, militants, and state officials. This book thus

represents a notable contribution to both African Studies and Political Science, and can be read profitably by scholars in both disciplines.

Daniel L. Douek 🆔
Department of Political Science, McGill University, Canada
daniel.douek@mcgill.ca
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