Inherited Privileges and Coercive Repertoires: How Rebel Origins Shape Civilian Abuse

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Abstract

Why do some rebel groups commit a wide range of human rights violations against civilians while others exercise remarkable restraint? Existing scholarship has made important progress in explaining rebel violence, yet it has largely focused on wartime dynamics and battlefield incentives, overlooking the role of structural factors established before conflict begins. This study addresses that gap by examining how the foundational organizational origins of rebel groups shape the breadth of coercive practices they deploy against civilian populations during civil conflict. Drawing on the Rebel Human Rights Violations dataset between 1990 and 2018, the Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence dataset, and the Non-State Actors in Armed Conflict dataset, I find consistent evidence that organizational origins systematically condition the range of violations rebel groups commit. Rebel groups with non-violent organizational origins, particularly those rooted in civil society organizations and political parties, employ a significantly narrower range of human rights violations than groups emerging from violent parent organizations. Similarly, rebel groups without any identifiable parent organization commit fewer and less diverse forms of abuse than their counterparts with violent organizational backgrounds. These findings hold across the main model specifications and robustness checks, providing robust evidence that pre-conflict organizational foundations shape not only whether rebel groups abuse civilians but how broadly and diversely they do so.

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Introduction

Why do some rebel groups commit a wide range of human rights violations against civilians while others exercise remarkable restraint? Consider Sierra Leone's civil war, where the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and the Civil Defence Forces (CDF) fought under nearly identical conditions of state weakness and military contestation. The RUF employed widespread mutilation and sexual violence (Hoover Green, 2016), while the CDF engaged in significantly lower levels of civilian victimization (Conibere et al., 2004). This divergence is not unique to Sierra Leone. Across civil conflicts, groups like the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the RUF engage in murder, rape, abduction, and systematic property destruction (Walsh et al., 2024; Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood, 2017), while others, including the Fretilin movement in East Timor and the Free Aceh Movement in Indonesia, refrained almost entirely from targeting civilians, directing their violence exclusively at military opponents (Aspinall, 2009; Taylor, 1999).

These contrasts are not isolated anomalies. Data from the Rebel Human Rights Violations dataset covering all rebel groups worldwide between 1990 and 2018 reveal that while rebel groups are more likely than not to commit at least some form of human rights abuse during civil conflict, there is striking variation in both the occurrence and the range of abusive practices (Walsh et al., 2024). Even within the same conflict environment, this variation is pronounced: in the Democratic Republic of Congo, eight of fourteen rebel groups showed no evidence of any violations while four engaged systematically in multiple categories of abuse simultaneously (Walsh et al., 2024). Some groups develop diversified and expansive repertoires of coercion, drawing on killings, torture, detention, sexual violence, and forced displacement in combination, while others rely on a narrow set of tactics or abstain altogether (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood, 2017; Walsh et al., 2024). As gleaned from these case studies, patterns of civilian abuses vary widely by rebel groups, not just in their intensity but also in the repertoires of violence employed across conflicts by armed groups (Tilly, 2010; Hoover Green, 2016). Crucially, this heterogeneity persists even when groups face identical battlefield conditions, resource constraints, and state opponents. The divergence is not simply that some groups commit more violations than others at a given moment; some organizations sustain wide-ranging coercive practices across the lifespan of a conflict while others maintain consistent restraint throughout. What makes this variation theoretically significant is that some groups draw on a wide, diversified toolkit of coercive practices while others operate within a far narrower range, a difference in repertoire breadth, the range of distinct violation types a group commits, that cannot be explained by wartime conditions alone. A group that simultaneously employs killings, torture, sexual violence, forced recruitment, and property destruction is not merely committing more violations than one that commits only killings. It is exhibiting a qualitatively different organizational signature, one that reflects an institutionalized capacity for coercion across multiple domains that cannot be explained by battlefield incentives alone.

Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood (2017) demonstrate that patterns of violence must be understood as multi-dimensional configurations of repertoire, targeting, frequency, and technique rather than collapsed into a single proxy measure, and that treating

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lethal violence as an index of all violence systematically obscures meaningful organizational variation. Yet this conceptual framework remains largely untested as an empirical matter. This paper takes repertoire breadth seriously as a dependent variable in its own right, asking what pre-conflict organizational foundations produce the capacity for coercive diversification in the first place.

Existing scholarship (Weinstein, 2006; Kalyvas, 2006; Hultman, 2009; Fortna, 2015; Stanton, 2016; Hinkkainen Elliott et al., 2021; Thomas, 2014) has made important progress in explaining rebel violence against civilians. Rationalist accounts emphasize how territorial control, information about civilian loyalties, and battlefield incentives shape targeting decisions (Kalyvas, 2006; Fjelde and Hultman, 2014). Organizational theories point to resource endowments, recruitment practices, and internal discipline as determinants of civilian abuse (Weinstein, 2006; Hoover Green, 2016; Cohen, 2016). These are powerful explanations, yet they share a common limitation: they treat rebel behavior primarily as a response to wartime conditions, largely setting aside the question of where the organizational characteristics that enable or constrain civilian abuse originate. Why do some groups enter war already equipped to sustain coercive operations across multiple domains, while others lack this capacity entirely? If wartime conditions alone determined the breadth of violence, groups facing identical circumstances should converge toward similar patterns of civilian treatment. Instead, repertoire breadth diverges persistently, pointing to pre-conflict foundations as a missing explanatory layer.

This paper addresses that gap by arguing that the organizational origins of rebel groups, specifically the preexisting organizations and founding processes through which groups emerge, constitute a set of pre-conflict privileges and constraints that systematically shape the breadth of coercive repertoires groups deploy against civilians during war. Groups that emerge from identifiable parent organizations inherit the privileges associated with those origins, including organizational templates, behavioral repertoires, community relationships, and resource networks that determine their capacity to engage in or refrain from a wide range of coercive practices before conflict even begins (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020).

These foundational privileges are not incidental but rather durable endowments that travel with the group into armed conflict. Crucially, not all parent organizations confer the same privileges. Rebel groups rooted in civil society organizations and political parties inherit non-coercive behavioral repertoires and deep community embeddedness that constrain the range of abusive practices available to them. Because these groups developed their organizational culture through persuasion, mobilization, and negotiation rather than coercion, they carry a narrower coercive toolkit into war. Groups emerging from violent parent organizations, by contrast, inherit the privileges of institutionalized coercive practices, combat experience, and offensive capabilities that enable a wider and more diversified reliance on abusive strategies across multiple domains simultaneously. Groups without any identifiable parent organization, lacking inherited structures altogether, face organizational constraints that limit their capacity to sustain diversified abuse.

The paper makes two core empirical contributions. First, I demonstrate that rebel groups with non-violent organizational origins commit a significantly narrower range of human rights violations than groups emerging from violent parent organizations,

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even after accounting for battlefield conditions, organizational capacity, and conflict-level characteristics. Second, I show that parentless rebel groups, lacking the structural privileges conferred by any parent organization, similarly commit fewer categories of abuse than their counterparts with violent origins. These findings hold across multiple model specifications and estimators, providing robust evidence that pre-conflict organizational origins shape the breadth of coercive repertoires that rebel groups deploy against civilian populations during conflict. The contribution is not simply that some groups violate human rights more than others, but that organizational origins produce qualitatively distinct patterns of coercive diversification that wartime accounts cannot adequately explain.

Understanding how foundational origins shape the breadth of rebel violence matters for both theory and practice. Theoretically, this study shifts attention from wartime dynamics to pre-conflict foundations, identifying origins as a missing explanatory layer that conditions not only whether groups abuse civilians but how broadly and diversely they do so. A group with a wide coercive repertoire poses a qualitatively different threat to civilian populations than one with a narrow range of tactics, and explaining this difference requires looking beyond the battlefield to the organizational inheritance that groups bring into war. Practically, recognizing that some groups enter conflict with the privileges of inherited coercive templates while others carry structural constraints toward restraint enables policymakers and humanitarian actors to better anticipate which groups pose the greatest risk of broad and systematic abuse, and to direct prevention and intervention resources accordingly. The study proceeds by reviewing existing research, presenting the theoretical argument, describing the research design, analyzing the results, and concluding with a discussion of implications and directions for future research.

Rebel Groups and Civilian Abuse in Civil War.

The concept of human rights spans legal, moral, and political dimensions and encompasses a wide range of protections against abuse by state and non-state actors. Beyond direct violence against civilians, human rights violations include practices such as murder, kidnapping, torture, and political imprisonment, all of which contravene internationally recognized standards (Walsh et al., 2024; Hafner-Burton, 2014; Donnelly, 2013; Sikkink, 2011; Jo, 2015; Cingranelli and Filippov, 2018).

On the broader level, debates persist on whether human rights practices have improved over time (Fariss, 2014, 2019; Cingranelli and Filippov, 2018), and much of this contestation rests on methodological issues, with significant debates surrounding how to weight different types of violations in measurement models. However, while debates persist about overall human rights trends, research on rebel groups' civilian abuses reveals no uniform pattern of improvement or deterioration. Walsh et al. (2024) in their investigation of human rights violations that span beyond just lethal harm against non-combatants for all rebel groups around the world between 1990 and 2018, find that violations by some groups escalate over time while others decline, with most types of abuse remaining relatively stable. Interestingly, while a focus on the aggregate trends has its own theoretical implications, understanding the variation poses a

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greater theoretical challenge for scholarship and policy discovery.

One of the common and enduring features of civil conflicts is civilian victimization by rebel groups (Eck and Hultman, 2007). Existing research identifies multiple factors shaping rebel groups' treatment of civilians. Popular and influential among these theories are rationalist explanations (Kalyvas, 1999, 2006; Valentino, 2005; Hultman, 2007). These rationalist models essentially converge on the idea that violence patterns reflect strategic interactions between armed actors and civilians. Kalyvas (2006), for instance, argues that combatants' territorial control and information about civilian loyalties determine targeting decisions. In the same vein, in heavily fractionalized and polarized rebel constituencies, violence against civilians is significantly high (Ottmann, 2017). Meanwhile, Balcells (2010) demonstrates that violence reflects both armed groups' targeting strategies based on public identities and civilians' strategic collaboration. In another related account, Fjelde and Hultman (2014), find that armed actors are more likely to engage in civilian abuse in areas associated with the enemy's ethnic constituency. Importantly, strategic explanations also recognize that restraint can be a deliberate choice: armed actors may avoid targeting civilians and adhere to international legal standards when doing so enhances domestic legitimacy or secures international diplomatic support (Stanton, 2016).

Also, more prominently, a related body of work highlights the role of resource endowments and organizational capacity on rebel treatment of civilians. Weinstein (2006) argues that rebel groups with access to lootable resources or external funding are more likely to abuse civilians because they can recruit opportunistic fighters and operate without relying on local support. Similarly, Salehyan et al. (2014) shows that foreign state sponsorship reduces rebels' dependence on civilians and, when multiple sponsors are involved, weakens oversight, increasing the risk of civilian abuse. Stressing the role of organizational capacity and internal structure as a driver of civilian abuse, Weinstein (2006) posits that poorly organized groups often lack effective mechanisms for punishing indiscipline and enforcing standards of conduct, increasing the likelihood of civilian abuse, M Wood (2010) finds that stronger insurgents kill fewer civilians because they can offer material incentives and protection instead of relying on coercion, whereas weaker groups escalate violence due to limited capacity. At the same time, rebel groups with strong internal institutions, especially political education emphasizing restraint, are better able to control fighters and limit civilian abuse, while the need for organizational cohesion and recruitment needs undermine discipline and increase civilian abuse (Hoover Green, 2016; Cohen, 2016). Rebel organizational structures are also shaped by environmental factors, including leadership dynamics, relationships with external supporters, and regional dynamics of conflict and cooperation among states (Acosta et al., 2023; Clapham, 1998; Doctor, 2021; Reno, 2011).

Though, these theoretical traditions illuminate important mechanisms, they share a critical analytical blind spot that leaves the central puzzle incompletely resolved. Both strategic interaction frameworks (Kalyvas, 1999, 2006; Ottmann, 2017; Valentino, 2005; Hultman, 2007) and organizational theories (Weinstein, 2006; M Wood, 2010; Hoover Green, 2016; Cohen, 2016) treat the organizational characteristics and strategic capabilities of rebel groups as given, analyzing how these attributes operate during

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war without asking where they come from in the first place. Strategic frameworks reveal how territorial and constituency dynamics, information constraints, ethnic allegiances, and battlefield incentives shape targeting decisions during conflicts. Organizational theories demonstrate how resource endowments and institutional structures condition groups' capacity for abuse and discipline. Yet an important analytical question remains underexplored: where do these organizational characteristics and strategic capabilities originate? This omission matters because the answer fundamentally changes how we understand the breadth of civilian abuse. If some groups enter conflict already possessing institutionalized coercive practices, community networks, and organizational infrastructure to sustain diverse abusive operations across multiple domains, while others do not, then wartime factors are not the primary source of variation in coercive repertoires. They are amplifiers or moderators of pre-existing organizational endowments that groups inherit from their founding circumstances.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, eight rebel groups committed no violations while four engaged in systematic abuse across multiple categories, all operating in the same environment (Walsh et al., 2024). This enduring divergence in repertoire breadth raises a question that wartime accounts cannot answer: what determines the organizational capacity for diversified coercion before conflict begins?

This paper fills that gap by bringing into focus rebel origins, arguing that the preexisting organizations and founding processes through which rebel groups emerge constitute a set of pre-conflict privileges and constraints that shape the breadth of coercive repertoires groups deploy against civilians during war. Rather than treating organizational characteristics as exogenous inputs to wartime behavior, this origins-based framework traces those characteristics to their source, explaining why some groups enter conflict already equipped with diversified coercive templates while others carry structural constraints toward restraint. In doing so, it addresses a blind spot in existing approaches by empirically clarifying the pre-conflict foundations of the organizational variation that rationalist and organizational theories take as their starting point, and by demonstrating that origins shape not simply whether groups commit violations but how broadly and diversely they do so.

Rebel Groups Foundation and Conflict Dynamics

Insurgent groups hardly emerge in a vacuum. Over 95 percent of rebel groups active during intrastate conflicts included in the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's (UCDP) Armed Conflict Database got their initial membership from some sort of pre-existing named organization or, at the very least, from an identifiable ethnic or refugee community (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2019). This initial membership is significant as it influences the conduct of these emerging rebel groups in conflict. For instance, empirical works of scholars like (Fjelde and Nilsson, 2012; Cunningham et al., 2013; Doctor, 2020) demonstrate that the emergence and division of rebel groups are crucial for understanding the dynamics of conflict processes and dynamics. As gleaned from their submissions, (Weinstein, 2006; Reno, 2007; Staniland, 2014; Parkinson, 2013; Sarbahi, 2014; Lewis, 2017; Larson and Lewis, 2018), the micro-foundations of rebellion, particularly the extent to which a rebel group is socially connected to the wider population has some significant impact on the dynamics of conflict. This connection

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and ties presumably enable rebel groups to fight a prolonged conflict and sometimes survive counterinsurgency efforts. However, it is plausible that the rebel groups' connection with the locals is shaped not only by geographical proximity but also by its foundational origins (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020).

Yet, both the initial rebel organizations and their organizational offspring are all bound by the same human rights obligations. Understanding how rebel groups perceive and behave with respect to international humanitarian law (IHL) and human rights is crucial in protecting human rights. If rebels have different understandings of the law, it undermines the effectiveness of IHL in reducing civilian suffering and preserving human dignity (Jo and Niehaus, 2018). While International humanitarian law has explicitly cautioned combatants to respect non-combatants and avoid any abuse during wars (Slim, 2007), rebel groups still commit a wide range of human rights abuses during civil wars.

Theory and Hypotheses

There is a considerable variation in the degree to which rebel groups engage in human rights abuses during conflict. In other words, the way rebel groups prey on civilians differs significantly from case to case (Salehyan et al., 2014). For instance, rebels in Myanmar, Sierra Leone, and Colombia[1] engaged in large scale abduction, while groups in Niger and Georgia significantly refrained from using this recruitment strategy. Analogous pattern also exists in Burundi, where the National Council for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD) forcibly recruited children, while the Front de Libération Nationale (FROLINA) employed this tactic to a lesser extent (Haer et al., 2020). Understanding why rebel groups attack the civilian population is not new (Weinstein, 2007; Salehyan, Sirosky, Wood, 2014; Walsh et al., 2019); (Kalyvas, 2006); (Hoover Green, 2016), (Cohen, 2016), (Doctor, 2021); (Fjelde Hultman, 2014); (Wood, 2010; Stanton, 2016) as rebel groups typically commit at least some form of human rights abuses during civil wars (Walsh et al., 2024).

However, the range of coercive practices that rebel groups are able to deploy against civilians varies systematically, and existing explanations leave an important gap. Scholarship on organizational capacity, community embeddedness, and resource endowments identifies these factors as proximate drivers of civilian abuse. Yet it does not explain why some groups possess these attributes while others do not before a single shot is fired. Lemke and Carter (2016), for instance, show that the birth legacies of sovereign states impact when and how governments fight wars. The same logic applies to rebel groups. The degree of rebels' prior relationships with local communities through their founding organization shapes their capacity to deliver social services, maintain political institutions, and exercise coercive behaviors such as sexual violence and targeted killings (Chu and Braithwaite, 2018; Loyle and Binningsbø, 2018; Pettersson and Eck, 2018; Stewart, 2018; Cunningham and Sawyer, 2019). The works of Weinstein (2006), Reno (2007), Staniland (2014), Parkinson (2013), Sarbahi (2014), Lewis (2017), and Larson and Lewis (2018) further suggest that a rebel group's so-

[1]Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2008

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cial embeddedness and ties to the broader population have an important influence on conflict dynamics, enabling groups to recruit fighters, sustain long-term conflict, and withstand counterinsurgency efforts (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020). Yet these accounts treat organizational capacity and community embeddedness as background conditions, without asking what generates them in the first place. The answer, this paper argues, lies in the foundational privileges that specific origin conditions confer before conflict begins.

The critical insight this paper advances is that organizational capacity and community embeddedness are not exogenous inputs that some groups happen to possess and others do not. They are products of organizational origins, and more specifically, of the pre-conflict advantages and constraints that those origins generate. Origins are the causal antecedents that produce these attributes—the founding processes through which groups acquire or fail to acquire the structural endowments that shape their wartime behavior. A group that emerges from a civil society organization does not simply have stronger community ties than a group that emerges from a military faction by coincidence. Rather, it inherits these ties from a parent organization that built and sustained relationships with civilian populations over time. This inherited embeddedness constitutes a key organizational advantage that travels into armed conflict. Similarly, a group that emerges from a violent parent organization does not simply happen to possess coercive expertise. It inherits established coercive practices, combat routines, and offensive capabilities from an organization that institutionalized them prior to the group's formation. Groups without any identifiable parent organization, by contrast, enter conflict without these inherited advantages, lacking both established coercive templates and embedded community networks. Origins, therefore, are not a proxy for capacity and community ties. They are the pre-conflict source of the structural conditions that shape them, and understanding these origins is essential to explaining why groups differ in the breadth of coercive repertoires they deploy against civilians.

H1: Parentless Groups and Human Rights Abuses

Braithwaite and Cunningham (2020) provides a useful framework for understanding this variation, classifying rebel groups into those with a formal parent organization and those that are parentless. Parentless rebel groups lack an identifiable foundational structure such as a political party, military faction, or civil society organization underpinning their emergence. Examples include the Rassemblement des Forces Démocratiques de Guinée, composed largely of Guinean exiles; the Palipehutu, formed by Burundians in Tanzanian refugee camps; and the Kuki National Front in India[2]. In contrast, groups such as the Moro Islamic Front, the Cocoyes in Congo, and Venezuela's Bandera Roja trace their origins to established, formal organizations. This distinction matters not because parenthood is itself a cause of civilian abuse, but because the presence or absence of a parent organization determines the foundational privileges groups carry into conflict and the structural constraints under which they operate from the moment of their formation.

[2]See Braithwaite and Cunningham (2020)'s FORGE Dataset for further examples

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Groups with parent organizations inherit organizational privileges in the form of "ready-made" structures like logistical infrastructure, ideological blueprints, recruitment networks, and tactical doctrines that facilitate more organized and extensive violence across multiple domains simultaneously (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020). These inherited endowments lower the organizational cost of expanded violence repertoire and enable groups to draw on a wider range of abusive practices because the templates for doing so are already embedded within the organizational inheritance they receive. Parentless groups, given the absence of a parent organization, have more work to do in terms of capacity building. This absence of inherited organizational advantages produces a fundamental constraint: without pre-existing command-and-control mechanisms, coercive templates, or logistical networks, parentless groups are far less likely to possess the capacity necessary to sustain diversified abuse across multiple violation categories. The narrower breadth of their coercive repertoire therefore reflects not simply strategic choice, but a structural limitation rooted directly in their founding conditions.

Beyond organizational constraints, parentless groups face a second set of limitations rooted in their relationship with civilian communities. Because they lack elite networks or transnational backers at the outset, their survival depends heavily on localized recruitment through kinship, friendships, and communal ties (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020). In many instances, parentless groups often form around a charismatic individual, recruiting friends, neighbors, and others without the benefit of an established hierarchy or experience in collective action (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020). This absence of inherited privileges means that community legitimacy becomes an essential resource rather than a supplementary one. Engaging in broad or indiscriminate violence would alienate the very communities on which their survival depends, creating strong normative incentives for restraint across multiple forms of abuse. Furthermore, without pre-existing ideological frameworks or militant traditions passed down from a parent organization, parentless rebels are less likely to inherit coercive norms that normalize the use of violence across different domains. This further reduces the likelihood that diverse forms of abuse become embedded in group behavior.

Empirical patterns from the data further illustrate these constraints. Several parentless groups, including the Autonomous Province of Western Bosnia, the National Council for Recovery (CNR) in Chad, and the Rassemblement des Forces Démocratiques de Guinée (RFDG) in Guinea, show no recorded violations across their observed years of conflict. The absence of violations in these cases is not incidental but reflects the lack of inherited organizational privileges necessary to sustain coercive activity across multiple domains. Without the logistical networks, coercive templates, and institutionalized routines that parent organizations confer, these groups lack the organizational capacity to deploy violence broadly against civilian populations. Even among parentless groups that do engage in abuse, the range of coercive practices remains sharply limited. The Movement for Democracy and Justice in Chad (MDJT), for instance, exhibits only isolated instances of violation without expanding into multiple categories of abuse simultaneously. Similarly, the United Liberation Front (UNLF) in India records occasional killings and, in a few cases, torture, but never develops a broader pattern of diversified violations across domains. Violations appear spo-

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radic and concentrated in a narrow set of practices rather than systematically deployed across multiple categories (Walsh et al., 2024).

This pattern is theoretically consequential. It reflects not the complete absence of violence but the constrained development of a coercive repertoire. Groups that lack inherited organizational privileges do not possess the institutionalized templates or operational capacity required to scale violence across categories. As a result, even when violence occurs, it does not evolve into a diversified repertoire. The breadth of civilian abuse is therefore not simply reduced but structurally bounded by the founding conditions under which these groups emerge.

Finally, existing research shows that parentless groups often fight shorter wars (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020). These shorter conflict durations reflect, in part, the absence of inherited organizational advantages that help sustain conflict over time, such as established recruitment pipelines, external support networks, and institutionalized command structures. Shorter wars reduce the opportunity for broad coercive repertoires to emerge and become institutionalized, both by limiting opportunities for abuse and by discouraging strategies that invite prolonged retaliation from either the state or civilian populations. Taken together, these organizational, social, and temporal constraints limit not simply whether parentless groups commit violations, but how broadly and diversely they do so. The absence of foundational privileges is what produces this pattern, and it is a condition that originates before conflict begins rather than one that emerges from wartime dynamics. Therefore, I hypothesize that:

> **H1**: Parentless rebel organizations will employ a significantly narrower range of human rights violations during civil conflict than rebel groups with parent organizations.

H2: Non-Violent Origins and Human Rights Abuses

Not all parent organizations confer the same effects. The structures, behavioral templates, and community relationships that rebel groups inherit depend critically on the nature of the founding organization from which they emerge. Some rebel groups originate from political movements, religious organizations, trade unions, and student associations, organizations that pursue their goals through persuasion, mobilization, and collective action rather than coercion. Braithwaite and Cunningham (2020) classify these as groups with civil society origins. These organizations are distinct from other parent types in that they are not primarily oriented toward capturing political office, nor have they typically relied on violence to pursue their goals prior to the formation of the rebel group (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020). The organizational privileges these groups inherit differ fundamentally from those associated with violent parent organizations. Rather than acquiring coercive templates, combat routines, and offensive capabilities, civil society-origin groups inherit dense community linkages, and legitimacy networks built through sustained engagement with civilian populations (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020, 2024). These inherited privileges constrain rather than expand the range of coercive practices available once conflict begins.

This argument operates through two reinforcing pathways. The first is organizational inheritance. Because civil society organizations did not typically rely on violence

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prior to the formation of the rebel group (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020), the behavioral templates they transmit emphasize persuasion, negotiation, and collective mobilization. Groups inheriting these templates are less likely to possess the institutionalized routines necessary to sustain abuse across multiple violation categories. Even when violence is employed, it tends to remain limited in scope, reflecting the absence of established coercive practices within the organization's inherited structure.

The contrast with violent origins makes this mechanism clear. Groups emerging from military units, preexisting rebel organizations, or armed non-state actors inherit something categorically different: established coercive infrastructure, combat-tested doctrines, weapons access, and organizational routines built around the exercise of force (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020, 2024). These inherited endowments do not merely make violence possible, they expand the repertoire of coercive practices available to the group from the outset of conflict. A group that enters conflict already possessing the personnel, routines, and institutional memory for coercion does not need to develop these capacities from scratch. The Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army illustrates this dynamic. Emerging from mutinying Sudanese military officers and soldiers, the SPLM/A carried established combat capacity and coercive routines directly into armed conflict. Across its conflict period, the SPLM/A exhibited frequent killings, torture, forced recruitment, sexual violence, and movement restrictions (Walsh et al., 2024), sustaining a wide and diversified repertoire of abuse that reflects precisely the kind of inherited coercive infrastructure that violent origins confer.

The second pathway operates through community embeddedness. Rebel groups rooted in civil society organizations do not enter conflict as organizational outsiders. They emerge from within the communities they claim to represent, inheriting preexisting linkages to local populations that include recruitment networks, social legitimacy, and accumulated knowledge about civilian loyalties and grievances (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2024). These inherited connections are a form of organizational privilege that most rebel groups must painstakingly construct during conflict, often through coercion. Civil society-origin groups arrive with them already in place. This matters for the breadth of civilian abuse in two ways.

First, these inherited networks reduce the need for broad coercion as an organizational tool. Groups that can draw on established civilian relationships to recruit fighters, secure resources, and gather information do not need to rely on violence to compel participation or extract compliance. Civil society organizations that precede rebel groups provide structured community networks, localized knowledge of sympathetic populations, and direct access to supporters and recruits, reducing the incentive to coerce civilians into compliance (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2024). Thus, the coercive practices that other groups develop out of organizational necessity are simply less necessary for groups that inherit functional community ties. This reduces both the incentive to develop a wide coercive repertoire and the organizational pressure to institutionalize diverse forms of abuse.

Second, community embeddedness creates powerful normative constraints against broad civilian abuse. Because civil society-origin groups depend on maintaining local legitimacy for their survival and operational effectiveness, the use of broad or indiscriminate violence carries high costs. Abusing the civilian populations from which

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they draw support, recruit members, and derive legitimacy would undermine the very foundations of their organizational capacity. The threat of losing community support therefore functions as a structural disincentive against expanding coercion across multiple domains, even when battlefield pressures might otherwise create incentives to do so.

The Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) provides a clear illustration of how organizational embeddedness might create rebel restraint. Since the 1970s, the group cultivated strong ties to civilian populations in Oromia, developing education and healthcare institutions, building infrastructure, and establishing local governance structures rooted in the Oromo gada system (Jalata, 1993; Stewart and Liou, 2017). The OLF also lacked external sponsorship and natural resource revenues (Stewart and Liou, 2017), leaving it dependent on civilian populations for support. Despite holding consistent territorial control over the areas in which it operated and sustaining armed conflict against the Ethiopian government for more than two decades, the OLF rarely employed direct violence against civilians, recording only sporadic, low-level violations limited to occasional killings and detention (Stewart and Liou, 2017; Walsh et al., 2024). From this pattern, the rarity of civilian violence does not reflect a lack of capability, but rather organizational conditions that reduced reliance on coercion. Rather than escalating into a wider range of coercive practices, the OLF sustained a narrow repertoire of violence throughout its conflict.

Additionally, part of this non-violent parent organization also includes groups that emerge from political parties. Groups that emerge from political parties, as part of the broader category of non-violent parent organizations, benefit from similar community ties through prior campaigning or governance roles, having represented local populations, advocated for resources, and served as a channel for supporters' concerns (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2024). Political parties are fundamentally institutions of competitive political engagement. They develop routines centered on persuasion, constituency building, coalition formation, and internal deliberation, practices oriented toward winning and sustaining popular support rather than compelling compliance through force. Parties maintain established relationships with specific constituencies whose support they have cultivated through years of political mobilization. These inherited community ties provide many party-based organizations with ready-made bases of support that reduce reliance on coercion for recruitment, resource extraction, and information gathering (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2024; Sarbahi, 2014). Party-origin groups therefore enter armed conflict structurally predisposed toward restraint, constrained by the risk of alienating the very constituencies from whom they draw legitimacy and on whom their organizational survival depends.

Fretilin in East Timor and the National Council for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD) in Burundi illustrate how party-based organizational origins might produce restraint. Fretilin originated from the Timorese Social Democratic Association, inheriting organizational foundations built through social and political mobilization before transitioning to armed struggle. The group expanded its base through literacy campaigns, cooperative agriculture, and participatory governance (de Acolhimento and Verdade, 2005; Taylor, 1999; Bermeo, 2022). Similarly, the CNDD grew out of FRODEBU, the Front for Democracy in Burundi, a party deeply embedded in Burundian political life through electoral competition and participation (Braithwaite and

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Cunningham, 2020; Burihabwa and Curtis, 2019). Both groups entered armed conflict carrying the organizational legacy of their political origins, including established civilian relationships and legitimacy structures built through advocacy rather than coercion. Neither group recorded a single violation against civilian populations across any of their observed conflict years (Walsh et al., 2024). In fact, for the Fretilin organization, avoiding civilian violence was its major strength (Durand, 2016).

Braithwaite and Cunningham (2020) demonstrate that the conflict-shortening effects of rebel strength and legal political wings are driven primarily by groups rooted in civil society organizations and political parties, as non-violent origins enable more efficacious substitution of nonviolent actions for violent activities in pursuit of group demands. This substitution logic extends beyond conflict duration to civilian treatment. If non-violent origins give groups the organizational means to pursue their goals through political rather than coercive channels, then those same origins produce structural predispositions toward restraint in how groups engage civilian populations. Groups that can draw on inherited legitimacy networks, community embeddedness, and non-coercive behavioral templates to recruit, mobilize, and extract resources without force carry these same organizational dispositions into their treatment of civilians. The foundational privileges associated with non-violent origins therefore condition not only how effectively rebels fight and how quickly conflicts end, but also the breadth of coercive practices they deploy against the populations they claim to represent. Therefore, I hypothesize that:

> **H2**: Rebel groups originating from non-violent parent organizations will employ a significantly narrower range of human rights violations during civil conflict than rebel groups emerging from violent parent organizations.

Research Design

To test the hypotheses on how rebel groups' organizational origins shape their conduct toward civilian populations, I use the Rebel Human Rights Violations dataset (Walsh et al., 2024) to construct the dependent variable. The dataset covers rebel group behavior globally between 1990 and 2018 and captures eight categories of non-combat violations: arbitrary killing, forced detention and disappearance, torture, property destruction, forcible recruitment, sexual violence, forced displacement, and movement restriction. The unit of analysis is the rebel group-year. This choice reflects the fact that patterns of violence vary over time even within the same organization. While the key explanatory variables capturing organizational origins are time-invariant characteristics established at the point of group formation, the theoretical argument concerns how these pre-conflict attributes shape behavior during conflict across years. Using a group-year structure allows the analysis to capture temporal variation in the deployment of coercive practices while attributing systematic differences in repertoire breadth to stable organizational attributes inherited from founding circumstances.

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Dependent Variable

The primary dependent variable is the Violation Repertoire Score, a count of the distinct violation categories employed by a rebel group in a given year, ranging from 0 to 8. Each of the eight violation types contributes a value of 1 if the group engaged in that category of abuse in a given year and 0 otherwise, and these are summed to produce the final score. For instance, if a rebel group engages in killings, torture, and forced recruitment in a given year, but no other forms of abuse, the resulting Violation Repertoire Score for that group-year would be 3. While the RHRV dataset records each violation on a three-point ordinal scale capturing the frequency of abuse from unreported to frequent or systematic (Walsh et al., 2024), the Violation Repertoire Score aggregates across categories to capture the breadth of the coercive repertoire rather than the severity of any single violation type. This operationalization is theoretically motivated: the central argument of this paper concerns the organizational capacity to sustain broad patterns of abuse across multiple domains simultaneously, which is better captured by the count of violation types than by a binary indicator of any violation or by the severity of a single category. Higher values on the Violation Repertoire Score therefore reflect a wider and more institutionalized reliance on coercive practices, consistent with the theoretical expectations derived from the organizational origins framework. I estimate this outcome using negative binomial regression to account for overdispersion in the count distribution.

Independent Variables

The primary explanatory variables capture the organizational origins of rebel groups using the Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence dataset (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020). I distinguish between three mutually exclusive origin categories, with violent-origin groups serving as the reference category in all specifications. Merger groups, that is, groups with two or more identifiable origins, are excluded from the three-way origin specifications to avoid confounding origin classification with organizational restructuring during conflict.

Parentless rebel groups are those that emerge without any identifiable preexisting parent organization or without a broader community underlying the initial membership. These groups lack inherited organizational structures and enter conflict without the foundational privileges conferred by established networks, logistical capacity, or institutionalized coercive or non-coercive routines. Examples in the data include the Rassemblement des Forces Démocratiques de Guinée and the Mouvement pour la Démocratie et la Justice au Tchad, both of which are coded as parentless and record either no violations or violations confined to a narrow set of categories across their observed years. To measure parentless origin, I follow Braithwaite and Cunningham (2020)'s broad definition of parentless rebel groups, which includes both groups that lack a formal organization and an identifiable broader community underlying their initial membership, as well as groups that were initially constituted from a specific refugee population or domestic ethnic group but not from a formal organization within those communities. Parentless Origin is coded 1 when a rebel group meets either of these conditions and 0 otherwise.

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Rebel groups with non-violent origins are those that emerge from civil society organizations or political parties, including religious groups, trade unions, student associations, and political movements. To measure non-violent origin, I follow (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2024)'s conceptualization of community ties. I code observations as 1 when a rebel group emerged from at least one political party or civil society organization. The variable receives a value of 0 if the rebel group in a given dyad was not founded by or did not emerge from a political party or civil society organization of any type.

Control Variables

I include a range of controls to account for alternative explanations of variation in violation repertoires. From the Non-State Actors in Armed Conflict dataset (Cunningham et al., 2013), I include rebel support, coded as a binary variable taking the value of 1 when a group receives explicit external state sponsorship and 0 otherwise. I also include rebel strength, measuring the relative military capacity of the rebel group compared to the government on a five-point ordinal scale, and territorial control, a binary indicator coded 1 when the rebel group holds identifiable territory.

I additionally control for organizational merger, a binary indicator coded 1 when a rebel group emerges through the combination of multiple parent organizations, either within or across origin categories (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020). Merger groups occupy an ambiguous position in the origins framework, as they may inherit a mix of coercive and non-coercive organizational templates that do not map cleanly onto a single category. If unaccounted for, this could confound the estimated effects of non-violent and parentless origins. By retaining merger groups in the sample and controlling for merger status, I ensure that the estimated origin effects are not driven by the organizational complexity associated with multi-parent founding conditions.

At the country level, I control for economic development using log GDP per capita from the World Development Indicators and democratic governance using the V-Dem polyarchy index (Coppedge et al., 2024). At the conflict level, I include measures of intensity and duration from the UCDP armed conflict dataset to account for the possibility that more severe and prolonged conflicts produce broader patterns of civilian abuse independently of group origins.

The RHRV dataset is subject to well-documented measurement limitations. Violation records depend on the reporting capacity and access of nongovernmental organizations, media outlets, and human rights monitors, which vary considerably across conflict contexts (Davenport, 2010). Some violations may go unreported due to access restrictions or victim reluctance, while others may be over-reported in conflicts with greater international attention. These limitations apply broadly across rebel groups and are unlikely to systematically favor any particular origin category, though they should be borne in mind when interpreting the magnitude of estimated effects (Cohen and Green, 2012; Cohen, 2016).

For the primary analysis, I estimate negative binomial regression models with cluster-robust standard errors clustered by rebel group to account for within-group correlation across years. The negative binomial specification is appropriate given the count nature of the Violation Repertoire Score and the overdispersion present in the data. All

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models include the full set of organizational and contextual controls described below. I further assess the robustness of the main findings using an alternative specification. I use violation severity as an alternative dependent variable, summing the ordinal scores across all eight violation categories to capture both breadth and intensity simultaneously.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	N	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max
Violation Repertoire Score (0–8)	514	2.210	1.000	2.460	0	8
Violation (Binary)	514	0.621	1.000	0.486	0	1
Parentless Origin	514	0.099	0.000	0.299	0	1
Non-Violent Origin	514	0.302	0.000	0.459	0	1
Rebel Support	514	0.403	0.000	0.491	0	1
Territorial Control	514	1.800	1.000	0.982	1	3
Rebel Strength (1–4)	514	1.760	2.000	0.634	1	4
Ideology	514	0.761	1.000	0.427	0	1
Merger	514	0.255	0.000	0.436	0	1
Conflict Intensity	514	1.150	1.000	0.361	1	2
Conflict Duration (years)	514	4.440	2.000	5.800	0	33
Democracy (V-Dem Polyarchy)	510	0.382	0.309	0.217	0.076	0.776
Log GDP per Capita	503	7.250	7.140	1.280	5.120	10.400

Note: N = 514. Sample restricted to groups with mutually exclusive origin classifications.

Results and Discussion

Parentless Rebel Groups and Violation Repertoire Breadth

Table 2 presents the negative binomial regression results for the Violation Repertoire Score across four specifications. Models 1 and 2 compare rebel groups without parent organizations to all other groups, while Models 3 and 4 disaggregate rebel group origins into three mutually exclusive categories using violent-origin groups as the reference category. Baseline specifications include only conflict-level controls, while full control specifications add organizational and country-level covariates.

Hypothesis 1 posits that parentless rebel organizations will employ a significantly narrower range of human rights violations during civil conflict than rebel groups with parent organizations. The results provide consistent support for this expectation. In the baseline specification (Model 1), parentless groups exhibit a negative and marginally significant effect on the Violation Repertoire Score (b = -0.535, 95% CI [-1.150, 0.080]), indicating that even before accounting for organizational and contextual factors, parentless groups draw on a narrower range of coercive practices than groups with parent organizations. In the full control specification (Model 2), this effect strengthens considerably (b = -0.658, 95% CI [-1.180, -0.134]). The corresponding

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incidence rate ratio of 0.518 indicates that parentless groups are predicted to commit approximately 48% fewer violation types than groups with parent organizations in a given year, holding all other variables at their means. This finding holds after accounting for rebel strength, territorial control, external support, conflict intensity, duration, economic conditions, and regime type, suggesting that the effect of parentless origins on repertoire breadth is not reducible to differences in organizational capacity or conflict severity.

Models 3 and 4 further disaggregate the analysis by distinguishing between violent-origin, non-violent-origin, and parentless groups. In the baseline specification (Model 3), both non-violent-origin and parentless groups exhibit significantly narrower violation repertoires than violent-origin groups. Non-violent-origin groups show a coefficient of -0.567 (95% CI [-1.009, -0.125]) and parentless groups a coefficient of -0.697 (95% CI [-1.340, -0.054]), confirming that the restraining effect of non-violent origins and the absence of organizational inheritance both operate independently of conflict-level dynamics. In the full control specification (Model 4), these effects are maintained. Non-violent-origin groups commit approximately 40% fewer violation types than violent-origin groups (IRR = 0.603, 95% CI [0.393, 0.924]), while parentless groups commit approximately 50% fewer violation types (IRR = 0.497, 95% CI [0.306, 0.806]).

Figure 2 illustrates these patterns visually. Violent-origin groups are predicted to commit 2.27 violation types under average conflict conditions, compared to 1.37 for non-violent-origin groups and 1.13 for parentless groups. The non-overlapping confidence intervals between violent and non-violent origin groups confirm the statistical significance of this difference.

Non-Violent Origins and Violation Repertoire Breadth

Hypothesis 2 posits that rebel groups originating from non-violent parent organizations will employ a significantly narrower range of human rights violations during civil conflict than groups emerging from violent parent organizations. The results provide consistent support for this expectation across all model specifications.

As shown in Models 3 and 4, non-violent-origin groups commit significantly fewer violation types than violent-origin groups in both the baseline and full control specifications. In the baseline model (Model 3), the coefficient for non-violent origin is -0.567 (95% CI [-1.009, -0.125]), indicating that even without accounting for organizational capacity or conflict-level factors, non-violent-origin groups draw on a substantially narrower coercive repertoire than their violent-origin counterparts. In the full control specification (Model 4), the effect remains stable at -0.507 (95% CI [-0.934, -0.079]), with an incidence rate ratio of 0.603. This means that non-violent-origin groups are predicted to commit approximately 40% fewer violation types than violent-origin groups in a given year, holding all other variables at their means.

Importantly, the inclusion of both non-violent-origin and parentless categories in the same model allows for a direct comparison of their effects relative to the violent-origin reference group. While both categories exhibit significant restraint, the effect is somewhat larger for parentless groups (IRR = 0.497) than for non-violent-origin groups (IRR = 0.603). This pattern is theoretically consistent with the argument that parentless groups face the most severe organizational constraints on coercive diver-

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sification, lacking both inherited coercive templates and established community networks. Non-violent-origin groups, while constrained by their inherited non-coercive repertoires and community embeddedness, nonetheless possess some organizational infrastructure that may enable occasional coercive activity across a limited range of domains.

The substantive magnitude of the non-violent origin effect is further illustrated in Figure 2, which shows the predicted Violation Repertoire Score for each origin category at sample means. The predicted score for non-violent-origin groups (1.37) falls well below that of violent-origin groups (2.27), with non-overlapping confidence intervals confirming the precision of this estimate. Figure 3 further illustrates the qualitative dimension of this difference, showing that violent-origin groups record consistently higher proportions of group-years with each violation type, particularly detention, forced recruitment, sexual violence, and property destruction. These descriptive patterns are consistent with the theoretical expectation that violent origins confer inherited coercive templates that enable diversification across multiple violation domains simultaneously, while non-violent origins impose structural constraints that limit the breadth of coercive practices available to rebel groups before conflict begins.

Turning to the control variables, the results are largely consistent with existing scholarship. Rebel strength is positive and highly significant across all full control specifications, indicating that groups with greater military capacity relative to the government commit a wider range of violations, consistent with the argument that organizational capacity enables more diversified coercive operations (Cunningham et al., 2013). Conflict intensity and conflict duration are both positive and significant across all specifications, confirming that more severe and prolonged conflicts generate broader patterns of civilian abuse independently of group origins. Territorial control is positive across specifications but does not reach conventional significance in most models, suggesting that holding territory provides some enabling conditions for abuse but is not a consistent independent predictor of repertoire breadth once other organizational factors are accounted for. Rebel support, ideology, democracy, and log GDP per capita are consistently insignificant, indicating that external sponsorship, ideological orientation, regime type, and economic development do not independently predict the breadth of coercive repertoires once organizational origins and conflict dynamics are controlled for. Merger is near zero and insignificant in all specifications, confirming that rebel groups formed through the combination of more than one parent organization do not systematically differ from non-merger groups in their violation repertoires.

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Table 2: Organizational Origins and the Violation Repertoire Score

	Model 1: Parentless vs All		**Model 2: Three-Way Origin**	
(lr)2-3 (lr)4-5	Baseline	Full Controls	Baseline	Full Controls
Organizational Origins				
Parentless Origin	$\mathbf{-0.535}^{\dagger}$	$\mathbf{-0.658}^{*}$		
	(**0.314**)	(**0.267**)		
Non-Violent Origin			$\mathbf{-0.567}^{*}$	$\mathbf{-0.507}^{*}$
			(**0.226**)	(**0.218**)
Parentless Origin			$\mathbf{-0.697}^{*}$	$\mathbf{-0.700}^{**}$
			(**0.328**)	(**0.247**)
Organizational Controls				
Rebel Strength		$\mathbf{0.541}^{***}$		$\mathbf{0.513}^{***}$
		(**0.098**)		(**0.118**)
Territorial Control		0.154		0.159
		(0.105)		(0.098)
Rebel Support		−0.175		0.053
		(0.154)		(0.152)
Ideology		−0.153		−0.016
		(0.227)		(0.228)
Merger		0.044		0.002
		(0.190)		(0.238)
Contextual Controls				
Conflict Intensity	$\mathbf{0.728}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.605}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.757}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.512}^{***}$
	(**0.135**)	(**0.129**)	(**0.124**)	(**0.143**)
Conflict Duration	$\mathbf{0.054}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.047}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.068}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.053}^{***}$
	(**0.009**)	(**0.011**)	(**0.010**)	(**0.011**)
Log GDP per Capita		0.126		0.088
		(0.088)		(0.089)
Democracy		0.099		0.075
		(0.098)		(0.109)
Observations	667	592	514	501

Note: Negative binomial regression. Cluster-robust standard errors by rebel group in parentheses. Reference category: violent-origin groups.

†p<0.10, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001. Bold indicates statistical significance.

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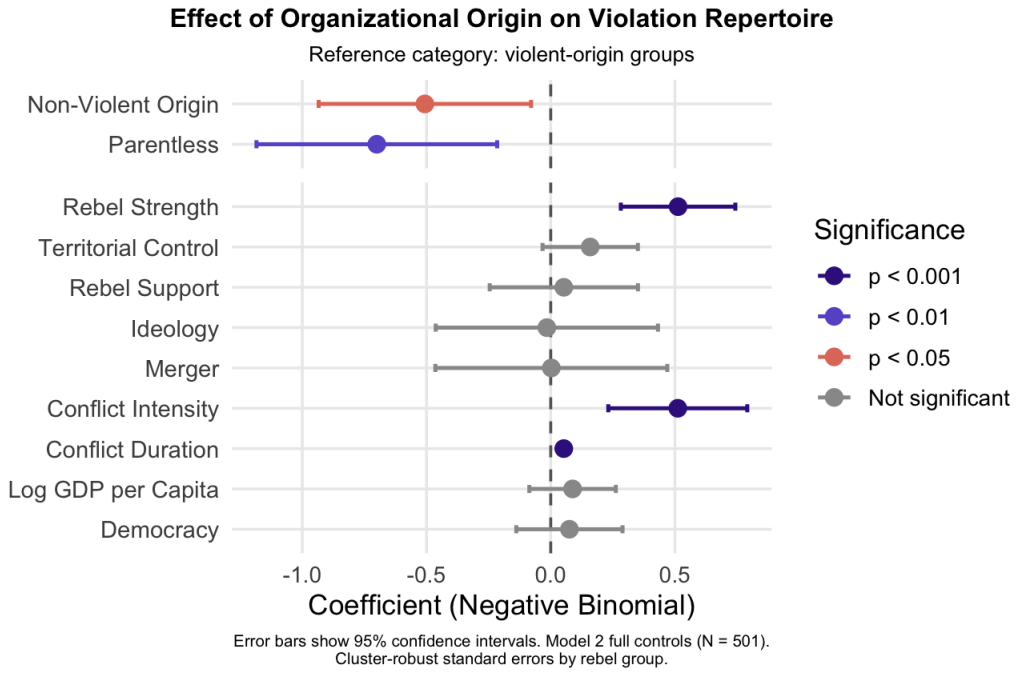


Figure 1: Effect of Organizational Origin on Violation Repertoire

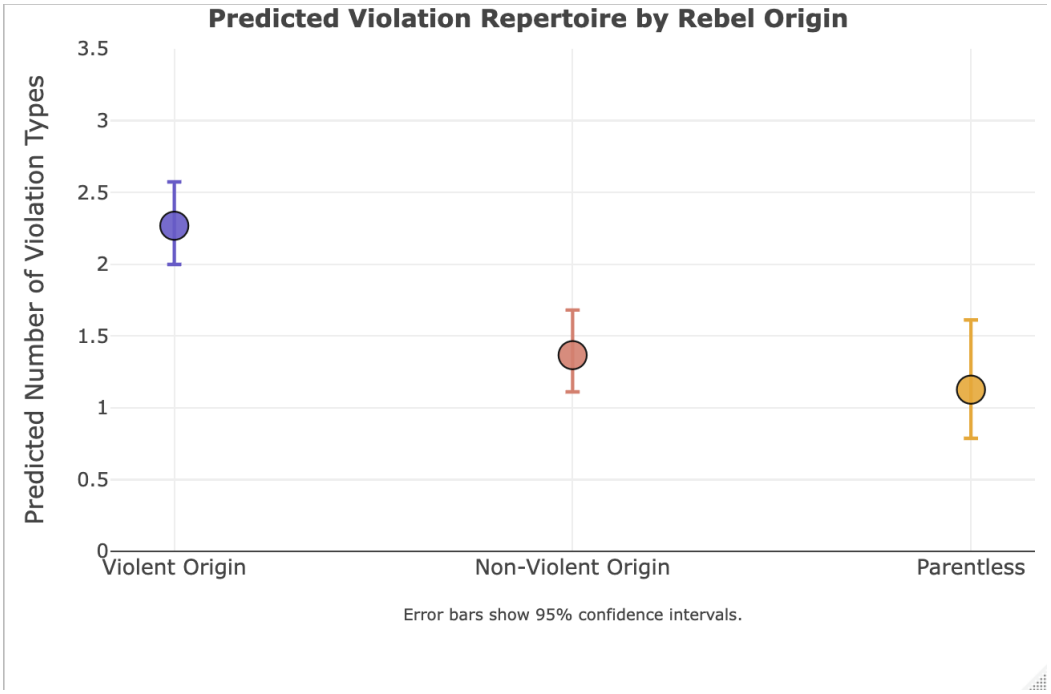


Figure 2: Predicted Violation Repertoire by Organizational Origin

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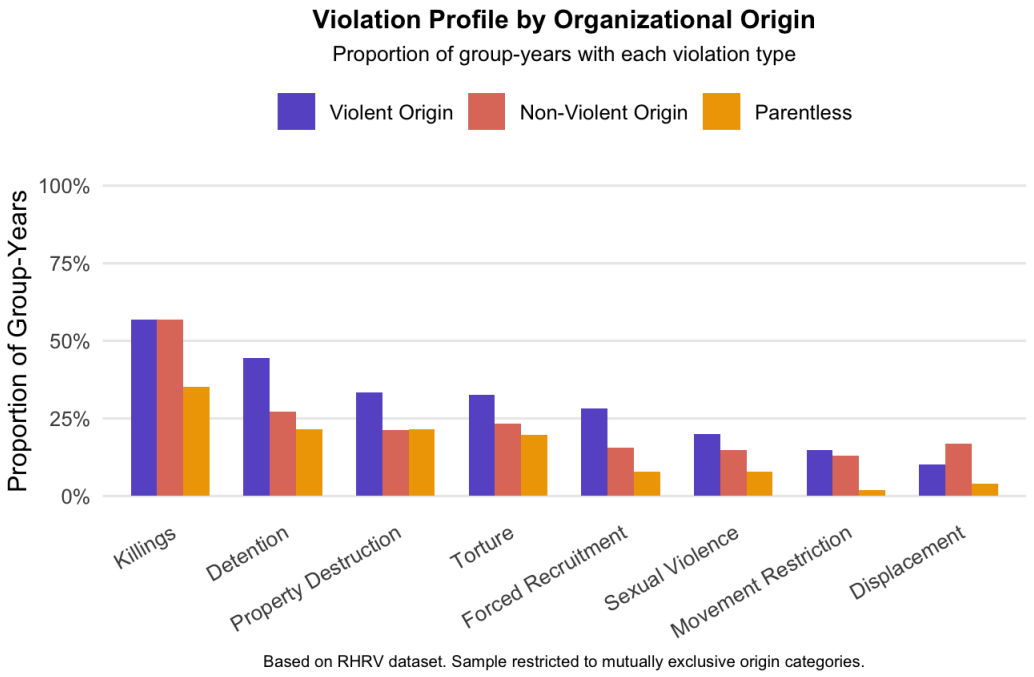


Figure 3: Violation Profile by Organizational Origin

Robustness Check

To assess the sensitivity of the main findings to the operationalization of the dependent variable, I re-estimate the three-way origin model, replacing the Violation Repertoire Score with a Violation Severity Index, constructed by summing the ordinal severity scores across all eight violation categories. Each category is coded 0 if the violation was unreported, 1 if it occurred occasionally, and 2 if it occurred frequently, yielding an index ranging from 0 to 16. While the main analysis captures the breadth of coercive practices, the severity index captures both the breadth and the intensity of abuse simultaneously, providing a more demanding test of the theoretical argument.

The results, presented alongside the main model estimates in Table 3, strongly corroborate the core findings. Non-violent-origin groups exhibit a coefficient of -0.538 (95% CI [-1.014, -0.062]) on the severity index, corresponding to an incidence rate ratio of 0.584. This implies that, holding all other variables constant, non-violent-origin groups are predicted to exhibit approximately 42% lower levels of violation severity than violent-origin groups. The parentless effect is even more pronounced, with a coefficient of -0.854 (95% CI [-1.447, -0.261]) and an incidence rate ratio of 0.426, indicating that parentless groups are predicted to exhibit approximately 57% lower severity scores relative to violent-origin groups. Both effects are statistically significant at conventional levels.

Importantly, the magnitude of these effects is larger in the severity specification than in the main variety specification. This pattern suggests that organizational origins do not merely constrain the range of coercive practices available to rebel groups, but also shape the intensity with which those practices are deployed. In other words,

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groups that lack violent organizational inheritance—or that emerge from non-violent institutional environments—are not only less likely to diversify into multiple forms of abuse, but also less likely to escalate the frequency and severity of the violations they do commit.

This finding provides additional support for the proposed mechanism. If organizational origins embed coercive repertoires prior to conflict onset, then groups emerging from violent backgrounds should possess both a wider set of coercive tools and a greater capacity to deploy them intensively. Conversely, groups lacking such inheritance should face constraints not only in repertoire expansion but also in the escalation of violence. The stronger effects observed in the severity models are consistent with this expectation, indicating that the influence of organizational origins extends beyond the extensive margin of violence to the intensive margin as well.

Finally, these results help rule out the possibility that the main findings are driven by measurement choices specific to the Violation Repertoire Score. In sum, the evidence indicates that organizational origins shape not only whether and how broadly rebel groups engage in human rights violations, but also how severely those violations are carried out during civil conflict.

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Table 3: Robustness Check: Alternative Dependent Variable

	Main Model	**Robustness**
	Violation Repertoire Score	Violation Severity Index
Organizational Origins		
Non-Violent Origin	$\mathbf{-0.507}^{*}$	$\mathbf{-0.538}^{*}$
	(**0.218**)	(**0.243**)
Parentless Origin	$\mathbf{-0.700}^{**}$	$\mathbf{-0.854}^{**}$
	(**0.247**)	(**0.303**)
Organizational Controls		
Rebel Strength	$\mathbf{0.513}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.588}^{***}$
	(**0.118**)	(**0.136**)
Territorial Control	0.159	$0.190^{\dagger}$
	(0.098)	(0.115)
Rebel Support	0.053	0.130
	(0.152)	(0.180)
Ideology	−0.016	−0.046
	(0.228)	(0.264)
Merger	0.002	0.153
	(0.238)	(0.279)
Contextual Controls		
Conflict Intensity	$\mathbf{0.512}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.585}^{**}$
	(**0.143**)	(**0.182**)
Conflict Duration	$\mathbf{0.053}^{***}$	$\mathbf{0.061}^{***}$
	(**0.011**)	(**0.014**)
Log GDP per Capita	0.088	0.104
	(0.089)	(0.097)
Democracy	0.075	0.020
	(0.109)	(0.120)
Observations	501	501

Note: Negative binomial regression. Cluster-robust standard errors by rebel group in parentheses. Reference category: violent-origin groups.

†p<0.10, *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001. Bold indicates statistical significance.

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Conclusion

Do the organizational origins of rebel groups shape how they treat civilian populations during conflict? This study argues that the answer is yes — and that understanding why requires looking before the war begins. The preexisting organizations from which rebel groups emerge confer foundational privileges and constraints that systematically condition the breadth of coercive practices groups deploy against civilians once armed conflict starts. Examining rebel groups active between 1990 and 2018, I find consistent evidence that organizational origins shape not only whether rebel groups commit violations but how broadly and diversely they do so.

The findings support both theoretical expectations. Rebel groups with non-violent organizational origins, particularly those rooted in civil society organizations and political parties, employ a significantly narrower range of human rights violations than groups emerging from violent parent organizations. These groups inherit non-coercive behavioral repertoires, community embeddedness, and legitimacy networks that constrain the range of abusive practices available to them before conflict begins. Similarly, rebel groups without any identifiable parent organization commit fewer and less diverse forms of abuse than groups with violent organizational backgrounds, reflecting the structural constraints imposed by the absence of inherited organizational infrastructure. These findings hold across multiple model specifications, alternative operationalizations of the dependent variable, and different sample compositions, providing robust empirical support for the theoretical argument that pre-conflict organizational foundations shape the coercive repertoires rebel groups develop during war.

It is important to note that the findings do not imply that violations are absent among non-violent or parentless groups. All rebel groups are prone to some degree of civilian abuse during conflict. The central contribution of this study is the demonstration that the privileges associated with different origin conditions enable some groups to sustain broader and more diversified coercive repertoires while imposing structural constraints on others, producing systematic variation in the breadth of civilian abuse that wartime accounts alone cannot explain.

Several policy implications follow from these findings. First, policymakers and humanitarian actors now have a clearer basis for anticipating which rebel groups pose the greatest risk of broad and systematic civilian abuse. Rather than focusing exclusively on the presence of violations, attention and resources should also be directed toward the organizational origins and founding structures of active rebel groups, which provide early indicators of coercive capacity before abuse occurs. Second, the findings suggest that timely intervention and mediation efforts may be more effective when directed at groups with violent organizational backgrounds, given their structurally greater capacity for diversified coercion. Third, the study underscores the potential value of human rights education and training directed at combatants in conflict zones, particularly those affiliated with groups whose organizational inheritance predisposes them toward broader patterns of abuse.

This study also points toward productive directions for future research. While origins shape the baseline coercive capacity of rebel groups, within-group variation among organizations with similar origins may be driven by internal leadership dynamics, factional competition, or shifts in organizational culture over time. Investigat-

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ing these within-group mechanisms would complement the cross-group analysis presented here. Additionally, since the timing of civilian abuse may carry independent theoretical significance, future work could examine not only the breadth of violations but when during a conflict they first emerge and how quickly they escalate, extending the organizational origins framework to the temporal dynamics of civilian targeting.

In sum, this study advances the scholarship on rebel groups and civilian abuse (Weinstein, 2006; Kalyvas, 1999, 2006; Fjelde and Nilsson, 2012; Fjelde and Hultman, 2014; Cohen, 2016; Wood et al., 2012) by incorporating rebel group formation processes into the explanatory framework, and directly addresses an empirical gap highlighted by Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood (2017), who show that variation in violence repertoires is analytically irreducible to a single proxy measure but leave unexplained what drives differences in repertoire breadth across organizations by bringing rebel group formation processes into the explanatory framework. Rebel groups enter conflicts with distinct organizational traits and privileges inherited from their founding circumstances (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020, 2024). Beyond wartime incentives and battlefield dynamics, these inherited traits constitute baseline organizational capacities and constraints that condition how groups engage civilian populations once violence begins. By shifting attention to the pre-conflict foundations of rebel organizations, this study demonstrates that the origins of armed groups are not merely historical background but an active determinant of how conflict unfolds for civilian populations caught in its path.

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