

From Guerrilla War to Party Politics: The Transformation of Non-State Armed Groups in El Salvador and Nicaragua

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Introduction

Post-war periods can be described as a grey area between war and peace. This applies in particular to contemporary armed conflicts which commonly lack both a formal declaration of war as well as a formalized and commonly acknowledged peace accord. A particularly sensitive problem at this stage is the handling of the violence experts, i.e. members of the military, police or paramilitary units as well as members of diverse non-state armed groups. It is this latter group that dominates the image of contemporary wars.

In various cases in recent history non-state armed groups have emerged victoriously out of war in so far as they were able to achieve their goal of participation in power sharing arrangements. In addition to the integration of respective combatants into existing or newly created security forces, the reorganisation of an armed group as a political party appears to be an appropriate means to direct the pursuit of specific interests of these actors into civilian, controllable and accountable channels, as well as to legally institutionalise their desire for power.

The intent of this paper is to present a couple of theses concerning the process of post-war transformation of non-state armed groups into political parties. These insights have been developed out of the empirical analysis of the respective transformation processes in two cases, namely the former guerrilla groups FMLN (*Frente Farabundo Martí de Liberación Nacional*) in El Salvador and FSLN (*Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*) in Nicaragua. The theses include insights from a comparative view on other cases.

Background of FMLN and FSLN

The transformation of the **FMLN** in **El Salvador** has taken place in the context of an UN-brokered and supervised peace process after the signing of the Chapultepec-peace accords in January 1992. The formation and development phase of five different guerrilla groups in the early 1970s culminated in the establishment of a joint general command in 1980. This joint command strengthened the combative force of the insurgents during the course of the civil war which started with the so called “General Offensive” in 1981. After the 1992 peace accord the FMLN reorganised its group structure and was registered as a legal political party. In 1994 the FMLN participated in national elec-

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tions. Since then it has been able to establish itself as the second largest and most important opposition party in the political system of El Salvador.

The background of the transformation process of the **Nicaraguan FSLN** is very different, especially in terms of its starting point and structural context. The Sandinist movement was founded in the mid 1960s, but was only able to gain what became considerable military strength in the mid 1970s. Its combative force was weakened by the fragmentation of the movement into three different factions which reunified in the joint *Dirección Nacional* in 1978. In the following year the armed group was able to topple the existing authoritarian regime under the Somozas and to take over state power. The following ten years of their rule – which are commonly known as the Revolution – were the actual context of their transformation. During this time the FSLN had to fulfil a dual function: not only did it officially become a political party in 1984, but it was also responsible for administering the state during the period of the Revolution, thus it can be described as having merged with the state apparatus. This transformation process actually culminated in the electoral defeat of the FSLN in 1990 and its subsequent consolidation as the most important and strongest opposition party in Nicaragua.

In comparison to other armed groups that fragmented or started to exercise organized violence again, both cases can be seen as relatively successful, measured both by their own aims but also from a viewpoint that sees it as a success that violent politics are capable of being transformed into a more stable political conflict. The following propositions present factors that seem to have allowed for this transition.

“Old groups” transform more easily

The term “old groups” is assigned to those non-state armed groups that have a civil history as social or political organisations before resorting to arms. Empirical evidence shows that these civil groups tend to react to state violence with the acquisition of their own expertise in violence, increasing as hardliners within these groups gain momentum and internal power within their groups. If the armed group manages to keep a political project (however this is articulated) alive during the course of a war, and if they foster this for example through education and formation of their own cadres as well as their social base, there is a high possibility that patterns of thinking and behaviour relevant to the political field will survive the logic of war and serve as a valuable basis for the (re)transformation process of the group.

Organisation allows for transformation

A similar observation accounts for the organisational structures of the group. The more the internally established mechanisms of power division and decision-making fit the functional requirements of politics, the more successfully the group will deal with the problems during the difficult stages of transition.

In comparative regard, the FMLN and the FSLN had the advantage of being relatively clearly structured organisations. This gave them an edge in dealing with the usual problems of transformation. Decisions at the top – like agreeing to compromises negotiated at peace talks – could thus more easily be transmitted and agreed within these armed groups.

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Also, relatively clear boundaries, and internal organisational discipline of the organisations made it easier to separate internal from external problems. As a consequence, decisions and procedures within the organisations were not that much interrupted and distorted by other conflicts the members had during the period of the transition. Membership was clear, and it meant that decisions within the organisations were followed. Many other less clearly defined groups encounter the problem that there is rather a less defined following that has competing bonds of loyalty. This renders it extremely difficult for armed groups' leaders to enforce their decision and policies.

Context determines structure

For many scholars, policy-makers and diplomats it is extremely difficult to get a reasonable picture of chains of command and of the organisational form and coherence of an armed group they investigate or have to deal with politically. As a general rule, confirmed by the study on the FMLN and the FSLN, these organisational forms usually correspond to the organisational structure of the social environment from which these groups emerge. Studies on armed groups in Africa for example have shown that those that were much better organised came from contexts that had experienced political centralisation earlier, like in the case of kingdoms within the Great Lakes region. In nomadic societies, by contrast, armed groups were not able to build stable hierarchic structures.

Few groups achieve a considerable higher organisational form than their context of origin. Cases in point are Eritrea's EPLF, the LTTE in Sri Lanka, and also the Taliban.

This insight allows for a proxy assumption which could be used to overcome total lack of knowledge: in order to get a picture of an armed group, the spread and durability of organisational forms within the context of its emergence gives a good first clue as to how an armed group might function.

Competition for leadership

During war, leadership within armed groups becomes contested. Whereas in many "old groups", those which existed as parties or other organisations before violence began, leaders may have an advantage in keeping their positions and their recognition due to former achievements. In contrast to that, groups which newly emerge during war are characterized by highly volatile and individualistic forms and personnel structures at their uppermost levels. Being a successful warrior entails the accumulation of charisma and power, and such gains in power are capable of seducing lower level staff members and subalterns with the ultimate possible result that they challenge the incumbents of the top positions.

When a group's organisational forms are well entrenched, this reduces the risk of severe leadership conflicts at the top. Also the sheer size of groups seems to play a role here. Almost any group, however, shows the dynamic that during war certain members climb up as they convincingly show particular military achievements and benefit from strong personal loyalties among followers and low-ranking members.

External and internal legitimisation

There is always the danger of peace processes being spoiled by factions and single persons who see a better future in continuing war than in agreeing to peace. As empirical examples show, the develop-

ment of stable and acknowledged hierarchies and mechanisms of decision-making within the armed groups counteracts this tendency. This point is extremely important in the case of negotiated solutions as these always entail compromises. These have to be communicated internally, and there must be a chance of enforceability.

Also the external transformation of an armed group into a political party requires a minimum of legitimization. Here the composition of the respective political system has to be taken into consideration, as it needs to be sustainable enough, in order to be able to integrate a new player formerly considered as illegitimate and to institutionally absorb the consequences of this process. This process will only be accomplished successfully if the other political actors accept the armed group as henceforth regular political player. The question of how past behaviour, most importantly crimes, on all sides of the conflict are dealt with in the post conflict arrangements obviously has deep significance here.

The need for dual use structures

One necessary condition for successful transition from war to regular politics is therefore that armed groups have “dual use” structures, that they have developed organisational forms that can serve the functions of peaceful politics as well as military ones. The likelihood that this is the case does not only depend on leaders’ skills and social environments. Experience is also a crucial factor. Seemingly, groups that control a territory are more apt in this than those that only randomly administer small pieces of land for short periods of time.

Authority, as the sociologist Max Weber put it, in everyday life simply means administration. In sorting out everyday life problems and in gaining legitimacy in the eye of the population armed groups can win or lose a war before it is actually over. When it is able to come to terms with the challenge of administering territory, it will in general also be more successful in using its apparatus for regular politics.

Winners among losers, losers among winners: individuality matters

The prospects for a successful transformation of an armed group also depend to a large degree on individuals. The analysis of biographies of members of armed groups that have then transformed into political parties show the importance of personal qualities, characteristics and abilities within the process of transformation. This is particularly true for the leaders and members of the upper echelons who in their majority come from the middle class and who have had a formal university education. The cultural and social capital they have acquired during their lifetime facilitates the accomplishment of the learning processes that are necessary for the adjustment to the logic of action in politics. The specific form of capital that is accumulated during the course of war and which is usually depicted as the charisma of the warrior will serve only for a transitional period. So others within the same victorious group might have a quite different fate. If they do not possess the skills required in regular politics they may fall off the wagon quickly. To the degree that these “losers among winners” are able to organise violence independently they form a major threat for post-war settlements, as the current situation in Timor Leste shows.

Dangers of victory

As the case of the FSLN illustratively shows, dangers do not end once a war is settled. Many armed groups face the danger of becoming patrimonial regimes once they succeed in war, meaning regimes

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which function implicitly at least on the basis of the distribution or inheritance of power and position through a system of established (though rarely transparent) rules. Apparently the sacrifices for the eventual victory are so huge that groups turned into government normally do not easily open up the political system for competition in form of free elections. Instead they tend to monopolize the means of power, including economic spoils. This most often draws them into a spiral of de-legitimation. The more power and its spoils they take for themselves, the less this is tolerated by the society. There seems to be a point where the charisma of having won and the distribution of spoils to the followers can no longer counterbalance the decrease of support that patrimonial exclusion produces.