



# Historical legacies of colonial indirect rule: Princely states and Maoist insurgency in central India <sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

What are the long term effects of colonial institutions on insurgency? The literature on civil wars has not explored the historical legacies of colonial institutions for insurgency. I address this gap in the literature, by exploiting sub-national variation in the most important internal security threat in the world's largest democracy—the Maoist insurgency in India. Within India, I focus on the crucial case of the Maoist rebels in the tribal state of Chhattisgarh in central India which epitomizes the causal mechanism of indirect rule through native princely states creating enclaves of weak state capacity, low development and tribal grievances due to natural resource exploitation. I test my theory on a new dataset at the sub district level within Chhattisgarh, and use instrumental variable regression to address endogeneity due to selection bias, combined with historical analysis and interview data to demonstrate path dependence. This study demonstrates historical origins of weak state capacity and ethnic grievances due to natural resource exploitation, which are important explanations for civil war onset. It also sets the agenda for further research on other cases where colonial indirect rule creates conditions for insurgency, like the Taliban in FATA in Pakistan, the ethnic insurgencies in Burma's peripheries, and leftist insurgencies in Nepal, Peru and Colombia.

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## 1. Introduction

What is the long term effect of colonial institutions in creating historical legacies that influence spatial variation in *rebel control* in insurgency? Why is it that the Taliban in Pakistan was more successful in areas of former British indirect rule in the FATA area of NWFP, than in the British direct rule districts (Naseemullah, 2014)? Some of the secessionist insurgencies in India's North East like Mizoram, Nagaland, and Manipur can be traced back to discontent and identity formation emerging from indirect rule and chieftaincy system set up by the British (Baruah, 2005). The leftist FARC insurgency in Colombia occurs in areas of historically low

state penetration (Robinson, 2013). The type of land tenure system created is partly the result of colonial institutions of direct/indirect rule, and could explain the level of sons of the soil land related conflict in Africa (Boone, 2017). This article sets a new research agenda by proposing that historical institutions are omitted factors that need to be taken seriously by the civil war literature to explain the persistence and recurrence of conflict.

There are various reasons for taking historical institutions seriously for the study of civil war and insurgency. First, the civil war literature does not explain very well why sometimes there is persistence and recurrence of conflict from colonial and pre-colonial times in certain regions of countries. Dell (2010) finds that districts in Peru which were part of the exploitative *mita* labor system under the Spanish tend to have lower levels of public goods today, and Guardado (2016) shows that these districts with *mita* system also had more anti colonial rebellions and also more support for the Sendero Luminoso insurgency. Besley and Reynal-Querol (2014) find persistence of conflict from pre-colonial times in certain zones in Africa. Focusing on the role of historical institutions and also past conflict allows us to analyze why certain conflicts recur in different time periods.

Also, there is potential omitted variable bias in different quantitative models of civil war onset using cross national datasets, since some omitted factors like institutional quality

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may be driving both economic/ethnic outcomes, as well as conflict (Miguel, Satyanath and Sergenti (2004: 726). Colonial institutions are one such potential omitted variable that influence both the sub-national variation in proximate levels of state capacity and ethnic exclusion, and also the chances of conflict (Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson, 2001), so including them in models of civil war will partly reduce such omitted variable bias.

Another analytical advantage of bringing historical institutions back into the study of insurgencies is that the cross-national literature on civil war does not address well the issue of endogeneity of socio-economic factors to the process of conflict (Hegre and Sambanis (2006: 513–514). By analyzing the effects of historical institutions which are causally and temporally prior to current conflict dynamics, and using an instrument for such historical institutions to address possible selection bias, my study addresses such endogeneity issues.<sup>1</sup>

Given the dearth of research on this less understood link between colonial institutions and their long term effects on insurgency, it would be profitable to focus on one type of colonial institution and carefully study its effect on some important cases of insurgency using fine-grained sub-national data, before extending the analysis to a cross-national level.<sup>2</sup> A particularly fruitful direction of research would be to analyze the colonial institution of indirect rule, which is an important colonial institution with long term effects. Studies like Lange (2009); Mahoney (2010); Kohli (2004); Mamdani (1996) analyze the effects of colonial indirect rule on development, state capacity, and ethnic genocide, but not on insurgency.

I fill this gap by exploring the effects of colonial indirect rule on the most important internal security threat in the world's largest democracy—the Maoist insurgency in India.<sup>3</sup> I focus on the crucial case (Gerring, 2007) of the Maoists in the tribal state of Chhattisgarh in central India where formal indirect rule through *princely* states created weak state capacity and natural resource extraction and conflict (Sundar, 2007). While indirect rule through *princely states* was abolished following Indian independence in 1947, the effects of these institutions in the forms of weak state capacity, extraction of natural resources, and rebellious tribes excluded from the process of modern nation-state formation, persisted through path dependent processes into the 1980s in these areas in central India. These historically created state weakness and tribal grievances were exploited by the People's War Group (PWG) Maoists, paving the way for very high levels of Maoist rebel control in these areas by late 1990s.

I combine quantitative analysis of an original dataset at the sub district level within Chhattisgarh, with qualitative analysis showing path dependence, to demonstrate how historical institutions create current levels of state capacity, and ethnic inequalities in central India. While my larger project presents historical evidence for process tracing and path dependence of mechanisms, this article focuses on addressing selection bias by using an instrument for the British choice of indirect rule through *princely state*. This also addresses the issue of endogeneity of more proximate factors like state capacity, tribal grievances, to ongoing conflict which affects other econometric studies of Maoist insurgency, and moves beyond correlations to search for long term causal effects of historical institutions on insurgency.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wucherpfennig et al. (2015) similarly address the criticism that ethnic exclusion is affected by reverse causality from conflict, by developing an instrument based on the different types of relations with indigenous elites used by the British and French colonial rule.

<sup>2</sup> A few studies like Lange & Dawson (2009) have developed broad measures of colonial institutions to show its effect on rebellion using cross-national analysis.

<sup>3</sup> The ex-Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, called it India's "number one internal security threat" in 2006.

<sup>4</sup> The other study on Maoists addressing endogeneity is Gawande et al. (2017) which uses rainfall variation as an instrument for changes in forest cover and therefore employment in these forested Maoist affected areas of India.

In the rest of the paper, I first engage with complementary and alternate explanations for Maoist insurgency in India. I then outline theory and mechanisms through which colonial indirect rule sets up the structural conditions for Maoist insurgency. I then discuss the history of indirect rule and its effects on the Maoist movement in Chhattisgarh. Finally, I present IV-2SLS analysis to show that *princely state* has a positive correlation with *Maoist control*, even after addressing selection effects, and conclude by discussing generalizability of the theory.

## 2. Complementary and rival explanations for Maoist insurgency

### 2.1. Complementary explanations for Maoist insurgency

There are several excellent emerging studies of India's Maoist insurgency using district level econometric analyses. Gawande, Kapur and Satyanath (2017) and Vanden Eynde (2017) explain variation in patterns of Maoist and state violence by focusing on how rainfall shocks change forest cover and have an adverse effect on opportunity costs to rebel recruitment. Dasgupta, Gawande and Kapur (2017) analyze the effects of government employment programs like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) on Maoist recruitment, and find that it reduces violence in strong states like Andhra Pradesh and Chhattisgarh by reducing opportunity costs and grievances of unemployed youth. Gomes (2015) finds that districts with *landlord tenure* also tend to have more Maoist conflict, building on Banerjee and Iyer (2005)'s theory, and also that districts with more land inequality, forest cover, and scheduled castes (SCs) and scheduled tribes (STs) create conditions for Maoist insurgency. Echoing these findings, Hoelscher, Miklian, and Vadlamannati (2012) find that mining, scheduled castes/tribes, and NREGS all have an effect on Maoist violence.

My article makes several contributions which make it distinct from the micro-econometrics literature on India's Maoist insurgency (Gawande et al., 2017; Dasgupta et al., 2017; Vanden Eynde, 2017; Gomes, 2015; Hoelscher et al., 2012; Chandra & Garcia-Ponce, 2014). First, while these studies use *Maoist violence* as their dependent variable, my paper uses a different dependent variable of *Maoist control* measured using novel data from State Election Commission.<sup>5</sup> Second, my theory focuses on how colonial indirect rule creates structural constraints for rebel leaders before the insurgency suddenly expands following unification of the PWG and MCC factions in 2004, and is distinct from these studies which explain violence in the latter phase of insurgency (2005–2012). Third, most of these recent studies of Maoist insurgency use district level datasets. In contrast, I develop a sub-district Assembly Constituency (AC) level dataset for the state of Chhattisgarh, which is the first such micro level dataset.

My paper is also complementary to these other studies which analyze the effects of proximate opportunity factors like forest cover, lower caste and tribal grievances, ethnic parties, land inequalities and NREGS on levels and patterns of violence. In contrast, my study analyzes the *omitted variable* of colonial indirect rule which created structural conditions that enabled Maoists to mobilize more successfully in areas of former indirect rule. Once the British chose colonial institutions of indirect rule for particular areas, these institutions had an independent effect on probability of leftist insurgency, beyond that created by proximate opportunity structures like forest cover and hilly terrain. Colonial indirect rule created tribal grievance due to natural resource extraction,

<sup>5</sup> This data is not publicly available and was collected through field-trips to the State Election Commission, and also by filing official requests through the Right to Information Act (RTIs), and represents new data.

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