'Greed' and 'Grievance' as Motivations for Civil War: The Libyan Case

Introduction

The last decade has been characterised by a lively debate about "greed" and "grievance" as causes of civil wars. Before, arguments about the outbreak of civil wars focused on the irrationality and 'essentially inexplicably primordial qualities' of human beings (Pugh and Cooper, 2003 in Berdal, 2005, p. 688). However, at the start of the 21st century Collier and Hoeffler (2000) argued that their statistical data pointed towards economic incentives as being the main cause of the outbreak of violent rebellion.

There was wide-spread criticism of Collier and Hoeffler's work. One such criticism focused on the fact that it is impossible to impose the type of generalisation of civil wars that they attempted in their work. Civil wars are caused by highly complex social processes that greatly depend on the historical and regional context. Therefore, it is important to study the causes of civil wars in the context of the specific case. In short, it is necessary to move from generalised statistics to case studies (Cramer, 2002; Nathan, 2005, p.11).

The Arab Spring provides new opportunities for the study of civil wars. The wave of protests has led to two violent rebellions: the Libyan revolutionary war and the Syrian civil war. Both are new case studies for the outbreak of violent rebellion and can therefore provide new insights into causes and motivations for civil war and the validity of greed and grievance factors as motivations. In order to do justice to the case, this paper will discuss whether the distinction between greed and grievance is useful to explain the outbreak of civil war in Libya.

Firstly, I determine the arrest of Fathi Terbil as the trigger event that marks the start of civil war. Then I consider the greed thesis and I conclude that the situation in Libya does not conform to the conditions for greed-based rebellion as put forward in Collier and Hoeffler's original work. Nevertheless, there is a lack of research into the motivations of rebels to completely rule out that they were motivated by the prospect of oil income. In regards to grievances, several can be identified. Both vertical inequalities: economic grievances, a lack of political rights, and the lifestyle of the Gadaffi children, as well as horizontal inequalities: regional as well as tribal differences. This collection of grievances seems to have been the main motivation for Libyans to choose violent rebellion. However, most of these grievances have been present for at least a decade. We need to look at the 'rebel's dilemma' and the role that government decisions played in allowing its own demise. When studying the outbreak of civil war, the distinction between grievances and *opportunity* might turn out to be more helpful.

The Start of the Libyan Civil War

In their original paper, Collier and Hoeffler use a number of 1.000 deaths per year as the baseline for 'civil war' (2000, p.4). However, other scholars argue that this is too rigid a distinction and that some conflicts with fewer casualties do share the characteristics of civil war (Nathan, 2005, p.15). This definition risks defining civil wars too late, or too early, and might define a peace when conflict is still ongoing. To overcome this, the 'contested sovereignty situation' definition can be used (Florea, 2012, p.87). This describes a situation in which different groups claim jurisdictions in (parts of) the territory. In Libya, the start of violent protests can be pinpointed on the arrest of

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Fathi Terbil. Protests for his release led to a brutal response by the regime and a 'spiral of violence' in the east (Pargeter, 2012, p.221). By the end of the month most of the east was out of Gadaffi's control (ibid, p.223). By this time, the conflict can be described as a situation of contested sovereignty and thus as a civil war. The next two sections will focus on two explanations for the outbreak of civil war: greed-based and grievance-based motivations.

Greed-Based Explanations

In accordance with other revolutions during the Arab Spring, the Libyan rebel movement focused its narrative on demands for democratic reforms. However, Collier and Hoeffler (2000) argue that all rebellions are accompanied by a narrative of grievance, simply because publicly announcing greed-based motivations would lead to reduced support. As a consequence, their main explanation for the outbreak of conflict is greed: rebels are interested in the profits that they can make from predation upon primary commodities. Collier and Hoeffler argue that the main characteristics of civil war-prone states are: heavy reliance on primary commodity exports, a large percentage of unemployed and uneducated young men, and a sudden and rapid economic decline. Does the Libyan case conform to their definition? It does in part: the country strongly relies on primary commodity exports in the form of oil, and it had an estimated unemployment rate of 30% in 2004. However, up to 2011 the economic growth rate had been relatively stable and education indicators in Libya were relatively positive, with high literacy rates and more years of schooling than other states in the region (CIA, 2012 and Kabbani, 2005). Therefore it is questionable whether we could categorise Libya in the way that Collier and Hoeffler intended.

Additionally, their argument assumes that in states with those characteristics, the opportunity costs of rebellion are low and that citizens are thus likely to attempt to use it to capture the income from primary commodities. However, proxies of a potential for greed can often be used also as proxies for grievances, as exemplified by low schooling in Sierra Leone, which can both be a source of social anger and a reason for low opportunity costs for rebellion (Cramer, 2002, p.1853). With regard to Libya the interpretation could also be two-fold: either there were indeed rebels who saw an economic opportunity in taking control of the oil reserves in Libya, or the lack of distribution of income from oil should be regarded as a grievance that became part of a more general discontent with the policies of the Gadaffi regime.

Furthermore, the behaviour of rebels in the initial phase of the rebellion does not seem to confirm the greed thesis, as there were no reports of significant looting. Nevertheless, the role of oil would merit more study, as the rebels moved to control this resource fairly quickly and it would need to be confirmed that they limited themselves to controlling resources necessary for the war (England and Blas, 2011). As mentioned above, rebel movements have an incentive to portray to the outside world that grievances are their main motivation. As a result, without research that engages directly with their personal motivations it is impossible to determine whether quick profit from oil resources was a major motivation for the rebels. In short, while there were no signs of self-enrichment as a motivation for the rebels, it cannot be disproven that the prospect of riches was a reason for violence.

Another case in which greed-based motivations can come to play a more important role is when the conflict drags on for a long time. Economic interests develop for groups that want to take advantage of the conflict (Keen, 2000, p.27). Evidence for this in Libya is provided by Dirk Vandewalle (2012b) in an interview with Foreign Affairs on 'rogue militias' which developed in Libya during the war and that still attempt to profit from violence after the overthrow of Gadaffi. The role of oil can possibly be seen in this light: apart from being a lifeline for the rebel movement, revolutionaries could quickly get an incentive for, or established interest in, control over oil.

Grievances in Libya

In contrast to the greed-thesis as proposed by Collier and Hoeffler, many scholars still argue that the historic record shows grievances as an important motivation for violent rebellion. Frances Stewart (2002) distinguishes between two types of inequalities: vertical and horizontal. The former refers to inequalities as measured on a societal level between individuals, while the latter measures inequalities between social groups, where one social group is marginalised compared to others. Stewart further argues that both vertical and horizontal inequalities can be motivations for civil war, with horizontal inequalities at least equally likely a cause of conflict, because '[where they]

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coincide with economic and political differences between groups, this can cause deep resentment that may lead to violent struggles' (Stewart and Brown in Stewart, 2010, p.2). When studying the case of Libya, vertical grievances can be found in terms of the economic position of the population, the lack of political rights and the behaviour of Gadaffi's family. Additionally, horizontal grievances exist between regions and between tribes.

Firstly, the Libyan society has suffered under the economic policies of the regime. In the 1990s, international sanctions were imposed on Libya that mainly hit the poorer citizens. To make matters worse, the sanctions regime was abused by the rich class, who managed to sell off food allowances and gained unique access to foreign products. In the meantime, public services were eroded (Pargenter, 2012, pp.172-3). As a result, the gap between the rich and poor in Libya widened. In 2003 this worsened, as subsidies were removed, thereby further angering Libyans (ibid, p.194-5). The combination of poor employment opportunities and the fact that education levels strongly increased in recent decades can be seen as a major source of vertical economic grievance, as it was impossible for citizens to work on the level that they were trained for (Campante and Chor, 2012).

Secondly, political power was uniformly in the hands of the regime. Regional political bodies were ineffective, and Gadaffi was the only one to make political decisions. It was an authoritarian police state without political parties which violated the legal rights of all those that opposed it. Opposition to the regime was kept low through fear. Responses to protests were violent, and prisoners faced torture and executions (Simons, 2003, pp.101-107). These measures ensured the regime's hold on power for a long time, but also caused widespread resentment. Thirdly, in a country that traditionally valued a sober lifestyle, the Gadaffi children exhibited their Western luxuries to the whole population. This further aggravated resentment (Pargenter, 2012, p.211).

Fourthly, the conflict in Libya is characterised by a strong regional division. Historically, the east has been the centre of resistance against Gadaffi. During the second half of the 1990s, Benghazi had been the centre of an Islamist uprising against the regime. According to Pargenter, Gadaffi's response was to keep the East in a 'constant state of underdevelopment', in order to make it feel what it means to challenge the regime (2012, pp.170-1). The Gadaffi policies towards the East were important in forming the necessary resentment for a prolonged rebellion. In 2001, 76% of the citizens in Benghazi felt alienated from the political process and sought change (Warshel, 2012, p.735). It was the East that finally rose up against the regime, with Benghazi as its most important city.

Fifthly, Gadaffi had long exploited the tribal differences in Libya. Initially, Gadaffi played out the different tribes against each other, with three tribes as the main pillars under his regime. After an attempted coup by the Warfalla tribe in 1993, the Libyan leadership consisted entirely of members of the Gadaffa, the leader's own tribe (Martinez, 2007, p.99). This way Gadaffi ensured their loyalty to the regime. As a consequence the rest of the population had no perspective at representation or improving its position and was kept on a leash through coercion. It is argued that tribal loyalties shaped allegiances during the revolution, although they were less important than the regional division (Lacher, 2011, pp.144-5).

Each of these factors can be argued to have played a role in inciting resistance against Gadaffi's regime. As a whole, they led to the image of a Gadaffi regime that was illegitimate and, certainly for those in the East and from outside the Gadaffa tribe, as a regime that caused a lot of suffering. Based on the narrative of the protests, these are the concerns that were crucial in motivating people to take up violent rebellion. However, as with greed-based motivations, we need more detailed research into the motivation of individuals to be certain about which factors were more prominent in driving their behaviour.

The Role of Opportunity

Having established that grievances provide a more likely explanation as a motivation for conflict in Libya than greed, are greed and grievance a useful distinction to explain rebellion? According to Berdal (2005, p.689): 'the conceptual distinction between greed and grievance is *not* in fact terribly useful, either in explaining the motivation or persistence of wars' (italics in original). He argues that, in recent works, scholars have moved to regard the opportunity for violence as the more relevant object of study under the 'greed' category. In response, Collier modified his greed thesis to focus on the feasibility of rebellion (Keen, 2012, p.757). In the next section, I will consider the opportunity for

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rebellion in Libya.

For this, it can be helpful to look at rebellion as a collective action problem. Lichbach (1994) calls this the 'Rebel's Dilemma': the problem that people generally do not participate in protests. In their choice whether or not protest, a rational actor would weigh the costs and benefits of protesting. People who take the decision to take to the street risk punishment from the regime, for example in the form of violence or imprisonment. On the other hand, the decision is determined by the chance that the protest succeeds to overthrow the regime. A more advanced model of these choices can be found in Heckathorn (1988). Solving the Rebel's Dilemma is a dynamic process. The government tries to prevent the rebels from succeeding in overcoming the Rebel's Dilemma, whereas the rebels, to the extent that they are organised, try to find a strategy to overcome the collective action problem.

In the case of Libya before 2011, the Gadaffi government was very consistent in its approach to prevent protests from spreading. 'The state apparatus [Gadaffi] created persisted for so long not through legitimate support, but because the regime simply [was not, or could not be] opposed' (Warshel, 2012, p.734). In such a situation, fear for repression can become a more important concern than countering grievances. As long as the regime has the organisational capacity to keep rebels in check, and the protesters lack strength and cohesion, a leader will manage to stay in power (Potocki, 2011, p.57). In 2011, the protests in Libya finally gained momentum. In that regard, a possible explanation is the unique regional context: the early Arab Spring protests showed that the autocratic regimes were not all-powerful in cracking down on dissidents (Kneissl, 2011), lowering the perceived opportunity costs for protesters.

Beyond 'Greed and Grievance'

The case of Libya seems to suggest that even though grievances played an important role as a motivation for rebellion, the specific circumstances of 2011 were crucial in allowing the outbreak of civil war. It was the simultaneous existence of grievances and the right set of conditions for an *opportunity* for rebellion that both made civil war necessary, and allowed it to take place. In other words, these conditions allowed the Rebel's Dilemma to be overcome. Collier focuses his more recent writings on economic opportunity (Keen, 2012, p.757), where people rebel because they expect to gain a higher income as a result. However, the case of Libya suggests that we should look at a concept of opportunity that takes non-economic factors into account. In Libya the first of these factors is the behaviour of the Gadaffi government, reducing its internal legitimacy and isolating itself from outside support through violent actions and rhetoric (Whitaker, 2011). Additionally, in contrast to what Collier et al. argue it was the *increase* in education that played a role in allowing the revolution to take flight. People with high levels of education are generally more likely to get politically involved (Champante and Chor, 2012, p.174). This, amongst others, was likely to play a role in allowing the rapid organisation of the opposition after the start of the protests (Pargenter, 2012).

Conclusion

Grievances of the Libyan population have long-established roots, but it was not until 2011 that they finally found an effective way to express those grievances. The sequence of events seems to suggest that violent rebellion in Libya was strongly grievance-induced. In general, it can be said, that the distinction between greed and grievance only provides a limited explanation of the outbreak of civil wars. It is useful to provide a categorisation of different potential motivations. However, as previous case studies have already shown, greed and grievance factors often interact and the distinction thus falsely assumes that these are two distinct analytical categories (Berdal, 2005, p.691). The more important question is to what extent the grievances are perceived as fundamental enough for citizens to rebel and whether they perceive that a rebellion is viable. Only by mapping the individual motivations of Libyan rebels it becomes possible to determine which motivation was more crucial in their decision to fight. In general, in order to fully grasp the causes of the civil war, it would be helpful to focus on research that attempts to determine individual rebels' motivations for joining the struggle.

All in all, while grievances seemed to play an important role as a motivation in Libya, 'greed' does not provide a convincing explanation. *Opportunity* would be a more appropriate phrase, as the economic motivations do not come forward out of greed but rather out of the feasibility of the revolution. These economic opportunities also require

several non-economic conditions that make protests possible. Lastly, it would be most helpful to study the *interplay* of opportunity and grievances: where the two coincide, the chances of civil war breaking out are the highest.

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