



# From secessionism to regionalism: Intra-organizational change and ideological moderation within armed secessionist movements



Gyda M. Sindre <sup>a, b, \*</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS), University of Cambridge, 7 West Road, Cambridge, CB3 9DT, UK

<sup>b</sup> Department of Comparative Politics, University of Bergen, PB 7802, N-5007 Bergen, Norway

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## ABSTRACT

Secessionist movements rarely succeed in their quests for separate statehood. Hence, conflict resolution efforts in secessionist wars tend to focus on making autonomy frameworks acceptable to both sides. This article posits that de-radicalization on the issue of secession and specifically the endorsement of regionalism over secessionism is an important prerequisite for such autonomy arrangements to succeed. A programmatic shift toward regionalism represents a determinant shift in the ideology and *raison d'être* of secessionist movements. Drawing on insights from the literature on party change and rebel group transformation, a twofold contribution is made. First, moderation can occur in the absence of electoral participation as a result of internal shifts in the dominant faction of a rebel group. Second, identifying two mechanisms as drivers for group identity change, organizational diversification and internal debate, it shows how under certain condition fragmentation may induce moderation on core ideological issues of the armed movement. These arguments are developed through an inductive analysis of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). In this case, moderation on the issue of secession was the outcome of the formation and strengthening of a moderate domestic wing, increased internal debate and the subsequent weakening of the symbolic powers of a long-standing insurgent leadership.

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## Introduction

Of all types of intra-state conflict, disputes over self-determination are the most intractable and the least likely to end with a settlement (Walter, 2009). A common feature of movements such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Polisario Front in Western Sahara is that they have maintained their armed struggles for several decades with relatively few resources. What remains clear, however, is that international support is a *sine qua non* in the quest for separate statehood, with East Timor, Kosovo and South Sudan being the exceptions in their achievement of self-determination and international recognition rather than the norm for these 'geopolitical anomalies' (c.f. Jeffrey, McConnell, & Wilson, 2015). Conflict resolution in the case of secessionist wars therefore tends to be found not in awarding recognition but in awarding autonomy to secessionist regions (Caspersen, 2017, 4). International peace

negotiations therefore focus on reaching negotiated settlements that accommodate separatists within the state together with offers of formal reintegration programs and opportunities for armed groups to transform into political parties (Söderberg Kovacs & Hatz, 2016). During the most recent peace negotiations between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government, the international facilitators explored a federal solution as an alternative to self-determination (Stokke, 2009), and recent negotiations between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Philippine government led to the signing of a peace agreement that stipulated rebel group inclusion and special autonomy provisions (Walch, 2014). Indeed, such autonomy arrangements were the basis of the Helsinki agreement signed between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Indonesian government in 2005 (MoU 2005).

Despite the trend by states and international peacemakers to seek to accommodate separatists with forms of territorial self-government and democratic inclusion and the growing number of peace agreements that follow this trajectory, little has been written about the dynamics *within* the armed movements themselves that enable this transition. To date, the literature has tended to view the decision by armed secessionist movements to accept

\* Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS), University of Cambridge, 7 West Road, Cambridge, CB3 9DT, UK.

E-mail address: [gms50@cam.ac.uk](mailto:gms50@cam.ac.uk).

autonomy and demilitarize primarily as a strategic shift in their primary *mode* of mobilization instead of depicting any real change in the group's position on the issue of secession. An implicit premise is that autonomy provisions will appease secessionist demands and that inclusion will have a self-moderating effect on the armed group. The conflict resolution literature, however, has focused on the specific framework for negotiations and on identifying the moment of ripeness for when protagonists may compromise (c.f. [Stedman, 1997](#), [Sisk, 2004](#)). From these analyses, it is generally agreed that the presence or absence of moderate voices within the armed group and the strength of the group's political wing are crucial factors in determining whether the protagonists reach an agreement ([Sisk, 2004](#), p. 257). However, the question of how such moderate wings emerge and under what conditions they prevail vis-à-vis the more radical wings of the movements remains under-explored. This article addresses this lacuna in the literature by focusing on the ideology dimension of armed secessionist movements in order to tackle the question of why and how some armed secessionist movements moderate and adopt a regionalist position.

The present discussion of ideological de-radicalization on the issue of secession, taken here to mean a move from propagating secessionism to propagating regionalism, is situated within the contemporary scholarly debates about rebel group transformation and party change (e.g. [Berti, 2013](#); [Ishiyama, 2016](#); [Manning, 2008](#); [Sindre & Söderström, 2016](#); [Söderberg Kovacs, 2008](#)), while also extending debates in political geography on the significance of transnationality for understanding rebel group behavior (e.g. [Jeffrey et al., 2015](#); [McConnell, Moreau, & Dittmer, 2012](#); [Schlichte, 2012](#); [Salehyan, 2009](#)). The question of what explains ideological moderation on the issue of secession brings into focus an under-explored topic among party scholars and conflict scholars alike, namely how changes in visions and ideas shape prospects for conflict resolution. Although the topic of ethno-regionalism features prominently in the party literature, studies of the ideology of ethno-regionalist movements and parties are rare exceptions (e.g., [Massetti & Schakel, 2016](#); [Massetti, 2009](#); [Newman, 1997](#)). However, as [Gomez-Reino, De Winter, and Lynch \(2006, 252\)](#) conclude, ideology stands out as the most important aspect to cover in future research on sub-national politics. In its conceptualization of ideology, this article follows [Massetti and Schakel \(2016: 60, 76–7f4\)](#) focusing on the core ideology of ethno-nationalist movements, namely the relationship between the region and the state. Regionalist ideology, or regionalism, depicts that the region is a separate body politic vis-à-vis the state to which it belongs ([Massetti & Schakel, 2016](#), p. 60). Secessionist and regionalist positions correspond to radical and moderate ethno-nationalist ideologies respectively ([Newman, 1997](#)).

Against this backdrop, the following argument is made. While general conflict dynamics and state behavior are important factors in explaining why conflicts come to an end, whether an armed secessionist movement adopts a regionalist stance is a matter of internal shifts within the movement and, in particular, the emergence or strengthening of a new faction that propose alternative visions for the movement and territory. Two mechanisms are identified as determinants for promoting ideological change on the secessionism-regionalism spectrum: Organizational diversification and internal debate. Diversification, here taken to mean the manifestation of a more complex political organization that breaks with conventional military hierarchies, follows naturally for any political organization that seeks to cultivate political change ([Berti, 2013](#), p. 19; [Greenwood & Hinings, 1996](#), p. 1033). Internal debate is enabled by such organizational changes, especially if the leadership is weakened and no longer controls the propaganda apparatus or the internal political discourse. The analysis thus challenges

arguments that organizational fragmentation mostly leads to radicalization and violence (e.g., [Cunningham, 2014](#); [Pearlman, 2011](#)). As is suggested here, fragmentation may shift the internal balance of power and allow for a new and potentially more moderate political discourse to emerge. This argument brings nuance to contemporary debates about ethno-nationalist movements that find that fragmentation or the lack of cohesion leads to further radicalization and violence ([Bakke, 2015](#); [Cunningham, 2014](#); [Pearlman, 2011](#)). By taking a closer look at the rebel organization and in particular by identifying the internal fault-lines for fragmentation through the lens of organizational theory, this study shows that organizational change may also induce moderation on the core ideology of armed groups. Furthermore, when taking into account the transnational character of secessionist liberation movements, a central question precludes to whether organizational expansion brought about by the increased engagement in diplomacy, transnational activism and exile beyond the homeland by armed secessionist movements, may influence not only their strategic adaptation, as has previously been suggested (e.g. [McConnell & Wilson, 2015](#); [Salehyan, 2009](#)), but also lead to shifts in political visions and ideological perspectives.

This study uses an inductive approach to develop a framework that helps shed light on how shifts in groups' and individuals' political convictions are products of intra-organizational conflict that arises in the context of organizational change. The above-stated claims also indicate the methodological usefulness of within-case analysis, particularly historical diachronic analysis, which potentially can help explain change in movements and parties with ostensibly similar characteristics. To conduct the within-case analysis, this article uses the Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, GAM) to develop new theoretical insights into the issue of ideological change in secessionist movements. The empirical analysis is built around a combination of primary and secondary sources including interviews with leaders and members of the former armed group conducted between 2006 and 2014. Although the study itself does not provide a general theory for ideological moderation, it identifies a set of mechanisms drawn from the literature on party change and rebel group transformation that sheds light on identity change.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section discusses the concept of moderation, clarifying how it is understood with regard to ideological moderation on the issue of secession. It develops the theoretical argument underpinning this study, drawing attention to key mechanisms driving ideological adaptation by political movements. This is followed by a clarification of the methodology and data used for the analysis. The framework is then applied to GAM, tracing the changes in its organizational structure while explaining the shifts in the group's political discourse. The final conclusion also discusses the usefulness of this framework beyond Aceh.

## Theory: moderation and organizational change

### *Moderation: concepts and approaches*

What constitutes ideological moderation within armed groups? Conventionally, studies of political moderation have focused on explaining how extremist political parties, particularly religious parties, have adapted to democracy and the extent to which they have become more inclusive and liberal in their policies and outlook ridding them of exclusionary and illiberal positions (e.g., [Huntington, 1991](#), pp. 165–71; [Kalyvas, 1996](#); [Bermeo, 1997](#)). Hence, numerous studies view moderation primarily as a process of adaptation to democracy employing a teleological argument that political inclusion tends 'to appease the radical tenets of extremist groups' ([Brocker & Künkler, 2013](#)). Others are

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