Fighting against the odds*

Halvor Mehlum, Karl Moene

Department of Economics, University of Oslo, Norway Centre for the Study of Civil War, PRIO, Norway
(e-mail: {halvor.mehlum,k.o.moene}@econ.uio.no)

Received: June 2004 / Accepted: December 2004

Abstract. The fight for power is not only over immediate rents, but also over advantageous positions in future power struggles. When incumbency yields an extra fighting edge, current struggles involve high stakes as a victory today may guarantee the victory also tomorrow. Such an incumbency edge may stem from the control of the army, the police and other instruments reserved for the government. The conclusions drawn from static conflict models are turned on their head when the fight is also over the incumbency edge. A sharper incumbency edge increases the implicit prizes of winning. The fighting intensity may therefore rise when the strength of each side becomes more unequal. Unbalanced fights can last long and become particularly severe. This is in contrast to the standard result that equal strengths give the most intense fighting.

Key words: Contests, political stability, war, incumbency

1. Introduction

When civil wars involve a challenger fighting an incumbent, one might think that a rational challenger should give up when winning is hard. We should therefore expect that strong incumbents in conflict areas do not face much rebellion activities. But they do. In many cases challengers fight hard for a long time against the odds.

For instance, during the fights in Angola in 1975-2000 the odds in favor of the MPLA government was overwhelming. Yet the challenger (UNITA) continued to fight. The long duration of the Angolan war is not exceptional. Many countries are trapped in a circle of war, peace, and relapse into war (Collier et al. 2003). James Fearon (2004) estimates the average duration of 128 civil wars between 1945 and

* We want to thank the editor and a referee.
1999 to be 11.1 years. The average duration has steadily increased since 1969. These averages conceal a lot of variation across regions and between types of conflicts.

In the period 1945-99 the average duration of civil wars was 17.5 years in Asia, 13.1 years in Sub-Sahara Africa and 9.6 years in Latin America (Fearon 2004). According to Fearon’s classification: civil wars related to coups and revolutions do not last for long, yet ten per cent of them lasted more than ten years; anti-colonial wars also tend to be brief, yet twenty per cent of them lasted for more than ten years; civil wars over valuable contraband last longer, forty per cent of them lasted for more than twenty years.

Clearly, not all of these long lasting civil wars are over state power. Yet the number demonstrates that lasting conflicts can go together with a low turnover of incumbents. High regime stability may be explained by the military strengths and other advantages that incumbency entail. But if the power of incumbents is so strong, why do rebels continue to fight so long to overthrow them?

There may be many reasons why challengers fight against the odds. Here we focus on an explanation that follows from the dynamics of contested power, as the fight for power is not only over immediate rents but also over advantageous positions in future power struggles. Such an incumbency advantage may stem from the control of the army, the police, and other instruments reserved for the government.

Our approach builds on a more general theory of power contests (Mehlum and Moene 2004). One of the general features of the theory is this: When power is easy to hold it is particularly important to get. Strong incumbents are therefore more intensively challenged when the challenger, in the case of victory, inherits the incumbency strength. As a consequence a strong incumbency power can magnify rather than mitigate fighting. Since regime stability is high when incumbents are strong, intensive fighting and a low turnover of incumbents are likely to appear simultaneously. Thus our basic claim is that the circumstances that raise regime stability in conflict areas are also likely to raise the intensity of fighting if conflicts become violent. Improved regime stability can thus increase violent fighting.

In our dynamic framework of contested power some of the conclusions from static conflict models are turned on their heads. For a review of the standard results from static models see for example Nitzan 1994 and Mehlum and Moene 2003. In our approach a sharper incumbency edge increases the effective prizes of winning. The fighting intensity may therefore rise when the strength of each side becomes more unequal. This is in contrast to the standard result that equal strengths give the most intense fighting. These results have implications for the prospects of peace settlements and for international interventions in conflict areas.

The main novelty of our approach is the "King of the hill"-structure of repeated fighting. When a challenger wins he becomes the king and takes over the advantageous position on the hilltop. In this respect our approach is distinct from the contributions of Skaperdas and Syropoulos 1996 and 2000. In their approach future conflicts affect today’s incentives to trade and fight while in our case it is the present fights that effect future conflicts. The social mobility of contenders also make our approach different from other papers discussing multi battle contests, for instance the "first price all pay auction"-like conflicts discussed by Konrad (2002 and 2003) and of the multi prize approach of Clark and Riis (1998).