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Performing the Nation-State: Rebel Governance and Symbolic Processes[1]

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ABSTRACT

Rebel groups frequently deploy resources as symbolic expressions of power. What purposes do they serve, particularly in regards to the civilian–rebel relationship? Contrary to analyses that treat such actions as merely rhetorical, I argue that symbolic processes can serve both instrumental and normative purposes for an insurgent government. Specifically, symbolic processes reduce the need for a rebellion to use force to ensure compliance. In addition, they may increase civilian identification with the rebel government, producing several distinct benefits. This chapter illustrates these arguments, drawing on cases from around the world.

Insurrection is an art, and like all arts has its own laws.

– Leon Trotsky

INTRODUCTION

In 2004, I visited a graveyard built by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) near the rebel capital in northern Sri Lanka. Spread across several acres, hundreds of concrete tombs marked the final resting places of dead fighters. Poles flying the bright red insurgent flag, emblazoned with the image of a scowling tiger and two AK-47s, fluttered all around. The overall effect was deeply moving as well as disquieting, as all war memorials tend to be.[2]

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[1] For their helpful remarks, I am especially grateful to Elisabeth Wood and Matthew Kocher, two anonymous reviewers, and all other participants of the two rebel governance workshops.

[2] Similar cemeteries dotted Tiger-controlled territory and were referred to as *Thuyilum Illam*, or "sleeping houses." They were frequently used as sites for insurgent ceremonies and rallies. Prior to the 1990s, most cadre were cremated, in accordance with the Hindu faith. Though the reasons for this shift are debated, the physicality of burial and its symbolic claiming of land is often suggested as a motive. Following the end of the war in 2009, the Sri Lankan government quickly destroyed

FIGURE 4.1 LTTE Graveyard (Courtesy of Ananthan Sinnadurai)

On one level, the construction of the LTTE memorial can be viewed as an appropriate send off to cadres who had given their lives in pursuit of an independent Tamil homeland; similar to nationalist memorials to war dead found around the world. But such a reading barely scratches the surface of the strategic benefits and political valences embedded in such a display. The insurgency never governed an independent nation-state and the memorial was never simply intended to honor the dead. Indeed, civilian informants I spoke with at the time sardonically noted that burial was rarely the preferred choice for disposing of the dead among the largely Hindu Tamil community. Beyond commemoration, the cemetery as shown in Figure 4.1 served a greater purpose – both in the eyes of insurgent leaders who devoted resources to its construction, and, importantly, to the civilian population living within rebel-controlled territory. But what role did it play?

The relationship between symbolic displays and the consolidation of political authority, or "the introduction of aesthetics into political life" as Benjamin (1936) put it, has an extensive history in the academic literature

these cemeteries and other monuments built by the Tigers, a testimony to their perceived potency even after the end of the rebellion.

(Deutsch 1963). Yet, few have questioned the role of the symbolic domain in the control of a territory and a population by an insurgent organization. Rebels often devote considerable effort to developing and propagating an extensive array of symbolic processes. While many discount such displays as propagandistic, others recognize the symbolic domain as an important arena within the larger war. Kalyvas (2003: 476), for example, identifies the mechanism of "violence" as bringing together local and national actors, often with disparate agendas, into a cohesive fighting force. But he also asserts that violence alone is insufficient and that rebel groups must engage with the symbolic domain in order to incorporate what are "a bewildering variety of local conflicts" into a single cleavage that defines the broader movement (Kalyvas 2003: 486). Yet while he calls attention to the centrality of symbolic actions, his work, like most others, places violence at the heart of its analysis. In contrast, this chapter focuses on how insurgencies manipulate the symbolic domain. It suggests that examining these behaviors can provide a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between civilians and rebel groups.[3]

My argument is that the use of symbolic processes by insurgents is often systematic and can serve both instrumental and normative purposes by entrenching and legitimizing the insurgent political authority. Symbolic processes can influence the contours of the rebel–civilian relationship in two ways. First, they may bolster the legitimacy of an insurgent government by fostering greater identification between the rebel political authority and its targeted constituency. Such identification with the political regime can produce several positive outcomes including, potentially, recruits with higher levels of commitment, and, importantly, a lower risk of defection or denunciations by local residents. Second, symbolic processes that effectively reference the coercive power of the regime may reduce the need for the insurgent government to rely on force to ensure compliance.

What role do symbolic processes play in bolstering the rule of an insurgent political authority? Are there patterns to how insurgents deploy them? And what determines their ability to resonate with civilian constituencies? To answer these questions, this chapter combines observations drawn from fieldwork in rebel-controlled territories in Democratic Republic of Congo, Sri Lanka, and Sudan with an analysis of the secondary literature. This chapter first examines how political elites utilize symbolic processes to entrench their rule, with an emphasis on the interplay between nationalist symbology and the legitimacy of modern governments. Second, it shows how insurgent organizations mimic aesthetic strategies developed by the modern state in order to bolster their

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[3] Contrary to earlier work on the subject, I do not suggest that symbolic elements are determinative of battlefield outcomes. See, for example, the work of Kertzer (1988) or Locke Jr. (1995).

rule. Third, the chapter explores how insurgents craft their symbolic repertoires and what determines their reception by civilians, drawing on examples from a variety of recent conflicts.

GOVERNANCE, SYMBOLIC PROCESSES, AND COMPLIANCE

Analyses of the rebel–civilian relationship tend to focus on one of three activities: recruitment, resource extraction, or violence. As a result, scholars have failed to capture the larger set of interactions between an insurgent organization and the population that define the experiences of civilians during war. Recently, scholars have embraced the notion of "governance" to capture this broader relationship. "Rebel governance" refers to the development of institutions and, importantly, informal and formal norms and rules of behavior, by insurgents that regulate civilian social, economic, and political life. Rebel groups that develop a governance capacity are distinctive in that they seek an encompassing relationship with society, as opposed to those that eschew controlling civilian populations. Thus far, most analyses of rebel governance have focused on the provision of public goods. Scholars have sought to enumerate the empirical components of governance – whether security, taxation, or the provision of education and health – while ignoring the role of symbolic processes. However, governance involves not only the formal structures of a rebel civil administration, but also the symbolic processes that governments deploy to give meaning to their actions (Mampilly 2011; Förster, Chapter 10, this volume).

To understand rebel rule over a civilian population, then, it is necessary to expand the definition of governance beyond its instrumental aspects to include the complete set of social norms that define relations between a civilian population and a political authority. In other words, governance not only has remunerative and coercive aspects, but also involves normative behaviors that are crafted through symbolic processes.

Scholars have noted how "performativity" – the repeated enactment of coded normative behaviors to produce a specific subject – is elemental in the construction of state sovereignty by political elites seeking to legitimate their rule.[4] Similarly, insurgents engage in aesthetic activities to mimic the performance of what I deem *symbolic sovereignty*: the use of symbolic processes to bolster sovereign claims. As resistance is often reflective of the power that it seeks to transform, rebel leaders' deployment of symbolic processes reflects an understanding of how the modern nation-state ensures compliance with its dictates and generates identification with its governing institutions among its constituents. By mimicking the behavior

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[4] Performativity is distinct from a performance in that the former is reiterative and citational, while the latter is a single action (see Weber 1998: 79 for a full discussion).

of the modern state, rebels seek to discursively construct a political authority imbued with a comparable legitimacy enjoyed by national governments.

Gramsci's influential discussion of the modern state recognizes the decentralized nature of power, emphasizing the ways a political authority can move beyond mere domination, built on coercion, to achieve hegemony. Hegemony, in Gramsci's understanding, refers to, "The 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group" (1994: 214). For Gramsci, political elites cannot rely solely on coercion, but must also work to "marry their myths with popular conceptions and desires," generating consent and thereby increasing compliance with their dictates (Selbin 2010: 57). Governance, in this view, is "an interpretation of life and an affirmation of legitimate values and institutions" that "provides symbolic and ritual confirmation of the possibility of meaningful individual and collective action" (March and Olsen 1983: 292). In short, it is through non-material actions such as discourses and practices of rule that political elites secure their rule, requiring analysts to look beyond the formal structures of government to understand the power of the modern state (Benjamin 1936; Foucault 1982: 220; Rosenau and Czempiel 1992). In other words, governance strategies extend beyond public goods to incorporate the production of political power through the adoption and manipulation of cultural symbols (Kaufman 2001).

In this way, nation-states, which remain the dominant form of political authority, are both a construction of elite political interests as well as a manifestation of the popular will. The deep emotional resonances of nationalism provide a powerful ideological template through which would-be political elites mobilize political action (Githens-Mazer 2008: 42–43). Symbolic processes are central to the production and manipulation of nationalist emotions: they promote solidarity and social cohesion among a diverse population while imbuing it with a sense of moral unity. Through symbolic processes, political elites work to foster a collective project and make apparent an opaque political body. As such, symbolic performances serve as "both an image of unity and a tool to make it occur" (Foret 2009: 314).

Symbolic processes comprise any thing, action, event, or phenomenon that stimulates emotional responses, conditions actions of members, or expresses the character of the organization to various audiences because members of an organization give it meaning (Brown 1994: 862–63).[5] Individual symbolic processes include discourses, rituals, and objects – that together form a broader symbolic system (Foret 2009: 314). Political symbols are fluid, evolving over time and space, rendering interpretation a field of contestation

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[5] This chapter focuses on non-violent actions, but violence has its own symbolic dimensions as well (Coronil and Skurski 1991).

(a point I will return to later). Symbols do not have meaning separately from projects put forth by political elites. The challenge is to imbue a particular symbolic system with a coherent narrative, or collective frame of reference, that can generate popular support for the political order they seek to propagate. Elites who seek to assert control through symbolic processes must be attuned to the interpretation of symbols by their diverse and often contentious constituencies. Political symbols are most potent when they emerge interactively, directed by elites who draw on spontaneously generated themes and motifs that originate within societies (Lane 1981). Thus, elites select and manipulate symbols to reference existing social conditions and project their political projects to defined constituencies (Foret 2009: 313). As Kaufman (2001: 28) explains, "politics is mostly about manipulating people's emotions, and symbols provide the tools for such manipulation."

Symbolic processes can be divided into two general categories – those that refer to the latent coercive and bureaucratic power of the political authority, and those that strengthen identification between the political authority and the civilian population. The first category, known as referential symbols, are "economical ways of referring to the objective elements in objects or situations: the elements identified in the same way by the same people" (Edelman 1971: 6). These include the use of parades and rallies, the costuming of personnel according to distinctive military arrangements, and other symbolic allusions to the military prowess of a government. They also include rituals of governing such as the issuing of official receipts following a payment of government fees. The second category, called condensation symbols, "evoke[s] the emotions associated with the situation," condensing "into one symbolic event, sign or act of patriotic pride, anxieties, remembrances of past glories or humiliations, promises of future greatness" (Ibid.). These include the adoption and dissemination of official flags, anthems, and mottos that reference historical figures or events. Various media, including pamphlets, books, videos, and even websites, diffuse and reinforce these symbols.

The importance of symbols in propagating a political authority hinges on two central concepts relating governments to their publics: compliance and legitimacy. Compliance with the dictates of a political authority results from two categories of action: those that rely on specific incentives, whether threats of violence (coercive) or offers of material goods (remunerative), or those that rely on a shared set of values (normative) (Etzioni 1975: 4–6; Ahmad 1996). In contrast to coercive and remunerative compliance, normative compliance does not define a clear incentive structure. Rather, it implies consent derived from the coincident preferences of the political authority and the governed. Normative compliance is often regarded as the hallmark of hegemony.

Does achieving normative compliance among the governed imply that a particular authority is legitimate? Though they are related, legitimacy goes beyond normative compliance and implies increased identification and support for the political authority. Civilian acquiescence with the demands of government does not equate with the regime possessing legitimacy. Compliance is a one-way action between an authority and a subordinate, while legitimacy involves a more interactive relationship. In other words, while normative compliance may be achieved passively when the preferences of the ruler and ruled align, achieving legitimacy requires a political authority to deploy symbolic processes that provide a collective understanding of the meaning of its actions that resonate with a target constituency (Selbin 2010; Kaufman 2001). Legitimacy arises not merely from coincident preferences between a ruler and the ruled, but as a result of the symbolic processes a regime deploys to give meaning to those preferences.[6]

The discussion thus far presumes that all political authorities have at least the possibility of emerging as legitimate. And for those that do, the rewards can be great. Governments viewed as legitimate benefit from greater loyalty among the population that can help stabilize their rule, collect resources, and improve their survival prospects (Brown 1994: 863; Wedeen 1999; Eriksen 1987). But even regimes that are unlikely to achieve legitimacy deploy symbolic processes. Why? Part of this is aspirational, as all governments may think of themselves as legitimate, regardless of the truth. But there is another practical reason. Differences between coercive and normative compliance are often hard to discern. As Scott (1990: 66–67) explains, symbolic displays can have powerful effects on the psyche of the governed:

They are . . . a means of demonstrating that, like it or not, a given system of domination is stable, effective, and here to stay. Ritual subservience reliably extracted from inferiors signals quite literally that there is no realistic choice other than compliance. When combined with the exemplary punishment of the occasional act of defiance, the effective display of compliance may achieve a kind of *dramatization* of power relations that is not to be confused with ideological hegemony in the sense of active consent . . . The effect of reinforcing power relations in this way may be, behaviorally, nearly indistinguishable from behavior that arises from willing consent.

Once its potency has been experienced, a political authority need not resort to its coercive capacity in order to produce compliance. Instead, it can rely on symbolic assertions of power, thereby economizing the use of violence (Scott 1990: 48–49). As the subordinated population performs according to the demands of the political authority, the symbols of the regime come to have

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[6] Legitimacy is often credited simply to the provision of public goods. But this confuses legitimacy with effectiveness, which, while often overlapping, are not synonymous. A nation-state that provides extensive public goods may not be considered legitimate, while another with deep legitimacy may be ineffectual in providing public goods.

power independently of its coercive tools. In short, political elites deploy symbolic processes with the hope of bridging the distance between coercive and normative compliance. But even when they are unlikely to make such a transition, the use of symbolic processes can have value by reducing their need to rely on coercion.

The symbolic domain is thus a crucial arena of concern for a political authority seeking to ensure compliance among its civilian constituents. Resistance, the antipodal condition to compliance, may emerge as a consequence of a political authority's failure to safeguard and perpetuate its position in relation to its civilian population. Since domination is an exercise of power designed to extract resources from civilians, it may generate forms of resistance that require considerable efforts by the political authority to reinforce, maintain, and adjust its position. Combined with coercion, symbolic processes work "to manifest and reinforce a hierarchical order," thereby undercutting resistance (Scott 1990: 45).

Scholars have long recognized the use of symbols as an elementary aspect of political action: "Since the inception of the nation state, political leaders have created and used national symbols (flags, anthems, mottos, currencies, constitutions, holidays) to direct public attention, integrate citizens, and motivate public action" (Cerulo 1989: 76–77). These are points well understood by political elites operating within both autocratic and democratic arrangements, who spend considerable effort and resources to universally diffuse the symbols of national sovereignty (Wedeen 1999). National anthems are among the first songs a pupil learns in school and are used by governments at official ceremonies – both grandiloquent and trivial – whether solemn commemorations of the death of a head of state or winning a gold medal in international competition. Rulers across nations "attest to and believe in the power of such symbols," using them "as a tool for creating bonds and reinforcing goals among their citizens" (Ibid., 77–78). In addition, symbolic processes justify decisions made by elites, thereby reinforcing internal hierarchies. Symbols also mark space, delineating a perimeter of the state's claims of sovereign control. In these ways, symbolic and empirical dimensions of sovereignty are distinctive, as well as mutually reinforcing processes.

INSURGENT USES OF SYMBOLIC PROCESSES: SYMBOLIC REPERTOIRES AND REGISTERS

Popular support for a political authority is contingent on the behavior of the regime in power; hence, it may be contested by alternate political actors (Wickham-Crowley 1987). "Multiple sovereignty" occurs where one or more actors claiming civilian adherents compete to be the sovereign political authority within a single state shell (Tilly 1978; Vinci 2008: 303). During a

civil war, popular support responds to the behavior of the belligerents; it is rarely determined at the onset of fighting (Kalyvas 2006: 101–03). Unable to claim the loyalty of the entire public, the incumbent government may choose either to persist in its claim to total control or narrow its focus to target remnants of the original population. Challengers to the incumbent power engage in their own aesthetic offensives, seeking to win over followers to their preferred vision of social and political organization. As such, political violence can transform the symbolic realm into an important arena in the contest between multiple claimants to sovereignty.

What can be learned about rebel governance by looking at the use of symbols by the modern nation-state? Rebel groups, like all organizations, are socially constructed systems of shared meaning designed to aggregate a wide variety of individual agendas and perspectives into a single, purposive coalition. Just as governments are social constructions given meaning by both the rulers and the ruled, rebel governance entails a similarly interactive dynamic. Most rebel groups develop complex relations with their subject populations that they sustain through social, political, and aesthetic processes. Rebels often seek to bolster their authority by borrowing ruling practices developed by the nation-state, most directly by setting up governments that mimic the form and practices of the national governments they seek to replace.

Insurgents deploy symbolic processes, including both referential and condensation symbols, to reinforce internal hierarchies, broaden domestic support, promote organizational cohesion, elicit external support, and defeat adversarial (counter-insurgent) messages (Locke 1995 22). Due to their low cost, symbolic processes allow insurgencies to economize their use of material resources in their asymmetric battles with incumbents. Rebels frequently mimic national governments, building mausoleums or holding annual "Heroes' Day" rallies to commemorate the dead as with the LTTE, printing currency and designing a "national" flag like the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), or borrowing the language of the state in their daily interactions with civilians as did the rebels in Côte d'Ivoire (Förster, Chapter 10, this volume). If insurgents do use symbolic processes strategically, can we understand their actions systematically?

A *symbolic repertoire* consists of the set of symbolic processes available to rebel groups as they seek to influence the behavior of different social and political actors. It is an ensemble form of political communication that functions by linking together the rebel political authority with an intended audience, thereby providing a recognizable blueprint for interaction (Githens-Mazer 2008: 44). In the social movement literature, a repertoire includes the variety of processes given meaning by non-violent strategies of resistance. As Tilly notes, repertoires "provide approximate scenarios – and choices among scenarios – for political interactions" (2003: 46). He continues: "with scenarios available, participants on all sides can generally coordinate their actions more

effectively, anticipate likely consequences of various responses, and construct agreed-upon meanings for contentious episodes." As with non-violent movements, insurgents similarly deploy symbolic repertoires to provide "templates for interaction, bases for collective memory, and switchpoints for collective struggle" (Ibid.).

For rebel governments, the paradigmatic symbolic model is not the non-violent social movement, but the nation-state. Repertoires of symbolic action drawn from the nation-state have a number of advantages for would-be insurgent rulers. Most prominently, as civilians are socialized by their prior interactions with the incumbent government, reproducing practices developed by nation-states references a mode of governance with which most civilians are already familiar:

Imageries are constantly re-created through performance … Many are embedded in countless everyday practices. At roadblocks, words are uttered in the language of the state. At ceremonies, speeches are delivered in the same rhetoric of official language as before. From the village level through the small subdivisions to events at the headquarters of the rebellion, the same re-enactment of statehood seems to penetrate the new political order. (Förster 2012: 19–20)

For example, flags within rebel-controlled territory serve similar purposes as they do for national governments: delimiting the conditions of political domination (Foret 2009: 314). When rebels take control of a village or city, they signal the emergence of new political authority by raising their flag and propagating other aspects of their symbolic repertoire. Rebel parades and rallies also serve as symbols of political domination. Such rituals effectively dramatize the latent coercive power of the political authority without directly displaying its coercive capacity.

Rebel rulers and their civilian subjects engage in a set of performative acts – cued by symbolic markers borrowed from the nation-state – that reinforce a specific form of authority relationship between the government and the governed. A symbolic repertoire promulgates a pattern of shared meaning between the insurgent government and its subject population meant to condition the latter to behave according to the expectations of the rebel authority. Put another way, alongside violence, insurgent organizations exercise power through symbolic processes that promote shared frames of reference in order to reinforce patterns of activity that preserve their dominance and promote their political agenda (Brown 1994: 863; Selbin 2010: 24). In this way, symbolic repertoires are essential for *socializing* civilian populations that rebels engage with, increasing identification between the organization and its various constituencies. Successfully implementing a collective frame of reference can also constrain the behavior of competitors to the organization by making support for the rebels appear natural (Kalyvas 2006: 125). In essence, deploying a symbolic repertoire is an attempt by a rebel government to performatively legitimate its sovereign claim. Failing to do so can undermine the authority of the insurgent government,

rendering it vulnerable to denunciations or even defections by residents within the area of control.

Most insurgents exercise dominance without hegemony – or, put differently, the initial rebel claim to authority is predicated primarily on its coercive power (Guha 1997). While a state government claims the right to rule through its presumed contiguity with a nation, a rebel government, even one representing a nationalist claim, cannot take its affiliation with a specific population for granted. Its rebellion, by definition, renders that claim constantly contestable. As a result, rebels do not attempt to legitimize their rule solely by providing services, but must also engage in a symbolic offensive to give meaning to their actions. As such, symbolic repertoires combined with the provision of public goods contribute to the broader Gramscian ambition of generating hegemony.

In this way, symbolic repertoires play their greatest role in fostering the movement from coercion to consent. In order to go beyond coercion and gain legitimacy, a rebel authority cannot simply mimic a pre-existing template, but must ensure that its actions resonate with a targeted audience, typically by deploying effective condensation symbols. Unlike states, which rely on massive and repetitive inundation of symbolic actions to generate civilian identification with their sovereign prerogative, insurgents operate in a far more heterogeneous social environment riven with internal power struggles and external challengers. As a result, rebel deployment of symbolic repertoires must be attuned to a variety of audiences and contexts in order to be effective.

Understanding how rebels deploy symbolic repertoires requires an awareness of two related concerns: the *source* of the process and the *audience* toward whom it is targeted. Combined, the two constitute a *symbolic register*, the timbre at which a particular symbolic repertoire is calibrated. Successfully calibrating a symbolic repertoire can help foster a collective identity that bolsters the allegiance of civilians to the political authority, while failing to do so can embolden challengers. Condensation symbols are especially important in this regard, as their meaning is necessarily derived from the psychological needs of the civilian audience (Edelman 1971: 7). By grounding various generic rhetorical positions – "independence" or "reform," for example – within a particular social and historical context, condensation symbols provide form to insurgent aspirations. As Hunt notes in her study of the symbolic dimensions of the French Revolution, "By making a political position manifest, they made adherence, opposition and indifference possible. In this way they constituted a field of political struggle" (1984: 53). Referential symbols, meanwhile, play an essential role in demonstrating the latent coercive power of the rebel regime. In the next section, I explore what determines whether a symbolic repertoire will resonate with civilians, or be dismissed as propaganda.

AUDIENCES

To calibrate its message, an insurgent government must consider how it will relate to different audiences.[7] Rebel leaders must always take into account the social context. As context varies, so will the interpretation of any message. The same message may have diametrically opposed interpretations for different audiences – threatening or reassuring, for example. Thus, leaders must make strategic decisions in framing their messages. The challenge for insurgents is to put forth coherent messages that reinforce their political authority without alienating their core constituencies. Though it is challenging to craft individualized messages to multiple audiences, successful insurgent rulers often demonstrate considerable dexterity in doing so. The key is to send a consistent message to each distinct audience category. Unclear or contradictory messages may undercut civilian support, leaving the group open to challenges by the incumbent or other armed actors. As Kriger (1992: 157) notes in her study of Zimbabwe, "Inconsistent guerrilla appeals complicated winning popular support and confused even those who may have wished to be responsive."

Insurgent leaders primarily deploy symbolic processes to generate support from an internal core constituency. Symbolic repertoires directed toward the core constituency often rely on condensation symbols intended to stimulate pride, honor, or outrage. By effectively deploying a symbolic repertoire, insurgent leaders seek to define a new collectivity as the basis for insurgent action, fostering greater individual identification with and attachment to the insurgent cause among the core constituency (Kertzer 1988: 181). The goal is to bring together the disparate agendas at the local level with the central cleavage advanced by insurgent leaders: "the reliance on the same central symbols and messages may ultimately integrate and fuse the multitude of local cleavages into the master cleavage" (Kalyvas 2003: 487).

Failing to do so leaves an insurgent organization open to challenges to its rule. Counter-insurgent campaigns often work to create divisions between the leaders and their constituents. A successful symbolic campaign can mitigate divisive counter-insurgent strategies by providing an internal constituency a rationale with which to understand their participation in and support for the rebellion (Githens-Mazer 2008: 43–44). In addition, symbolic repertoires provide a collective frame of reference for the core constituency in their interactions with the rebel bureaucracy, as well as providing a tentative roadmap of the future social order that the insurgency

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[7] Insurgents also direct symbolic displays toward the incumbent state and its internal supporters, but the dynamics of such displays are qualitatively different than the compliance or legitimacy discussed here. Such displays are designed to create an appearance of unity between the rebel leadership and the subordinate population, giving the impression a discrete rebel organization leads a popular movement. Successfully fusing the core constituency with the insurgency – at least in the minds of the incumbent state and its own allied constituency – can increase the strength the insurgency possesses and the perceived threat it poses.

seeks to implement. They also serve as a visible manifestation of the insurgent claim to speak on behalf of the core constituency, whether or not such claims are warranted.

Cadre and potential recruits compose a second internal audience for targeted symbolic appeals. The blurring of lines between combatants and non-combatants characteristic of internal warfare makes them an especially relevant audience. Such identification may motivate civilians to perform a diverse array of roles, including front line soldiers, mundane positions within the insurgent bureaucracy or manning supply lines. In addition, symbolic processes that glorify the insurgent agenda may ameliorate anxieties present within potential recruits who have misgivings about the great risks of participation and low probabilities of success. By stirring emotions of outrage or pride, condensation symbols also play an important role in the socialization of cadre, producing greater discipline among troops and better relations between cadre and civilians.

Insurgent leaders must also be wary of how the messages they send are perceived by potential opponents residing within territory they control. These groups include both those that the insurgent leaders hope to mobilize and those unlikely to join. Groups marginalized by a rebel political authority may not only refuse to cooperate with insurgent rule, but could emerge as violent challengers to its sovereign claim. As with autocratic governments, symbolic processes targeting oppositional voices usually rely on referential symbols – such as military costuming or parades – that make apparent the latent coercive power of the rebel regime. Using violence against civilians is costly for insurgents, both materially and reputationally. Rebel leaders economize the use of violence by cowing potentially oppositional constituents into compliance. Such aesthetic displays of might also delineate a perimeter of control, signaling to potential challengers the scope of the insurgent claim to a specific territory and population.

Two additional audiences not resident within the insurgent area of control constitute secondary constituencies for rebel symbolic overtures. First are those members of the core constituency living outside of rebel control – either a diasporic population or those living within incumbent-controlled areas. Generating strong feelings of identification and attachment with the rebel government is important as such individuals can play an important role in shoring up governance capacity – whether serving as ad hoc ambassadors, lending technical expertise, running organizations that funnel humanitarian resources, or raising funds for the broader struggle. Second, insurgent organizations frequently craft symbolic messages to transnational actors including activist networks, aid organizations, religious institutions, international agencies, and foreign governments that may provide direct material and legal support to insurgents deemed to represent legitimate causes (Bob 2006; DeWaal 1997; Branch and Mampilly 2005). Embracing symbols that present a rebel political authority as sovereign reinforce its legitimacy as a

political actor to both audiences (Weber 1998: 93; Coggins, Chapter 5, this volume).

Insurgent leaders are often criticized for masking their true intentions behind symbolic and rhetorical constructions. However, since understanding the audience category is necessary to decipher the meaning of any communicative action, such criticism is often superficial (Edelman: 1971: 11). Indeed, the advantage of having a repertoire of symbolic actions available is precisely that it allows insurgents to cultivate different audiences with distinct messages. The task for analysts is not simply to dismiss insurgent symbolic constructions, but rather to determine the intended audience through a close reading of its symbolic repertoire.

The challenge of using symbols to relate successfully to various audiences is brought into stark relief when comparing the symbolic repertoires of two related insurgencies in the eastern Kivu provinces of Congo (DRC). While the leaders of the Rassemblement Congolais pour la Democratie (RCD) (1998–2003) failed to build successful relations with civilians, the Congrès National pour la Défense du Peuple (CNDP) (2006–2009) overcame its narrow ethnic identification as the army of the Congolese Tutsi population. Both insurgencies sought to frame their struggles in national terms, but were perceived as fighting on behalf of the Congolese Tutsi population. While Congolese Tutsi did dominate the top brass of the CNDP, the RCD actually had substantial representation from other ethnic communities within its higher ranks (Stearns 2008). Yet, the RCD's governance efforts were stymied by the continued perception that it was a Tutsi organization, despite efforts by the leadership to parade its indigenous roots (Mampilly 2011). The RCD's failure to deploy a resonant symbolic repertoire was spectacularly demonstrated by the vigorous challenge to its rule posed by the Mai Mai, a variety of indigenous militias that challenged the insurgency's control on nativist grounds, often by deploying symbolic processes that reinforced their claims to autochthony (Tull 2004; Jackson 2006). The RCD's failure to develop an effective symbolic repertoire eventually led even its core constituency to ostracize it (Mampilly 2011).

In contrast, the CNDP was far more successful in generating compliance with its rule among its diverse ethnic constituents, even though its leaders were largely Tutsi and its rank and file drawn from the Rwandophone community. By vigorously utilizing its symbolic repertoire to proclaim a nationalist message, the CNDP under Laurent Nkunda was able to engender a greater degree of identification with its rule compared to its predecessor, leading to higher degrees of popular support (Stearns 2008). This was not a pre-ordained outcome as it shared many common goals and even personnel with the RCD.[8] At the outset of fighting in 2006, Nkunda was widely perceived as a Congolese Tutsi leader

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[8] Nkunda himself got his start by serving as a major in the RCD. Other top CNDP leaders similarly had substantive histories within the RCD.

fighting for his community. However, he changed course after facing challenges to his rule from non-Tutsi local elites and militias. As a result, the CNDP became more attuned to the grievances of indigenous groups marginalized by the RCD.

Nkunda, a savvy populist, recalibrated his symbolic repertoire in order to foist a broader frame of reference upon the civilian population. He embraced potent symbols of Congolese nationalism in his public rhetoric that were reflected in the CNDP's evolving aesthetic offensive. Initially, Nkunda had focused on a narrow constituency, claiming he was fighting to prevent a "planned genocide" against the Congolese Tutsi as well as for the repatriation of his "ndugu" (relations or co-ethnics) in exile (IRIN 2004). By 2007, he had shifted dramatically, stating bluntly that, "I am not fighting for the Tutsi" (Wetshi 2007). Nkunda found a surprising model in Mobutu Sese Seko, the former president, drawing from his attempt to craft a distinct Zairean identity (*Zairois*): "I have always told people that we should follow Mobutu's example of how to 'manage' the country's ethnic groups" (Ibid.). By 2008, he completely rejected the notion that he was fighting on behalf of an ethnic community altogether, repositioning the CNDP as a nationalist movement (BBC 2008).

The evolution in the CNDP's ideological position was clearly reflected in its shifting symbolic repertoire. Most dramatically, the rebellion adopted a flag that was little more than a re-colored version of the former Zairean flag. In addition, an anthem proclaiming the rebellion's nationalist goals was produced, often providing the backdrop for rallies and parades as the insurgency moved into new territories (McCrummen 2008). The effective recalibration of its symbolic repertoire increased identification between the rebellion and its various constituents, as the steady growth in support from non-Rwandophone Congolese demonstrated. Challengers who had once effectively framed its predecessor, the RCD, as an illegitimate foreign creation were largely silenced. Nkunda eventually even emerged as a rival to President Joseph Kabila (before being defanged by his Rwandan patrons).

SOURCES

To understand the imputed meaning of any particular symbolic repertoire – its symbolic register – we must examine the various sources insurgent governments draw on when engaging in symbolic politics. Well-calibrated repertoires do not spring forth fully formed by the rebel command; rather, they emerge interactively through the constant interplay between communal sources and rebel initiative. Insurgents must rework existing symbols that resonate with their audiences' collective memories or emotions. As Connerton explains, "images of the past commonly legitimate a present social order. It is an implicit rule that participants in any social order must presuppose a shared memory" (1989: 3). However, historical sources are never transmitted directly.

Instead, they are refracted through the political agenda of insurgent leaders. In this way, insurgents play with the "imageries of statehood that spectators had in mind, trying to use them as an index of their own position in the emerging power game" (Förster 2012: 16).

Every rebel organization develops its own distinctive political culture, defined as "the values, norms, practices, beliefs, and collective identity of insurgents." Political culture is not a static enterprise; rather, it evolves in tandem with "the experiences of the conflict itself, namely, previous rebellious actions, repression, and the ongoing interpretation of events by the participants themselves" (Wood 2003: 19). The political culture of a rebellion influences the selection, deployment, and meaning of symbols in its repertoire – in other words, how it chooses to represent itself publically (el Houri and Saber 2010: 71). The goal of the leadership is to construct an image of the rebellion that can push back against portrayals by the incumbent or other challengers effectively.

Insurgents draw symbolic processes from three sources: first, local themes and motifs embedded within the memories of a specific community; second, recognized or latent nationalist symbols; and third, transnational ideological formations. These sources generally map onto one of three types of strategic agendas – ethno-nationalist, national reformist, or transnational. But insurgent leaders frequently vacillate between them, drawing on two related characteristics of political symbols: multivocality and ambiguity.

"Multivocality," the variety of meanings that can be attached to the same symbol, gives insurgents the flexibility to compete with the incumbent over the meaning of national symbols (Locke 1995: 25). As Edelman (1971: 11) explains, "Political symbols bring out in concentrated form those particular meanings and emotions which the members of a group create and reinforce in each other. There is nothing about any symbol that requires it stand for only one thing." However, as the incumbent often has far greater resources available for its symbolic offensive, insurgents may choose to hedge their bets by deploying multiple messages. Hence, "ambiguity," or the lack of a precise meaning imputed to a symbolic repertoire, is a crucial, if delicate, strategic necessity. Ambiguity includes cases in which the insurgents draw on multiple sources as well as those in which they target multiple audiences with distinct messages. Each specific constituency should see in the symbol what rebel leaders intend (el Houri and Saber 2010: 76). The risk of ambiguous political communication is that the core audience may not understand the discrete message it is being sent and come to feel ostracized by the insurgency's overtures to others.

For example, southern Sudanese informants frequently claimed that SPLA leaders sent covert signals regarding the secessionist goals of the movement despite its public rhetoric of national reform. They pointed to the development of distinctive symbolic appeals such as the adoption of a new flag or the development of an original currency that could be interpreted both as a

FIGURE 4.2 Bank of New Sudan notes (Source: Personal collection of Peter Symes)

reference to a reformed Sudan as well as an aesthetic manifestation of an emerging nation. Such ambiguity was essential for the rebellion as it sought to generate support among a core constituency of southerners while simultaneously cultivating supporters in the rest of the country. Prepared in 2002, "New Sudan Pounds" demonstrate both the ambiguity and multivocality of SPLA symbolic processes. Bearing the insignia of the nonexistent "Bank of New Sudan" and signed by a high-ranking figure within the rebellion, the notes depicted scenes that represented Sudan's distinctive African heritage, such as the Nubian figure on the five-pound note, a clear nod to the secessionist agenda (see Figure 4.2). Yet, the currency also sought to co-opt Sudan's Arabic heritage,

printing one side of the notes in Arabic script in order to challenge the incumbent's interpretation of the war (Symes 2011). By representing the Arabic script as integral to its political culture, the rebellion rejected Khartoum's narrative of the war as being between Arabs and non-Arabs. Posters prominently depicting the entire array of bills were a regular feature in many rebel administrative offices during my visits in 2004 and 2005, even though the currency was never adopted for general usage.

Ethno-nationalist leaders commonly draw from local cultural themes to unify their core constituencies and distinguish them from those of their neighbors. Condensation symbols that evoke myths of shared history, heroic figures, or common beliefs can produce both cognitive and emotional effects within a core constituency (Kaufman 2001: 29). Insurgent leaders often use a "hidden transcript": coded words and actions designed to speak to a targeted constituency, without alarming or alienating other audiences that may be paying attention (Scott 1990: 103). These references are intended to motivate collective action among members of a core constituency by facilitating "individuals to locate and contextualise their own personal experiences within the broader collective" (Githens-Mazer 2008: 44). They also provide a patterned cognitive structure that makes it possible for individuals to anticipate future developments within their society (Eriksen 1987: 261). The effectiveness of localizing symbolic repertoires rests on the degree to which particular symbols are embedded within a specific collective consciousness and resonate with members of that community.

In pursuing a strategic agenda of secession, LTTE leaders drew heavily on local cultural references engrained within the Tamil population to shore up their governance efforts (Roberts 2009). Names of governance structures were drawn from pre-existing terms from the earlier, independent Tamil kingdom in Sri Lanka. Thus, the civil administration was referred to as *Atasialthurai* and headed by a *Porupalar* (person responsible). The legal system was adapted from the Tamil cultural norms known as *Thesavalamai* that regulated inheritance, marriage, and other civil practices (Mampilly 2011). The insurgency inundated areas under its control with militaristic images, songs, festivals, and other symbolic displays drawn from the folk religious practices of rural Tamils, despite the LTTE's officially secular stance (Roberts 2009: 85–89). Massive billboards of Prabhakharan superimposed against a backdrop of the imagined Tamil homeland invested the rebel leader with the "aura of a deity," conflating the secular goal of secession with the command's Edenic aspirations (De Mel 2001: 221).

The aggressive and dramatic symbolic repertoire adopted by the rebellion accomplished multiple goals for the insurgency. Within the core constituency, it nurtured the belief that Tamils could challenge the power of the Sri Lankan state, because it adopted many of that state's rituals and forms (De Mel 2001: 223). Tamil informants frequently referred to the insurgency's restoration of a sense of dignity and equality after years of living as second-class citizens. Even

critics such as the late Dharmaretnam Sivaram agreed that the insurgency played an important psychological role in restoring Tamil dignity (interview, December 2004). By forcefully claiming the mantle as the sole representative of the Tamil cause, the LTTE's symbolic repertoire had the intended effect of fusing the Tamil population with the insurgent organization to both internal and external audiences, even though many Tamils had suffered at the hands of the rebellion. The massive use of militarized symbols within rebel territory also carried a warning for potential challengers.

Insurgent organizations that seek power nationally also draw on local sources, but risk the possibility that groups will interpret localized references differently (Connerton 1989: 3). The risk in using local references to define who is part of the struggle is that this approach also defines who is not, reducing the insurgent's potential base of support. Nevertheless, insurgencies that seek power in the center often draw on pre-existing cultural tropes, recognizing the challenge of overcoming the incumbent advantage within the symbolic realm. Some insurgencies exhume and empower entirely new national symbols altogether. In a 2011 case, Libyan rebels resurrected the image of the local anti-colonial leader Omar Mukhtar, who had been assassinated by the Italians in 1931 (McDonnell 2011). Pasting his image onto the prior "Kingdom of Libya" flag, the National Transitional Council plastered his visage throughout insurgent-controlled towns in an effort to provide a central rallying figure around which the varying strands of the anti-Gaddafi forces could unite.

The Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist (CPN-M) provides an unexpected, but telling example of the multivocality and contestability of national symbols. Though grounded in Maoist revolutionary doctrine, the Brahmin leaders of the organizations – Baburam Bhattarai and Prachanda – sought to legitimate their leadership by identifying with the country's royal heritage, particularly the Hindu Kingdom's leadership by warrior-kings. Prince Gyanendra, the incumbent who ascended to the throne as a result of the massacre of the royal family, faced questions about his legitimacy by the Nepali population (Lecomte-Tilouine 2003: 13). Prachanda exploited this weakness by visually situating his leadership within the legacy of Prithvi Narayan, the founder of the Shah dynasty that united Nepal in the mid-eighteenth century. The Maoists sought to appropriate this legacy through displays that depicted the insurgency's leaders as the true inheritors of the royal legacy, as Figure 4.3 demonstrates.

Insurgencies also draw on transnational sources to connect their strategic objectives with broader global struggles, particularly those that advance a specific ideological or religious agenda. Symbolic repertoires translate these themes for local audiences and can be particularly useful for groups seeking to overcome internal ethnic differences. Rebels professing a communist agenda commonly draw on transnational symbols to magnify the significance of their struggles. For example, the CPN-M and the Communist Party of Peru, better
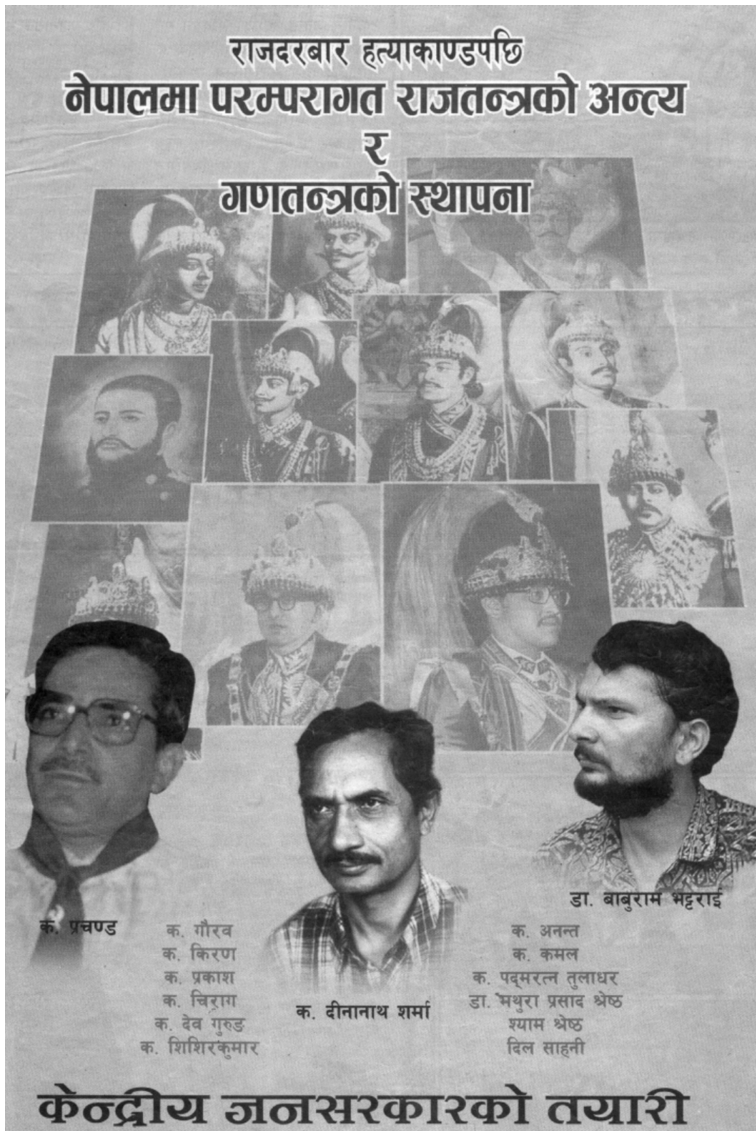
FIGURE 4.3 CPN-M leaders as inheritors of the Shah dynasty (Source: Lecomte-Tilouine 2003)

known as Sendero Luminoso, both adopted bright flags embellished with a simple hammer and sickle during their protracted struggles. The CPN-M kept this symbol of its fidelity to Maoism even after the Chinese leadership repeatedly rebuffed its overtures. Religions similarly provide a unifying

FIGURE 4.4 Taliban Flag

force for insurgents as they can bridge deeply felt local beliefs and practices with national and international faiths. Rebels have drawn on Jewish, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist themes – for example, the Stern Gang (British-controlled Palestine), the Irish Republican Army (Northern Ireland), the CPN-M (Nepal) and LTTE (Sri Lanka), and the Chushi Gangdruk (Chinese-controlled Tibet).

More recently, Hezbollah (Lebanon), Groupe Islamique Armé (Algeria), Abu Sayyaf (Philippines), and Al Shabaab (Somalia) have drawn on Islamic symbols to consolidate their rule. Incorporating Koranic references allows insurgents to project a veneer of legitimacy onto their governments by positioning themselves as upholding Islamic regulations. By integrally linking the honor of the faith with the success of the insurgency, Islamist militants delegitimize opposition by labeling challengers enemies of Islam itself. Islam also provides an ideology that can bind together different ethnic groups behind a single cause (Mamdani 2009: 138). For example, in Pakistan, the Taliban insurgency was able to downplay its Pashtun origins and foster a multi-ethnic movement by stressing its Islamic credentials.[9] The early Taliban flag elegantly represented its strategic use of symbols. Over a simple white background, it displays the *shahada* (the Muslim declaration of belief) in stark black calligraphy as depicted in figure 4.4. Instead of simply appealing to Pashtuns, the flag calls all Muslims to unite.

The benefit for an insurgency that successfully transnationalizes its objective is access to resources from co-believers abroad, or even state support from sympathetic regimes. However, this strategy can be risky. For example, if they become too closely associated with the Al Qaeda network, they are likely to draw the ire of the United States. Al Shabaab came to be viewed as an Al Qaeda affiliate due to their use of Islamist symbolism, despite its origins in the Union of

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[9] The Taliban may have learned from earlier governmental precedents. The Pakistani dictator Zia-ul-Haq used Islam to temper ethnic tensions that threatened to tear apart the country in the late 1970s (Ahmad 1996).

Islamic Courts, a local insurgency with few transnational ties (interview with a U.S. counterterror official, 2008).

CONCLUSION

The symbolic dimension of rebel governance allows us to consider the breadth of the relationship between an insurgent political authority and the civilian population under its control. Symbolic repertoires are an essential aspect of how insurgent governments position themselves vis-à-vis a particular civilian population. Symbolic processes that effectively signal the latent coercive power of the insurgent regime reduce the need for violence to ensure compliance and inhibit defections, while those aiming to legitimize the insurgent political authority in the eyes of a particular constituency can produce a wide variety of material benefits, including better recruits and other types of support, if calibrated at the appropriate register. In this way, symbolic and empirical aspects of governance are mutually reinforcing. While rebels almost never become juridical sovereigns without winning their civil wars, attempting sovereign behaviors, in both the empirical and symbolic sense, influences – and even drives – rebel development of civilian governance.

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