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Violent or non-violent action? Wartime civilian resistance in Colombia and Mozambique

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A B S T R A C T

Why do some communities resist armed groups non-violently while others take up arms to do so? Recent research has advanced our knowledge of the causes and consequences of wartime civilian resistance. Yet, the factors explaining the emergence and outcomes of civilian resistance do not account for *how* people resist. Despite its important consequences for the politics and geography of war, the issue of why civilians engage in violent or non-violent forms of resistance remains poorly understood. We rely on extensive original fieldwork to examine within-case and cross-case variation in violent and non-violent resistance campaigns during the Mozambican and Colombian civil wars. We argue that forms of resistance are linked to prior experiences of collective action, normative commitments, and the role of local political entrepreneurs. Previous experiences make repertoires of resistance “empirically” available, while prevailing local social and cultural norms make them “normatively” available. Political entrepreneurs activate and adapt what is empirically and normatively available to mobilize support for some forms of action and against others. Our analysis advances emerging research on wartime civilian agency and has significant implications for theories of armed conflict, civil resistance, and contentious politics more broadly.

1. Introduction

Civilians respond in various ways to armed conflict. Some flee from violence, joining the millions of internally displaced people and refugees that wars leave behind. Others cooperate with or even join armed groups, strengthening such groups’ support base and territorial control. Still others actively resist armed groups in an effort to reduce violence, prevent armed groups from establishing local order, or carve out local pockets of peace in active warzones. What civilians do in wartime has the power to alter the politics and geography of war. Yet, *how* they do it is also important.

Among those who resist, some stick to non-violent action, while others organize violence of their own. In the Mindanao region of the Philippines, for example, communities non-violently refused to cooperate with both the New Peoples’ Army and the state armed forces, creating “Zones of Peace” that caught the attention of the international community as prime examples of grassroots peace (Avruch & Jose, 2007). By contrast, during the second civil war in Southern Sudan, some communities defended themselves against the Sudan People’s Liberation Army through violent resistance, forming what became one of the most renowned factions in the war, the Fertit militia (Blocq, 2014). Why

do some communities resist armed groups non-violently, while others take up arms to do so?

Civilian resistance, understood as the active refusal to collaborate with and subordinate oneself to armed group violence, rules and institutions, has recently captured the attention of conflict scholars (Arjona, 2016; Gade, 2020; Gowrinathan & Mampilly, 2019; Jentsch, 2022; Kaplan, 2017; Masullo, 2017; Schubiger, 2021). This research examines the conditions under which civilian resistance emerges and explores some of its consequences, but it does not explain why resistance is sometimes violent and sometimes non-violent. Moreover, despite growing research on mass campaigns of civil (or non-violent) resistance (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Pinckney, 2020; Thurber, 2021), the more localized type of civilian resistance that is prevalent in wartime has been overlooked.

We address this gap in the literature by leveraging within-case and cross-case variation in violent and non-violent civilian resistance campaigns from two civil wars—Mozambique (1976–1992) and Colombia (1964 to present)¹—and by drawing on original data collected during extensive fieldwork in each country. We argue that prior experiences of collective action and normative commitments, both activated and adapted by local “political entrepreneurs,” make some forms of action

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¹ The Colombian government and the main rebel group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), signed a peace agreement in 2016, which led to the demobilization of the FARC. Yet, the conflict is still on-going, as other non-state armed groups are still active, including the second major rebel group—the National Liberation Army (ELN)—and levels of violence have not subsided in the entire country.

more available than others. Prior experiences make some forms of action “empirically available” because they provide know-how and a sense of collective efficacy that can be called upon when needed. Prevailing normative commitments make some forms of action “normatively available” by creating a socio-cultural environment that approves of some forms of action and disapproves of others. Finally, community leaders function as political entrepreneurs because they activate these prior experiences, define normative expectations and constraints regarding specific forms of action and, ultimately, mobilize popular support for some forms of action and against others.

Our paper makes three contributions to the study of wartime civilian agency, civil resistance and contentious politics more broadly. First, our analysis overcomes the tendency to study violent and non-violent mobilization as separate phenomena. Second, our argument emphasizes communities’ contentious histories and social and cultural context much more than prior organizational and structural explanations. Our emphasis on normative availability improves upon traditional approaches to repertoires of action that focus on empirical availability and structural constraints (Tilly, 1986, 1993, 267–268). Finally, we emphasize internal community dynamics and analyze how community leaders, religious actors and local elites shape communities’ cultural and social environment. Understanding what form civilian resistance takes is important, because whether it is violent or non-violent affects conflict and post-conflict dynamics such as the intensity, spread and duration of war as well as post-war reintegration and stability (Aliyev, 2020; Clayton & Thomson, 2016; Kaplan, 2017; Mouly et al., 2019).

The paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we situate our study within existing research on civil wars, civil resistance, and social movements and develop our theoretical argument. We then present our research design, discussing the logic behind the cases we examine and our combination of within-case and cross-case analysis. In the empirical sections, we analyze the process by which communities in our case studies decided which form of civilian resistance to engage in. The last section concludes.

2. Forms of civilian resistance

Previous studies have made important progress toward understanding the causes and consequences of civilian resistance. Recent conflict research has shown that civil war dynamics—such as high levels of military competition and collective targeting—explain why civilians (violently or non-violently) resist armed groups (Jentzsch, 2022; Masullo, 2017; Schubiger, 2021; Vüllers & Krtsch, 2020). Other work has demonstrated that local institutions and organizations, and support from external actors, give communities the capacity to organize both violent and non-violent resistance (Arjona, 2016; Jentzsch, 2022; Kaplan, 2017; Masullo, 2017). If similar factors explain the emergence of both types of civilian resistance, what explains variation in *what form* such resistance takes?

Prior conflict research has commonly analyzed violent (Blocq, 2014; Costalli & Ruggeri, 2015a; Jentzsch, 2022; Schubiger, 2021) and non-violent (Arjona, 2016; Kaplan, 2017; Masullo, 2017; Vüllers & Krtsch, 2020) resistance separately, and has not explicitly explored why resistance takes different forms. Two exceptions are Gade (2020) and Masullo (2021a). Yet, Gade focuses on why some individuals engage in violent resistance while others eschew it, rather than the different forms that collective resistance takes. While Masullo does focus on collective actors and argues that ideational factors shape the level of confrontation involved in non-violent resistance, his study does not compare non-violent to violent resistance.

Scholars of the politics of crime have also begun looking at civilian resistance to criminal organizations’ violence and attempts at governance. Yet, despite explicit calls to integrate research on violent and non-violent civilian resistance (Dorff, 2019), this scholarship has also explored violent (Osorio et al., 2021; Phillips, 2017) and non-violent resistance (Fahlberg, forthcoming; Ley, 2022; Ley et al., 2019) as

separate phenomena, and has largely overlooked the question of form.²

Research on civil resistance has more systematically examined why certain actors embrace non-violent action. Studies have demonstrated that groups with a greater mobilization potential (Cyr & Widmeier, 2021; Edwards, 2021; White et al., 2015) or more social ties (Thurber, 2019, 2021) are more likely to engage in non-violent resistance. However, these theories’ scope conditions—national campaigns with maximalist goals—exclude most campaigns of wartime civilian resistance against armed groups, which tend to be more localized and have more limited goals.³

Social movement scholars have argued that state capacity and regime type explain whether a movement engages in violent or non-violent action (Goodwin, 2001; Tilly, 2003, 2006). However, state-level factors cannot account for wartime civilian resistance, which is highly localized and varies sub-nationally. One exception is Pearlman’s (2011) work on the Palestinian National Movement, in which she argues that cohesive movements are more likely to engage in non-violent protest because internal fragmentation creates incentives and opportunities for violence. However, her theory assumes the existence of established movements, yet critical choices about the form of resistance are often made before, or during the early phases of, mobilization (Costalli & Ruggeri, 2015b; O’Connor & Oikonomakis, 2015). Our argument extends Pearlman’s theory (or just falls outside its scope) by focusing on communities’ trajectories at this early stage, when internal organizational structures do not yet have a decisive mediating effect on the form of resistance.

2.1. Empirical and normative availability of forms of resistance

We argue that forms of resistance are linked to prior experiences of collective action, normative commitments, and the role of local political entrepreneurs. We assume that within the constraints imposed by armed conflict, actors are able to decide whether to engage in violent or non-violent resistance. However, we contend that these actors must choose from a repertoire of possible activities shaped by both prior collective action experiences and the prevailing norms in their social and cultural environment.

When engaging in contentious collective action, civilians rarely start from scratch; they tap into a set of routines from prior struggles and limit what is available to them—what Tilly (1986, p. 42) termed “contentious repertoire.” This process can be observed in various contentious episodes, from the civil rights movement in the US (Morris, 1986) to the *piquetero* movement in Argentina (Rossi, 2017), to anti-Nazi resistance in Western Europe during World War II (Moore, 2000). When organizers consider how best to mobilize in new rounds of contention, they commonly turn to these inherited repertoires to identify which forms of action are “empirically” available.

Empirical availability works through two mechanisms. First, it provides “know-how” (Tarrow, 1993, p. 283; Tilly, 1978, p. 151). Organizing resistance is not easy, especially against superior forces and/or when lead time is limited, which is often the case in wartime. Therefore, building on prior experiences helps overcome practical obstacles and

² Two exceptions are Moncada (2022) and Dorff and Maves Braithwaite (2018).

³ Recent versions of the Non-violent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) dataset make it possible to examine more localized forms of non-violent action during wartime. See Chenoweth et al. (2018) and Chenoweth et al. (2019).

allows communities to act quickly. Such know-how can originate in struggles from the distant past and take the form of long-term legacies that are passed down through generations (Osorio et al., 2021), as well as in more recent experiences (Daly, 2012) with those who participated in prior collective action may adopt or teach known methods to others.⁴

Second, empirical availability can forge a subjective understanding that certain forms of action can achieve collective goals—what Klandermans (2013) calls “collective efficacy”. This is especially the case if actors directly participated in prior experiences. Since resistance is a risky enterprise, collective efficacy provides much-needed motivation and assurance. Forms of action that communities remember in a positive way and perceive as successful might be preferred due to expectations about potential results in new rounds of contention.⁵

Yet, for prior experiences to shape the form of resistance in new rounds of contention, repertoires of action also need to be “normatively available”—i.e., socially and culturally sanctioned. Repertoires represent not only what actors know how to do but also salient commitments that carry an expressive value (Jasper, 1997, p. 137; Doherty & Hayes, 2014). This is especially the case when deciding whether to use violent or non-violent means, as this choice likely touches on normative principles and forms part of actors’ moral identity, even when made on strategic grounds (Pearlman, 2018). We thus expect actors to attach ideational value to specific forms of action and to adopt more likely those that do not conflict with their own moral sensibilities and those of influential actors in the spaces they inhabit. To have mobilizing power, forms of resistance must resonate with prevailing normative commitments: influential actors in the social and cultural environment cannot sanction them as out-of-norm behavior.

Normative availability affects the form of resistance by creating a socially and culturally approving environment for some forms of action over others. In some environments, peers can sanction some forms of action as out-of-norm behavior but tolerate or even promote others. Just as (dis-)approving environments play an important role in decisions about whether to participate in collective action (Corrigall-Brown, 2011; Klandermans & Van Stekelenburg, 2014), they can also affect the form of action pursued. If the form of action resonates with dominant normative expectations in the social and cultural environment, people will have fewer barriers to joining and committing to the resistance campaign. Given the importance of almost-universal participation and strong commitment in high-risk collective action, normative availability is likely to affect which form resistance takes.

However, communities do not automatically adopt available repertoires and follow prevailing norms. Community leaders, religious figures and local elites, acting as “political entrepreneurs” (Costalli & Ruggeri, 2015a; Lichbach, 1995), play a crucial role in the adoption of certain forms of resistance. These often actors enjoy special moral authority, which allow them to effectively condemn some behaviors and support others⁶; and have strong vertical ties to their communities, which give them better access to information regarding community members’

⁴ Since we do not focus on how long-term historical legacies shape empirical availability, we do not discuss potential mechanisms of intergenerational transmission. For a discussion of these in the context of violent resistance, see Osorio et al. (2021). The mechanisms we point out here, however, could also facilitate transmission between generations and affect what form resistance over long periods of time.

⁵ Collectively learning that a given form of action is not effective at achieving collective goals excludes that form of action from the community’s repertoire. While it is theoretically possible that negative experiences with one form of action (e.g., non-violence) make the (e.g., violence) more available (Lichbach, 1987), this is not an implication of our argument.

⁶ While this ability is commonly associated with religious leaders (De Juan et al., 2015; Krause, 2018), other types of leadership can also produce political entrepreneurs. Moreover, even if religion is an important source of normative content in many civil wars, other normative frameworks, such as culture, tradition and custom, can also shape normative availability.

preferences and expectations. Political entrepreneurs can leverage this privileged position within communities to activate available repertoires and adapt them to present struggles, shape expectations and constraints regarding specific forms of action, and, ultimately, mobilize popular support for some forms of action and against others.⁷ They can forge consensus and tip the balance when communities are divided over what form of action to adopt.

In sum, we expect civilian resistance to be non-violent when non-violent forms of action are empirically and normatively available and mobilized by political entrepreneurs. This should be the case even when the material conditions to organize violence are in place. By contrast, when violence is empirically and normatively available, and political entrepreneurs promote norms tolerating or advocating violence, we expect resistance to be violent. We argue that empirical and normative availability, and the role of political entrepreneurs, are jointly sufficient for resistance to take a non-violent or violent form. While we expect our argument to explain a large number of cases, we do not claim that these elements are necessary for violent/non-violent action, as there might be other pathways to these outcomes.⁸ Moreover, as we explain below, our theoretical expectations are geared toward cases where resistance is clearly either violent or non-violent. Different combinations of these elements (e.g., violent forms are empirically available, but norms of non-violence are prevalent) might explain mixed forms of resistance or the absence of resistance.⁹

3. Research design

We empirically substantiate our argument by combining within-case and cross-case analyses of rural campaigns of violent and non-violent civilian resistance from two civil wars: Colombia (1964–present) and Mozambique (1976–1992). Both wars featured guerrilla warfare, fought predominantly in rural areas and along political cleavages. They feature weaker, center-seeking rebels who hide among the population and seek civilian support, making civilian choices particularly salient for war dynamics (Kalyvas & Balcells, 2010). These macro-level similarities allow us to control for background conditions and delimit the scope of our argument to irregular civil wars.

Our unit of analysis is the civilian resistance campaign—a series of observable, continuous, and organized tactics or events directed at a certain target to achieve a goal (Chenoweth & Lewis, 2013, pp. 416–17). We therefore focus on sustained interactions rather than one-off events such as protests against violence. We examine three campaigns: the Peasant Worker Association of the Carare River (ATCC) in Colombia, the Naparama militia in Mozambique, and the Jehovah’s Witnesses Peace Zone, also in Mozambique. These three campaigns engaged in different forms of resistance, which allows us to leverage variation within and across civil wars. While large resistance campaigns often employ non-violent and violent tactics simultaneously (Case, 2019), we focus on cases where the boundaries between violence and non-violence are clear and incidental acts of violence in non-violent campaigns are rare. Our analysis proceeds in three steps; each adds analytical leverage and addresses potential threats to inference present in the previous steps.

In the first step, we conduct a within-case analysis of the ATCC to trace the process by which civilians decided to pursue non-violent

⁷ Lichbach (1995) focuses on the role of political entrepreneurs in mobilizing rebellion and organizing violent action, while Costalli and Ruggeri (2015a) concentrate on their role in mobilizing voter support in the aftermath of war. Our argument highlights political entrepreneurs’ role in mobilizing people into certain forms of action by leveraging vertical links.

⁸ Since civilian resistance—violent or non-violent—is rare compared to other civilian responses, we expect that by offering one possible pathway to the outcome, our proposed argument sheds light on a large share of cases.

⁹ These theoretical and empirical questions are beyond the scope of this paper since rigorously exploring them would require a different research design.

resistance. Since violent resistance was seriously considered in the early stages of mobilization of the ATCC, this case is particularly relevant because it allows us to closely analyze villagers' deliberations and identify the factors that led them to eventually adopt non-violent action. We probe whether empirical and normative availability, as well as political entrepreneurs, played a role in this process. Moreover, the fact those who considered violent resistance were influential community leaders makes the ATCC a hard case for our theoretical argument, increasing the power of the evidence stemming from it.

In a second step, we examine the Naparama militia, an instance of violent resistance. This case allows us to probe not only the absence of the factors that explain the ATCC's adoption of *non-violent* action, but also the presence of factors that shape Naparama's decision to adopt *violent* action. Observing our theorized factors in the Naparama case would constitute compelling within-case and cross-case comparative evidence to support our argument.

To address potential comparability concerns between the first two cases, which took place in two different civil wars and in countries with distinct political, social and cultural histories, and armed groups, in a third step we examine the Jehovah's Witnesses Peace Zone. This was a non-violent resistance campaign that emerged in the same Mozambican region as the Naparama and among communities facing the same state and non-state armed groups.¹⁰ This final case allows us to investigate the absence of the violence-explaining factors that we observe in the Naparama case, as well as the presence of factors shaping the adoption of non-violent action that we observe in the ATCC case. If this case is in line with our expectations, it will yield stronger support for our argument by demonstrating that communities can adopt non-violent forms of action even when neighboring communities in similar war situations resist violently. Moreover, if the factors explaining the adoption of non-violence in this case are similar to those observed in the ATCC campaign, this last step will show that our argument can explain non-violence across different wars and contexts.

Our data comes from original semi-structured interviews and local archival primary documents collected during fieldwork between 2010 and 2016 in both countries, as well as secondary sources such as non-governmental organization reports, journalistic accounts and scholarly research on the conflicts. To reconstruct local histories of resistance, we interviewed civilians who engaged in resistance, community and traditional leaders, local authorities and elites, and supportive external actors.¹¹

3.1. Controlling for alternative explanations

Our three-step research design lets us analyze the adoption of different forms of resistance *within* each case and *across* cases, which

¹⁰ Although there were several instances of anti-insurgent violent resistance in Colombia in the 1980s and 1990s, we did not include them in our analysis because many of them rapidly evolved into paramilitary armies with regional and national reach, making them less comparable to the localized community experiences of non-violent resistance we examine here. However, secondary literature on the origins of paramilitary groups provides preliminary support for our argument, as some of these groups emerged in areas where violence had been a common community response to various challenges, explicit norms of non-violence were less prevalent, and political entrepreneurs such as cattle ranchers and drug traffickers played a central role in their creation and openly promoted and sponsored violence. For analyses of these groups' early stages, see Romero (2003) and Ronderos (2014).

¹¹ The Online Methods Appendix contains details on data collection, interviews, respondents and questions asked. To protect respondents' identities, we indicate the interviewee's role during the war (e.g., community leader, combatant, state official). For each interview we provide an ID number and indicate the interviewee's gender – m (male) or f (female) – and the place and date of the interview. All interviews were conducted by the authors and all participants consented to participate.

creates a strong base for descriptive and causal inference (Lyal, 2014). Moreover, it allows us to control for three key alternative explanations by design.

First, the three campaigns we analyze feature small, tight-knit communities in remote rural areas. This allows us to keep group size and composition, including social cohesion and social ties (Cyr & Widmeier, 2021; Thurber, 2019, 2021), as well as isolation levels (Gade, 2020), relatively constant. Second, our two campaigns of non-violent resistance cast doubt on cognitive availability (Gambetta, 2005) and material resources (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) as alternative explanations. The community of the Jehovah's Witnesses Peace Zone chose non-violence even though it knew that violent resistance was occurring in neighboring areas and had access to Naparama units. Similarly, in the ATCC case, key community leaders advocated violent resistance and believed the conditions for launching it were in place.

Third, we study communities that faced similar local war dynamics but chose different forms of resistance. This allows us to control for two important potential confounders: armed group characteristics and level of territorial control. Theories of civilian-combatant relations would predict that the characteristics of the armed group – e.g., groups with lower/higher "jointness of interest" with communities (Kaplan, 2017), activist vs. opportunistic insurgencies (Weinstein, 2007), or more/less repressive/accommodating groups (Edwards, 2021)—could shape the form of resistance that we observe. In the second and third campaigns we study, civilians faced the same armed group (the Renamo rebels) but still opted for different forms of resistance.

Existing conflict theories have also established that an armed group's level of territorial control shapes civilians' willingness to collaborate with or resist them (Arjona, 2015; Kalyvas, 2006; Masullo, 2017). Thus, territorial control may also shape the form of civilian resistance. However, our three cases experienced comparable levels of territorial control. At the local level, where civilian decisions about how to respond to war dynamics are often made (Arjona, 2019), there was ongoing conflict and competition between armed groups, and none had a clear advantage over the territory civilians inhabited.

The ATCC emerged in an area where territorial control was in flux due to a paramilitary challenge to the FARC's historical control. It was therefore uncertain whether the FARC would successfully retain control or whether the paramilitaries would take over. Similarly, both the Naparama and the Jehovah's Witnesses Peace Zone emerged when competition between Renamo and Frelimo had reached local stalemates; communities did not know which faction (if any) would achieve dominant control.¹² That both violent and non-violent campaigns emerged from comparable balances of territorial control suggests that this factor may not be driving the form of resistance. Consistent with Kalyvas' (2006) control and collaboration model, our study suggests that contested territorial control and uncertainty about which group will become dominant helps determine whether resistance emerges but does not explain whether this resistance is violent or non-violent.

4. Non-violent resistance in Colombia: The case of the ATCC

Colombia has experienced one of the longest civil wars in history (1964–present), with left-wing insurgencies, right-wing paramilitaries and state forces fighting each other. Various peace agreements have been signed with individual insurgent groups over time, including a historic deal reached in 2016 with the largest group, the FARC, but several non-state armed groups are still active and the population continues to endure conflict-related violence. Civilians, especially those in rural areas, have been disproportionately affected by violence: around 80% of the victims have been civilians and at least 6 million people (15%

¹² Below we briefly describe the balances of territorial control in the areas where each resistance campaign emerged. For detailed evidence of the levels of territorial control, see Jentszsch (2022) and Masullo (2017).

of the population) have been displaced (Grupo de Memoria Histórica, 2013).

More than 50 rural communities have non-violently resisted these armed groups (Masullo, 2021b), which has protected numerous civilians from violence (Kaplan, 2017) and limited armed groups' attempts to govern communities (Arjona, 2016). The case we explore here, the ATCC, is one of the conflict's first documented campaigns of non-violent resistance.

The ATCC emerged in 1987 in the village of La India, in the El Carare region, in north-central Colombia. In the mid-1960s the FARC arrived in El Carare and by the 1970s it had achieved almost hegemonic control. In the 1980s, to weaken the rebels' dominance, paramilitary units began to target the civilian population, considering it the FARC's "social base." In the absence of information on local allegiances, the paramilitaries targeted entire villages known to be under strong FARC influence, including La India.

With territorial control in flux, both the FARC and the paramilitaries pressured villagers to collaborate with them. In early 1987, the paramilitaries convened villagers in La India's main square and gave them 15 days to make a choice: join the paramilitaries, side with the rebels, flee their homes, or be killed. Villagers refer to this as "the ultimatum." Despite fearing for their lives, a group of community leaders quickly convened a clandestine assembly to analyze each option and decided that another course of action was possible—neutrality. In the words of one of the ATCC's founding fathers: "Neither everybody will die, nor people will go with an armed group. We are from here, we are *colonos* [settlers], so they [armed groups] will respect us. We will be neutral ...".¹³

The community leaders told the paramilitary commanders that they would stay on their lands and refuse to collaborate with any armed group present in their territory. During this period of contested territorial control between the paramilitaries and the FARC, villagers founded the ATCC. More than three decades later, and although some of their founding leaders have been killed, the ATCC still governs the lives of hundreds of peasants in La India and surrounding areas. Since its early days, ATCC's resistance has remained resolutely non-violent.

4.1. The adoption of non-violent forms of action

When villagers received "the ultimatum" and decided to resist, they disagreed over exactly *how* to resist. Community leaders had diverging views about whether they should take violent or non-violent action. Prior collective struggles and deeply embedded norms of non-violence, largely promoted by community leaders linked to the Adventist Church, convinced some influential leaders to drop the idea of armed resistance and make the ATCC a non-violent campaign.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, La India was sparsely populated. The state's weak presence and the unregulated nature of the settlement process pushed villagers to take matters into their own hands. Collectively, they constructed the first houses and the main road connecting the village to the closest municipal capital. Next they came together to denounce injustices to the local government and pressure the state to provide basic services such as electricity. To coordinate action, define tasks and gather residents effectively during this challenging time, villagers formed cooperatives and assemblies. They employed a combination of actions, including writing petitions and organizing marches to the distant town hall, to make claims on a largely absent and unresponsive state. Thus, since the early settlement days, villagers learned how to organize and make collective claims against powerful opponents, and saw how these collective efforts could bring about positive results.

Although these struggles were largely non-violent (despite being very contentious at times), leaders did not immediately agree on what form resistance should take in response to the presence of armed groups

in the late 1980s. Josué, the most influential community leader, founding father of the ATCC and its first president, advocated a violent response. He had been socialized into highly confrontational forms of opposition to the state, the army and other non-state armed groups. In the previous civil war in the late 1950s, he was close to the liberal guerrillas who resisted the advancing Conservatives.¹⁴ David, another community leader and founding father of the association, was also sympathetic to the idea of armed resistance. Before fleeing from his hometown to La India, he also participated in small left-wing guerrilla formations to resist Conservative violence. In stark contrast, Julio, one of the village's first settlers and leader of its Adventist Church, vehemently opposed violent resistance. Building on an idea of community action guided by church principles, Julio actively promoted norms of non-violence.

Julio remembered that Josué told him at the time, "We need to do something because these people [armed groups] will finish us. Let's arm ourselves as other people are doing in Puerto Boyacá [a neighboring Department infamous for the emergence of paramilitary armies]." Julio was not surprised, as he knew that Josué and others had entertained the idea of violent resistance for some time. Julio's reply was unequivocal: "We [the church] are here to collaborate, but not with arms. The Adventist people don't kill."¹⁵ The Adventist community, the largest religious congregation in La India, was sympathetic to the idea of resistance, but stressed that it had to be non-violent.

David confirmed that taking up arms was an idea that Josué and others in the village had considered for a long time and that they were simply waiting for the right moment to propose it. The "ultimatum" provided that opportunity. While they did not consider joining any of the existing factions, they discussed creating a self-defense group of their own on several occasions. David and Josué were ready to build on their experience with liberal guerrillas to promote violent resistance in La India.

Why did those considering violent resistance, including Josué, eventually drop the idea? While violent resistance was *empirically available* to some in La India, the community was also able to rely on positive prior experiences of non-violent collective action from the settlement years. These prior experiences, unlike those that some leaders had had with violent action individually and in other places, involved the participation of many residents of La India. Equally important, the use of violence was not *normatively available* for many residents, Adventists and non-Adventists alike.

Past experiences of non-violent collective action and normative commitments to non-violent action both played a central role in the decision to pursue non-violent action. Since the Adventists settled in La India in the early 1960s, the church has been a focal point for community congregation and an engine for collective action. "[T]he Adventist Church began in the middle of the jungle," Julio recalled. Given the multiple challenges associated with settling in the wilderness, the church was deeply involved in the process of organizing the community, creating informal cooperatives, and organizing assemblies to colonize the area and demand that the state supply basic services. This gave Julio and other leaders linked to the church a privileged position within the community, allowing them to activate prior experiences of collective action and promote non-violent forms of action when the moment to resist arrived in the late 1980s.¹⁶

Given their longstanding role in community organizing, the Adventists' influence also reached non-Adventists. All community

¹⁴ Between 1948 and 1958, Colombia experienced another civil war, known as *La Violencia*, which pitted supporters of the two traditional political parties, the Liberal and Conservative parties, against each other. About 200,000 people were killed, mostly in rural areas.

¹⁵ Interview 24 m with ATCC founding leader and Adventist priest, El Carare. May 9, 2014.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³ Interview 21 m, ATCC founding leader, El Carare. May 8, 2014.

members today recognize the church's chief role in the creation of the ATCC, the decision not to participate in the conflict, and the adoption of non-violent forms of action. With no probing, Julio made clear that well before the ultimatum, he used the church to shape people's preferences and beliefs regarding (non)participation in the war.¹⁷ He and some of his closest followers noted that they deliberately used Bible teachings to develop a community response to the war. Almost every respondent recalled that the Adventist message had always been one of peace, non-violence and non-participation, and that the church stressed that getting involved in violence only caused more violence.¹⁸ These normative commitments were backed by positive experiences of non-violent collective action, which leaders actively mobilized to motivate and assure villagers. Villagers knew how to organize and make claims on powerful actors, and had found through experience that non-violent collective action could bring about change even in highly contentious situations.

It is impossible to determine whether La India would have decided to resist violently in the absence of the Adventist Church and Julio, and the norms of non-violence and non-participation they promoted. Yet the fact that leaders who considered violent resistance dropped the idea because they were aware that, given the positive experiences of non-violent action and prevalent normative commitments activated and promoted by the church, many residents would reject violent resistance provides strong support for our argument.¹⁹ Violent resistance was cognitively available to some leaders and the material conditions to do so were in place (at least as perceived by some villagers, like David),²⁰ which eliminates some of the more plausible alternative explanations of why violent action was not adopted.

5. Civilian resistance in Mozambique

After a 10-year armed struggle for independence from Portugal (1965–1975), independent Mozambique experienced a civil war (1976–1992) between the party in power (Frelimo) and the opposition movement (Renamo), which received substantial support from Rhodesia and apartheid South Africa. The war began in the center of the country, and spread to the northern and southern provinces in the early 1980s (Dinerman, 2001, p. 51; Do Rosário, 2009, p. 305; Legrand, 1993, pp. 91–92).

The war caused great suffering among civilians in the central and northern provinces of Zambézia and Nampula; forced resettlement and lethal violence by both insurgent and incumbent forces were common (Finnegan, 1992). Communities fell under the control of either Renamo or Frelimo; some were in contested areas. When military competition between Frelimo and Renamo intensified, violence shifted from selective rebel violence against Frelimo representatives²¹ to the collective targeting of civilians.²² Both violent and non-violent resistance emerged in areas where territorial control was contested, partially controlled by Frelimo and frequently attacked by Renamo.²³

To protect themselves, some communities created peace zones to keep armed groups at bay,²⁴ while others resisted violently and created militias. As in the ATCC case, the lack of reliable protection in contested areas pushed civilians to develop their own means of protection. Yet, if the Mozambican communities and the ATCC peasants faced similar war dynamics, why did civilians resist violently in some areas and non-violently in others? The following discussion examines the (violent) resistance campaigns of the Naparama militia in Nampula province and the peace community of Carico in neighboring Zambézia province.

5.1. Violent resistance: The Naparama in Mecubúri (Nampula)

The Naparama militia formed in the late 1980s in Nampula and Zambézia provinces and grew into a force of several thousand troops. Our analysis focuses on Naparama in Nampula's Mecubúri district, about 50 miles east of the provincial capital Nampula, as its history exemplifies many districts in which the militia formed. Between 1988 and 1990, Mecubúri experienced some of the worst violence of the war, and Naparama was formed after some of the insurgency's most gruesome attacks.²⁵ Several youths had fled to avoid being conscripted into the military²⁶ and the district's main military battalion was deployed elsewhere; the area was thus largely unprotected and civilians were exposed to Renamo's collective violence. Communities had nowhere to turn, and therefore adopted violent civilian resistance to protect themselves.

The story of Naparama's beginnings is usually linked to its main leader in Zambézia province, Manuel António.²⁷ In the late 1980s, António traveled through the province claiming that he had received a mission from God to liberate the Mozambican people from the sufferings of war (Nordstrom, 1997, p. 58). He offered those joining his militia a "vaccine," derived from a secret plant and administered with a razor blade, that he claimed would make them immune to bullets.²⁸ In parallel efforts, the traditional healer Nampila formed his own Naparama units in Nampula, and used the same idea of "vaccinating" people against bullets. When residents of the Mecubúri district heard of Nampila, they traveled to meet the healer to form their own Naparama unit. Why did these residents pursue violent resistance?

5.2. Adopting violent forms of action

Communities in Nampula were familiar with militias well before Naparama's formation. After independence in 1975, the government formed popular militias (*milícias populares*) and vigilante groups as part of its efforts to restructure society according to socialist principles and to control "anti-revolutionary" forces. When the civil war began, the military took over the command of these militias and provided training for community defense against rebels. However, these forces lacked in

¹⁷ Interview 24 m with ATCC founding leader and Adventist priest, El Carare. May 9, 2014.

¹⁸ Interview 64 m with ATCC leader, El Carare. August 19, 2015; Interviews 14 m, 19f & 72f with ATCC members, El Carare. March 29, 2014, May 7, 2014 and August 23, 2015.

¹⁹ Interview 6.2 m with ATCC founding leader, El Carare. August 22, 2015.

²⁰ Interviews 6.1 m and 6.2 m with ATCC founding leader, El Carare. April 9, 2014, and August 22, 2015.

²¹ Interview Gr-G/Pm with community leaders, Mecubúri, Nampula, October 15, 2011; Interview Lm11 with community leader, Mecubúri, Nampula, October 17, 2011; Interview Fm6 with former Frelimo combatant, Mecubúri, Nampula, October 26, 2011; and Interview Hm2 with traditional healer, Mecubúri, Nampula, October 22, 2011.

²² Interviews Nm25 & Nm29 with former Naparama members, Mecubúri, Nampula, October 16 and 26, 2011.

²³ For an illustration of the levels of violence and changing territorial control in these areas, see Table 5.1, and Figures 5.2 and 5.3 in Jentszsch (2022, 94–95).

²⁴ Among the most notorious cases of non-violent resistance are the Mungoi peace zone in southern Mozambique and Jehovah's Witnesses peace zone in Milange, Zambézia province (Maier, 1998, p. 52; Wilson, 1992). We explore the latter in the next section.

²⁵ Interview Fm2 with former Frelimo combatant, Mecubúri, Nampula, October 17, 2011; Interview Nm27 with former Naparama member, Mecubúri, Nampula, October 22, 2011. See also República Popular de Moçambique, Província de Nampula, Distrito de Mecubúri, *Relatório anual—1988*, December 30, 1988 (AGN, Nampula).

²⁶ República de Moçambique, Província de Nampula, Administração do Distrito de Mecubúri, *Relatório das actividades do mês Fevereiro/91*, February 28, 1991; República de Moçambique, Província de Nampula, Distrito de Mecubúri, *Relatório de Dezembro/90*, December 1990 (AGN, Nampula).

²⁷ Interviews Nm11 & Nm2 with former Naparama members, Nicosadala, Zambézia, September 19 and 20, 2011.

²⁸ The term Naparama means "vaccinated" or the medicine used for vaccination. The term may also imply "irresistible force" (Finnegan, 1992; Wilson, 1992).

morale, war materiel, and efficient leadership.²⁹ In search of alternative protection, communities tapped into forms of action that were available through prior experiences of militias.

The availability of this violent repertoire is especially salient in Mecubúri. In addition to the state-initiated *milícias populares*, Naparama's formation in the district in 1990 also built on a more recent community-initiated experience of self-defense known the *grupo decidido* (the "committed group"). The *grupo*, which patrolled the village at night armed with knives, spears and arrows, was formed by a group of young men from Nahipa—a village close to the district town—to deter theft and robbery in the community.³⁰ In 1990, members of the group heard of Naparama's successes in another district and brought the militia's leader to their village to form their own Naparama unit. Their main motivation was to step up their self-defense efforts with the vaccine, which they believed would minimize the risk of getting killed in battle.³¹ While violent forms of action were already part of the group's self-defense repertoire, Nampila's vaccine empowered them to protect their communities not only from robbery but also from Renamo's violence.

Naparama leaders and members realized that, to confront Renamo, they had to activate and adapt prior experiences of collective action and prevailing normative commitments. The idea of "vaccination" against bullets was not new; traditional chiefs had used it in the past. Even if the idea of a traditional militia was new to many, the source of its power resonated with existing cultural norms and practices (Wilson, 1992, p. 561; 563). However, to be convinced of its power, community members had to see the Naparama in action. It was only after the Naparama forces from Nahipa had demonstrated their strength that people from Mecubúri realized the value of violent resistance, as the remarks of a former Naparama combatant show:

There was war here [in Mecubúri] and we fled to Nahipa. When we arrived there, we met members of the Naparama militia. They [wanted to] mobilize us, but we didn't agree [to join] and returned here [to Mecubúri]. Here we met a group of Naparama who had come and rescued the town, and its leaders mobilized us. Then we decided to return to Nahipa to get vaccinated. We came [to Mecubúri] and stayed in the district town to defend [it].³²

While Naparama's strength in neighboring areas had an important "demonstration effect" for Mecubúri residents that motivated them to create their own unit, it also suggested that violent resistance was normatively available. Neighboring communities socially and culturally accepted militias' violent actions, which (along with the alleged protection from bullets) lowered the normative barriers to using violence and made violent forms of action much more readily available to residents.

However, social norms and cultural practices circumscribed the violent repertoire of action that was normatively available. In accordance with local norms, communities believed the vaccine would only work if those vaccinated adhered to strict rules. While these rules varied according to specific local traditions, one of the most important constrained the Naparama's use of weapons to those of "cold steel" such as spears, knives and arrows. While communities had easier access to such

weapons, this rule aligned with both residents' "know-how" (the *grupo decidido* used the same type of weapons) and local norms. "Cold steel" weapons were more morally accepted than firearms and were considered legitimate self-defense.³³ The fact that only a limited set of violent tactics was normatively sanctioned provides strong support for our argument.

Local elites such as traditional leaders and local party secretaries played an important role in activating prior experiences of collective action, adapting them to the contemporary social and normative context, and mobilizing support for the militia. While Naparama was community based, it cooperated closely with the local administration, which not only tolerated its activities, but even promoted mobilization. In Mecubúri town, a local government official explained the reasoning behind supporting the Naparama:

Because of the fatigue with the burning of houses and random killing of people, when the traditional healer arrived, he contacted the local authorities and since these were tired ... —just imagine an administrator who never slept in his residence! [Naparama emerged] in agreement with the local government to resolve the problem (...). As soon as they founded the Naparama, the enemy no longer came here. When the youths went into battle, the enemy died and it was in battle that [the Naparama] convinced the people and the local government [to support the Naparama].³⁴

In the absence of support from the army, local elites believed accepting and supporting violent civilian resistance was their only option. They even became involved in creating new militia units across the district. A former Naparama combatant explained that a party secretary asked community residents to form a militia unit in another part of the district because "the government felt relieved," explicitly expressing that "it accepted the emergence of other groups."³⁵ Beyond this explicit approval, local elites played an active role in promoting the use of violent forms of action. According to former Naparama combatants, elites mobilized youths to get vaccinated, even forcing some to do so when there were too few volunteers.³⁶

In sum, community residents' decision to pursue violent resistance was shaped by a repertoire of actions that were both empirically and normatively available, and political entrepreneurs who activated the repertoire and mobilized support for the militia. On the one hand, prior experiences of violent action in the form of self-defense groups and various community protection strategies, some of which pre-dated the war, made violent forms of action available to those forming the Naparama. Residents built on what they were familiar with and what they believed would protect them. On the other hand, the use of (some forms of) violence was normatively available to residents as it was sanctioned by social and cultural norms and practices. Traditional healers, community leaders and local elites activated and adapted what was empirically and normatively available and mobilized support for violent resistance. This lowered the normative barriers to using violence, encouraging first movers to form units and many others to join.

This experience contrasts starkly with that of the ATCC, where community and church leaders, explicitly conditioned their support on resistance being resolutely non-violent. While political entrepreneurs actively promoted non-violence in the ATCC campaign, they advocated violent action in the Naparama in two ways. First, traditional healers

²⁹ República Popular de Moçambique, Província da Zambézia, Administração do Distrito de Namarrói, *Informação do Governo Distrital sobre as actividades realizadas referentes aos meses de Janeiro a Setembro 1989*, October 2, 1989 (AGZ, Quelimane).

³⁰ República Popular de Moçambique, Província de Nampula, Distrito de Mecubúri, *Relatório mensal—Novembro de 1989*, November 30, 1989 (AGN, Nampula). Interview Lf1 with local government official, Mecubúri, Nampula, October 17, 2011; Interview Gr-G/Pm with religious leaders and local government officials, Mecubúri, Nampula, October 15, 2011.

³¹ Interview Nm43 with former Naparama member, Mecubúri, Nampula, November 14, 2011.

³² Interview Nm26 with former Naparama member, Mecubúri, Nampula, October 16, 2011.

³³ Over time, the Naparama was allowed to use firearms, but only against Renamo soldiers and only if captured directly from them (Wilson, 1992, pp. 564, 569).

³⁴ Interview Lf1 with local government official, Mecubúri, Nampula, October 17, 2011.

³⁵ Interview Nm29 with former Naparama member, Mecubúri, Nampula, October 10, 2011.

³⁶ Interviews Nm22 & Nm24 with former Naparama members, Mecubúri, Nampula, October 15 and 16, 2011. Although some were forced to join Naparama, most joined voluntarily.

adapted social and cultural practices to offer rituals that symbolized the conquering of death. Second, local authorities actively mobilized for and relied on community resistance to protect civilians.³⁷

5.3. Non-violent resistance in Milange (Zambézia)

While violent resistance was the dominant response to Renamo's violence, non-violent forms of resistance, such as "peace zones," were also pursued in the central and northern regions of Mozambique. Among the most notorious was the Jehovah's Witnesses (JW) peace zone in the Milange district of Zambézia. In this section, we examine this case to explore how a tradition of resistance to religious persecution, particularly the presence of deeply ingrained normative commitments, played a central role in the adoption of non-violent action in the JW community.

The Frelimo government considered Milange a center of "enemy activity" even before the civil war broke out. JW members lived in a communal village, Carico, which the Portuguese colonial regime had built for refugees from Malawi; the newly independent Mozambican government used it as a detainment camp for JW between 1975 and 1980 (Wilson, 1994, p. 238). In independent Mozambique, Frelimo persecuted the religious community because its members, sticking to JW's core principle of "political neutrality," did not accept the party's leadership (Legrand, 1993, p. 90; Vines, 1991, p. 106).³⁸ Since these early years, residents of Carico had been socialized into the arduous task of resisting religious persecution.

Renamo's violence reached the province of Zambézia in 1985, and Milange was one of the first districts affected. To mobilize civilian support, the rebels employed a combination of political education and military strength to force residents to submit to their control. This strategy successfully gained the support of most of the province's residents. When these efforts proved futile in Carico, Renamo used harsher violent repression, including abduction, rape, limb breaking and killings to force the community into submission. Many residents of Carico eventually fled to Malawi and Zambia, or scattered in small groups across Zambézia. Yet, some did not bow to these pressures and decided to stay put, refusing to collaborate with any armed forces; some even confronted Renamo directly (Wilson, 1992, p. 558).

Unlike the response observed with the Naparama in neighboring districts, the JW resistance was resolutely non-violent. The Carico community refused to participate in Renamo's levying of produce and labor, or any effort related to the rebels' war program. As in the case of the ATCC in Colombia, residents of Carico openly challenged Renamo's attempts to violently impose authority by breaking the "law of silence." After violent incidents in the community, they would send delegations to Renamo's bases to denounce acts of violence, express their disagreement and demand an explanation.

JW's moral and normative commitments were a core element of their resistance. In stark contrast to how a belief in the powers of a vaccine encouraged members of the Naparama to engage in violence without fear of being killed, the Carico community's conviction in their "ability to conquer death and suffering through faith" took violence off the table. Carico residents were "armed" only with "the clarity and depth of their personal faith," which explicitly prescribed non-violence (Wilson, 1992, p. 558). Moreover, the JW's normative stance regarding political neutrality and a refusal to serve in the military—a staple of the denomination—pushed the Carico community away not only from violent action, but also from any form of resistance that would imply siding

with one side of the conflict.

There is persuasive evidence of the links between the moral and normative content fostered by the JW community's commitment to non-violent tactics in Carico. First of all, members of the community explained their non-violent and non-partisan stance by referencing its Biblical foundations and noting that abiding by these norms and beliefs would ensure their place among the Elect (Wilson, 1992, p. 558). Second, in past struggles they also acted in accordance with these principles and norms, suggesting that adopting non-violence was not only a strategic choice selected to resist Renamo. Since the Portuguese founded the Carico settlement, residents had lived by JW principles. Thus, norms of non-violence and neutrality were prevalent in the community well before the civil war; for example, they guided the community's non-violent struggle against religious persecution by Frelimo in the 1970s. As such, non-violent forms of action were *empirically* and *normatively* available to community members. Finally, indirect evidence points to this link, as the same normative foundations urged other minority communities to non-violently resist repression in other violent contexts, such as during the Holocaust in Germany (Chu, 2004).

To be sure, social cohesion and solidarity help explain why the community managed to resist Renamo despite violent repression. Moreover, the fact that many residents of Carico fled to Malawi and Zambia, or across Zambézia before the formation of the peace community (Wilson, 1992, p. 558), likely facilitated resistance, as those who stayed put were probably the most resolute—a sorting dynamic that others have found affects wartime civilian responses (Masullo, 2017; Revkin, 2021). Yet, this does not explain why the community adopted non-violent resistance while neighboring districts resisted violently.

Prior experiences of collective action and normative commitments, promoted by the JW denomination, had a strong imprint on *how* this resistance was channeled. A history of non-violent resistance against political and religious persecution by Frelimo prepared community members to resist new forms of oppression and repression, this time by the rebels. They knew how to oppose powerful opponents without resorting to violence, and the fact that they were still on those lands demonstrated the success of this approach. Yet, this case most clearly illustrates that norms of non-violence and neutrality are crucial ideational factors for explaining why the Carico community created a peace zone akin to that of the ATCC rather than adopting violent resistance like the Naparama in neighboring areas.

6. Conclusion

Why do some communities resist armed groups with violence of their own while others do so non-violently? We stress the role of prior experiences of collective action and normative commitments in making some forms of action more available to communities than others, and the role of political entrepreneurs in activating and mobilizing support for some and against other forms of action. This argument complements current civil war, civil resistance and social movements theories that privilege organizational and structural factors by emphasizing communities' histories of contention and the sanctioning role of normative commitments.

Understanding why communities adopt violent or non-violent forms of action has important implications not only for how they experience war, but also for how conflicts unfold and what legacies they leave behind. Civilian resistance can decrease violence against civilians (Kaplan, 2017) and prevent it from spreading to new localities (Krause, 2018), and condition the establishment of rebel social orders (Arjona, 2016). Yet, whether resistance is violent or non-violent matters for conflict and post-conflict dynamics. For example, while violent resistance can make wars longer and more intense (Aliyev, 2020; Clayton & Thomson, 2016; Cunningham, 2006), non-violent resistance can transmit norms of restraint among armed groups (Kaplan, 2013) and facilitate post-conflict ex-combatant integration (Mouly et al., 2019).

The type of resistance campaigns that we cover here are not the stock

³⁷ This choice for violent resistance did not come without costs. It created tensions with the Catholic Church—a major social and political force in northern Mozambique—which charged Naparama with perpetuating a "culture of violence." Yet, all things considered, most units accepted these costs (Wilson, 1992, p. 571).

³⁸ Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in the 1970s was particularly strong in Mozambique and Malawi (Jubber, 1977).

and trade of the civil resistance literature. We focus on highly localized and small-scale campaigns, often emerging in relatively cohesive communities. Comparative research between this type of campaign and mass campaigns articulating maximalist goals would help integrate research on civil resistance with that of civil wars and begin testing the scope conditions of what we know about violent and non-violent resistance. Future research might also explore the extent to which our argument holds for resistance strategies that combine violent and non-violent forms. Similarly, while our argument applies mainly to irregular civil wars, it also sheds light on situations of large-scale criminal violence where criminal organizations are embedded within communities, request the support of the population, and undertake governance roles (Barnes, 2021; Lessing, 2021). Comparing the dynamics of civilian resistance across these two settings, including the adoption of violent and non-violent forms of action, could also bring these literatures together.

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