

Good Times and Bad Apples: Rebel Recruitment in Crackdown and Truce

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Keywords: Civil Conflict; Rebel Organizations; Rebel Recruitment; Truce Agreements; Experiment; Northeast India

Short Title: Good Times and Bad Apples

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*Many thanks to my research assistants and enumerators: Sangti Konyak, Ruchinilo Kemp, Shemphoa Bohham, Hushito Swu, Maoba Konyak, Chumi Kalita, Hamidur Rahman, and Henry Goldsmith. Many thanks for comments and help from Page Fortna, Don Green, Macartan Humphreys, Nikhar Gaikwad, Mike Ting, Dylan Groves, Tara Slough, Lindsay Dolan, Erik Lin-Greenberg, Joon Yang, Jasper Cooper, Laura Resnick Samotin, Michael Rubin, Renanah Miles Joyce, Justin Canfil, and attendees of APSA, ISA, and Peace Science. This research was approved by the Columbia IRB (Protocol AAAP6257) and funded with help from Columbia's Center for Development Economics and Policy and Advanced Consortium for Conflict, Cooperation, and Complexity.

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Abstract

Even in long-running civil conflicts, governments may permit rebels to recruit and gather resources freely during years-long truce periods. Scholars and policymakers assume that these periods of forbearance allow rebel organizations to gather strength unchecked. Instead, with innovative evidence from five conflict zones in Northeast India, I show how leniency can actually undermine rebel organizations in the long run. Despite rebel leaders' best efforts, safety and comfort attract selfish opportunists who may later desert in battle, defect to the enemy, or abuse civilians. First, I show experimentally that the benefits of leniency disproportionately attract low-commitment recruits. By sampling in local recruitment hotspots, I gathered nearly 400 likely rebel recruits, testing their motivations with attitudinal questions and a conjoint survey experiment. Second, I conducted dozens of qualitative interviews with rebel leaders, rebel soldiers, and civilian observers, tracking how truce periods altered rebel recruitment and behavioral patterns over time.

Verification Materials: The data and materials required to verify the computational reproducibility of the results, procedures and analyses in this article are available on the *American Journal of Political Science* Dataverse within the Harvard Dataverse Network, at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/CL0RU2>

Word Count: 10,000

1 Introduction

Rebellion is a dangerous business, but some times are more dangerous than others. During a government crackdown, rebel soldiers may risk life and limb and live in squalor and discomfort. In many long-running civil conflicts, however, rebel groups may be largely left alone by government forces for extended periods. In the most extreme cases, governments may permit rebel groups — either explicitly or tacitly — to recruit new soldiers, gather resources, and prepare for coming battles, as long as they do not attack government forces. Truce periods like this are surprisingly common and can be quite durable; in more than two dozen civil conflicts (generally separatist conflicts), rebels and government forces have transitioned from active conflict to periods of toleration lasting years (Table 1). Even if neither side has any intention of negotiating disarmament or formal autonomy, warring parties may face substantial pressure from international observers or domestic constituencies to halt the bloodshed. As a result, rebels and government forces may agree to an indefinite ceasefire which freezes hostilities but leaves both sides armed and core issues unresolved. The terms may vary substantially, but reflect the same basic tradeoff: rebels are allowed to gather recruits and resources largely unchecked so long as they do not fight the government. These deals are neither bridges to a permanent settlement nor attempts to “divide and conquer” rebels: they are generally offered to all rebel factions at once and rarely lead to later disarmament.

How do rebel organizations change when the government permits them to operate in relative safety? It seems logical that toleration should monotonically strengthen rebel forces. The primary goal of most counterinsurgency is to make life dangerous and difficult for rebels, thus deterring rebellion. When governments target rebels with selective violence, would-be recruits should be less likely to join and current rebels should be more likely to surrender. When governments agree to remove this threat, therefore, rebels should grow larger, stronger, and more threatening.

Instead, I argue that periods of forbearance can weaken rebel organizations for the future

– not because recruits stop joining, but because the wrong recruits start joining. When rebels face targeted government crackdown, joining a rebel group comes with danger, stress, and deprivation. These difficulties deter recruits from joining, but they also help rebel leaders screen for commitment. The recruits who will endure difficulties for the group in the short run tend to be those who are more community-oriented in general – and thus less likely to behave opportunistically later on. During periods of leniency, by contrast, safety and comfort attract many recruits who may later desert, defect, or disobey. Even if rebel leaders want to keep material benefits low and discipline standards high, they may be forced to pass on these profits because of recruitment competition from rival factions or would-be mutineers. As a result, rebel movements in truce struggle to maintain the discipline and cohesion necessary to win battles and control civilian populations.

I test this theory with novel evidence inside rebel organizations and recruitment markets in five ongoing separatist conflicts in Northeast India. The conflicts of Northeast India provide an unique opportunity to study the motivations and interactions of rebel leaders and recruits. The huge variety of rebel groups and movements, both in and out of truces, provides a greater degree of causal leverage and generalizability than most studies of rebel recruitment and control. More importantly, though, government truce offers have brought rebel organizations and recruitment out into the open, even where hostilities are ongoing. Rebel groups recruit in public, and civilians and combatants openly discuss the conflicts and organizations. In this context, recruitment still carries real stakes but can be studied safely.

First, I test the underlying causal process: how committed and uncommitted recruits evaluate and decide whether to join a rebel group. I do so with an innovative recruitment experiment among real potential recruits. Along with local assistants and interviewees, I designed and implemented sampling procedures to gather the people most likely to be recruited and consider joining a rebel group. My team surveyed young men in the types of places that rebel groups are known to recruit: at ethnic activist organizations and in seedy gathering spots. These potential recruits answered a battery of behavioral, self-assessment,

Table 1: Selected Civil Conflicts with Periods of Long-Term Truce

<i>Conflict</i>	<i>Years of Truce</i>
South / Southeast Asia	
India - Garo	2004-2012
India - Kuki	2008-present
India - Naga	1969-1990, 1997-present
Myanmar - Kachin	1989-2009
Myanmar - Kokang	1989-2009
Myanmar - Mon	1995-present
Myanmar - Naga	2010-present
Myanmar - Palaung	1991-2012
Myanmar - Shan	1988-1993
Myanmar - Wa	1989-present
Philippines - NPA	1992-present
Philippines - Moro	1989-2003
Sri Lanka - Tamil	2002-2006
E Europe / Former USSR	
Azerbaijan - Nagorno Karabakh	1994-present
Georgia - Abkhazia	1992-1998, 1998-2008, 2008-present
Georgia - S Ossetia	1992-2004, 2004-2008, 2008-present
Moldova - Transdnistria	1992-present
Russia - Chechnya	1996-1999
Africa and Middle East	
Israel - Palestine	1994-1999, 2009-2014, 2014-present
Morocco - W Sahara	1991-present
Senegal - Casamance	2002-present

and opinion questions and then participated a conjoint survey experiment. In the experiment, the respondents evaluated a series of hypothetical coethnic rebel groups. Each of these hypothetical groups was a combination of randomly-generated organizational characteristics. With each of these factors randomized independently, the conjoint reveals what factors influence whether these potential recruits decide to join a rebel group. I then compare the answers of community-oriented recruits (those surveyed at ethnic volunteer organizations) and more self-oriented recruits (those surveyed in public hangouts). In interviews, rebel leaders in Northeast India stated repeatedly that they wished to attract more of the former and fewer of the latter. They believe the youth at ethnic volunteer groups are far more community-oriented and selfless — which is borne out in their answers to self-assessment and behavioral questions.

The experiment provides strong evidence that the benefits of truce — lifestyle perks and safety — disproportionately attract low-commitment recruits. While community-oriented recruits were willing to join even when it meant enduring a difficult lifestyle, self-oriented recruits were only willing to join when times were easier. These results show that government forbearance can dramatically shift the types of recruits who are willing to join a rebel movement, undoing rebels' efforts to screen out low-commitment recruits. Meanwhile, the results cast substantial doubt on other strategies that rebel groups might use to screen and control recruits like extremist ideological appeals and strict disciplinary systems.

Second, I test what these recruit-side motivations mean for rebel organizations: how rebel leaders try and fail to keep order in truce. I conducted 56 in-depth interviews with rebel leaders, current and former combatants, and affected civilians in Northeast India. These interviews compare the trajectories over time of two very similar rebel movements, one which was offered an indefinite ceasefire in the late 1990s (the Nagas) and one which was not (the Meiteis). These comparisons show how rebel leaders often struggle to keep control of soldier misbehavior during an extended truce, resulting in battlefield losses and popular backlash.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 lays out the theory of truces and rebel organizations. Section 3 introduces the context of Northeast India and the various conflicts there. Section 4 describes the methodology and process of the recruitment experiment, and Section 5 presents its results. Section 6 describes the process and results of case interviews in Northeast India. Section 7 addresses alternative explanations for organizational control and Section 8 concludes with implications for conflict, peacebuilding, and statebuilding.

2 Theory

2.1 Crackdown and Forbearance

When states target rebel groups, they generally do so with the goal of driving rebels off the battlefield and deterring would-be recruits from joining (Hobbes, 1651; Becker, 1974; Gates, 2002; Kalyvas, 2006). To do so, governments try to hunt down militants and disrupt their movements, keeping rebel soldiers scared and uncomfortable. Current and former rebels in Northeast India described how years of government crackdown traumatized them emotionally and mentally. They had to be always ready to fight or flee, unable to sleep well or safely visit family under constant threat of government attack. Even more pressing to these rebels, however, was the material deprivation of life in hiding. Nearly every interviewee who served during open conflict complained about sleeping on the forest floor (because permanent bases would be raided), trekking through the jungle by foot (because roads were too exposed), and eating cold rice porridge (because kitchens were far away).¹ Crackdowns also make it much more difficult for rebels to compensate their soldiers for these sacrifices in any meaningful way. Crackdowns often disrupt illicit activities like smuggling and extortion, but more importantly they stretch rebel resources, making it more difficult to pay soldiers while also replenishing ammunition and supplies. Moreover, even when soldiers receive wages or perks, they may

¹Author interviews (C1, C2, C3, C7, K2, K4), Nagaland and Manipur, 2016

have few opportunities to spend them while hiding or fleeing from government violence.² By heightening the individual costs and reducing the potential compensation of rebellion, the threat of government crackdown heightens the collective action problem at the heart of rebel recruitment (Olson, 1965; Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008; Collier, 2000; Mueller, 2000). Yet while prior work has emphasized looting and illicit goods, this effect turns on much more quotidian comforts: not diamonds and drugs, but a soft bed, a warm meal, and a few rupees to spend at the end of the week.

For governments, however, effective counterinsurgency is often not worth the costs in lives, treasure, and political capital. In order to redeploy troops to more pressing regions or neutralize a political issue, a government may permit rebels to operate and recruit freely so long as they do not attack government forces. These periods of forbearance happen nearly exclusively in separatist conflicts, where governments can contain rebel activity or even withdraw troops entirely from a restive region without risking state stability elsewhere (Staniland, 2017). These truce periods are just one form of ceasefire agreement – governments may halt hostilities to temporarily ally with a rebel faction, begin peace negotiations, or regather forces – but many separatist conflicts experience years or decades of truce (Table 1).

During a truce, facing much less threat from government violence, rebel soldiers experience a much better life. One Kuki rebel described life before and after the 2005 Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement with the government:

“We went from living in jungles to living in buildings, from walking to driving places, from always being afraid to being relaxed, from a hard life to an easy life.”³

This safety and comfort attracts many new recruits who would be reticent to join in times of crackdown. Soldiers who are drawn by more community-oriented motivations, meanwhile,

²Author interviews (A2, A3, A13, C10), Nagaland, 2015-2016

³Author interview (K2), Manipur, 2016

should still have strong reasons to join; rebel groups can still provide protection and and bargain for local autonomy and power-sharing. Nagaland’s ceasefires, as discussed below, are locally quite popular, even among staunch supporters of independence. As a result, however, rebel leaders lose a key screening process which helps maintain discipline and cohesion.⁴

2.2 Truces and Rebel Recruitment

No rebel soldier likes danger and discomfort, but some recruits are more willing to endure hard times for the rebel group than others. Many prior works have shown that even when times are tough for rebels, many recruits may have powerful community-level motivations to join such as anger toward the government, a belief in the rebels’ ideology, or zeal for local public goods (Wood, 2003; Petersen, 2002). Recruits who are responsive to these appeals will be far more likely to join rebel groups when doing so is dangerous and uncomfortable. Consider the answers of two former NSCN-K rebels when I asked why they joined the rebels:

Soldier 1: “I joined at the request of my village elders. I wanted to keep my village safe.”

Soldier 2: “I wanted to hold a gun and be rich.”⁵

While recruits like Soldier 1 would be likely to join a rebel group even in times of government crackdown, those like Soldier 2 may only join when doing so requires few sacrifices. It should be noted that, on follow up, Soldier 2 said that at sixteen being “rich” meant having token wages and occasional car-rides, the types of luxuries that Naga rebels have had in truce. If the threat of government violence is intense enough, it may be enough to scare all would-be rebels off the battlefield. But at more moderate levels, danger and deprivation may only deter those like Soldier 2.

Importantly, however, the types of recruits who are most easily deterred from joining

⁴For more, see Hanson (2019).

⁵Author interviews (C7, C9), Nagaland, 2016

by the danger and deprivation of crackdown are likely to be less willing to sacrifice for community-level causes in general, and thus more likely to misbehave and undermine rebel goals in the long run. Rebel groups need to recruit enough soldiers in order to fight, bargain, and control territory, but recruiting self-interested soldiers can just as easily undermine these goals. To be effective and useful, rebel soldiers must prioritize community-level goals over individual desires even when their behavior is difficult to observe. They must risk their lives to fight when the organization is in danger (Lyall, 2020) but also refrain from fighting when the organization negotiates a peace (Worsnop, 2017; Daly, 2016). When interacting with civilians, rebels must forgo opportunities to steal (Weinstein, 2007), abuse (Wood, 2009; Cohen, 2013), and settle scores (Kalyvas, 2003). Soldiers who fail to do these things are not just ineffective but actively toxic for an organization: they desert in the face of battle, leak information to the enemy, and erode civilian support. In Northeast India, nearly every rebel leader I interviewed complained – repeatedly and unprompted – about the “materialistic” soldiers who were destroying the movement because they cared more about themselves than the community. Without a commitment to community-level goals, they abused and extorted civilians and deserted in battle.⁶

The effects of government forbearance on rebel recruitment, then, depend on the claim that more community-oriented, altruistic soldiers are less affected by the relative safety and comfort that come with truce – and therefore more likely to join when times are tough. Other works, most notably Weinstein (2007), have argued that material benefits disproportionately attract opportunistic recruits who may undermine the group in the long run. In this paper, I make two additions to these findings. First, I fill in this theory with experimental evidence that potential recruits do have divergent motivations for joining rebel groups and demonstrate that altruism is at the center of this difference. Second, I show that periods of truce can similarly undermine screening, both by making mobilization safer and by easing the material burdens of rebellion (even with quite modest material benefits). The

⁶Author interviews (U1, U5, U7, U8, U9, U12, U13, U16), Nagaland, 2016

key claims can be summarized as:

H1: In deciding whether to join a militant group, low-commitment (more selfish) recruits should be more attracted than are high-commitment (more altruistic) recruits by modest wages and an lifestyle perks, all else equal.

H2: In deciding whether to join a militant group, low-commitment recruits should be more attracted than are high-commitment recruits by the safety of government truce offers, all else equal.

2.3 Truces and Rebel Organizational Control

These individual-level behaviors have major implications for rebel organizations. When governments grant a truce to a rebel movement, rebel soldiers are safer and their organizations have more material perks to spread around. Attracted by safety and comfort, low-commitment recruits flock to rebel organizations, where they shirk their duties, abuse civilians, and behave erratically. If rebels do clash with government forces, rebel soldiers are slow to risk their lives and may even desert en masse, leading to unexpected defeats. All of this leaves the rebels weaker in clashes with government forces, less credible in negotiations, and unpopular with their supporters.

Most of the time, rebels use the danger and difficulty of conflict to screen out low-commitment recruits. One Naga rebel leader dismissed concerns about disloyalty by saying, “We don’t pay much and this is a hard life. So only the good ones join us.”⁷ In theory, rebel leaders should be able to do this even in times of forbearance, offering few material rewards or demanding recruits endure harsh training to prove themselves. Rebel leaders in contexts as diverse as Uganda, Peru, Iraq, and the DRC have intentionally limited material rewards to soldiers to screen out low-commitment recruits (Weinstein, 2007; Bahney et al., 2013; Gordon, 2016).

⁷Author interview (U16), July 2015

However, rebel organizations face a major constraint in screening their soldiers: recruitment competition. If rebel leaders will not pass on their own good fortune to their soldiers and would-be recruits, some other aspiring leader will. Most rebel movements involve at least two armed groups (Christia, 2012), and armed groups frequently overlap in territory and recruit from the same pools of civilians (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008). Even if a single rebel organization dominates a movement, potential mutineers wait in the wings to take over the organization or steal recruits if conditions are right. Despite the prior success of the Tamil Tigers leadership in crushing its rivals, it found itself competing over soldiers' loyalty after the 2002 ceasefire when a regional commander, Colonel Karuna, began mobilizing his own private army from within (Obayashi, 2014). Even high-commitment soldiers are willing to shift their allegiances if they feel they are being underpaid, underappreciated, and betrayed by their leaders. This puts rebel leaders in a bind: either make life easier, bringing in low-commitment soldiers, or lose even high-commitment soldiers to a newly-formed faction.

Similarly, if rebels choose to stop recruiting new soldiers altogether, they risk losing material resources and manpower to those same rivals. As time passes and older rebels retire, rebel organizations have little alternative but to recruit whomever they can in order to maintain battle-readiness and bargaining leverage with the government.

During an extended truce, then, we should begin to observe changes not just in individuals, but also in rebel organizations as a whole. These effects are likely to play out over 5-10 years, as the current soldiers of an organization are gradually replaced with new soldiers.

H3: During a long-term truce, rebel movements will experience an influx of new soldiers, and these new soldiers will be less committed to organizational goals than rebels recruited before the truce.

H4: During and after a long-term truce, rebel organizations will have greater problems with soldier misbehavior, including unauthorized civilian abuse and desertion in battle.

Importantly, this effect should be strongest when government violence is at its most effective. Many have argued that government violence can empower rebels when it is indiscriminate, driving civilians into rebel hands (Berman and Matanock, 2015; Sewall et al., 2007; Kalyvas and Kocher, 2007). Truce periods, then, should dampen rebel recruitment and weaken rebel organizations. This argument flips the common logic on its head, arguing that even when government violence deters would-be rebels from taking up arms, it may strengthen rebel organizations; truce, therefore, should lead to greater numbers and weaker rebels.

3 Setting: Northeast India

Over the past six decades, the Government of India has clashed with more than 100 rebel groups from ten distinct ethnic-separatist movements in its Northeast region. Each of these movements (Table 2) mobilized demanding independence or autonomy for one of the region’s ethnic minority groups, whose members generally see themselves as racially distinct and had a history of self-rule before 1948 (Scott, 2010).

Following particularly intense fighting in the early 1990s, the Indian government began offering indefinite ceasefires to Northeastern rebel movements in order to focus military resources on more politically-salient conflicts with Kashmiri and Naxalite rebels. So long as rebels do not attack government forces, the government permits them to recruit freely, patrol territory, and collect taxes from the local population, even in view of government forces. Rebel still mobilize for coming battles with Indian “foreign invaders,” and the government still carefully monitors rebel “terrorists.” Notably, India has offered these ceasefires not to specific rebel groups but to rebel movements, pausing entire conflicts in a single stroke.

The conflicts in the Northeast help to overcome two empirical challenges inherent in work on truces, recruitment, and rebel organizations. The first is practical: rebel organizations operate outside the law, so it is typically difficult and dangerous to identify and interview

Table 2: Featured Separatist Conflicts / Rebel Movements

<i>Conflict</i>	<i>Largest Faction</i>	<i>Years Ongoing</i>	<i>Truce</i>	<i>Experiment</i>	<i>Interviews</i>
Naga*	NSCN-IM	Since 1958	Since 1997	✓	✓
Meitei*	UNLF	Since 1971	Never		✓
Bodo	NDFB	Since 1986	Never	✓	
Assam*	ULFA	Since 1990	Never	✓	
Kuki	KRA	Since 1997	Since 2005		✓

**Three largest rebel movements in Northeast India.*

rebels and recruits. In Northeast India, the ceasefires have brought rebel organizations and recruitment out of the shadows. Even where rebels are still actively fighting the government, rebel activities are much more visible and publicly discussed. This makes it much safer to observe rebel recruitment process in action. I have talked to dozens of civilians about how they decided whether or not to join a rebel group and conducted interviews in a de facto rebel recruitment center. This situation also facilitates more honest interviews with rebel leaders, current and former combatants, and activists. Local security forces showed little interest in my presence, and rebels and civilians alike showed remarkable willingness to criticize rebel actions. Even rebels who were reticent to discuss negative aspects of their own factions, they were generally willing to describe misbehavior by other factions (see *Appendix 5*). Despite this safety, however, militant recruitment carries real stakes for armed organizations and would-be militants: annual fatalities from insurgent violence number in the hundreds every year, and many organizations leverage their rank-and-file soldiers to bargain with the government for policy concessions.

Second, Northeast India has a huge number and variety of rebel groups and conflicts, which helps with internal and external validity. The recruitment experiment was conducted in three conflict areas: in and around Dimapur and Kohima (home to Naga separatist groups), Guwahati and Jorhat / Sivsagar / Dibrugarh (Assamese), and Udalguri (Bodo). Testing the generalizability of recruitment patterns is much easier with a variety of settings: hill vs. valley, truce vs. ongoing conflict, town vs. village, and unified vs. divided movement.

Also, the variety of rebel groups means that respondents can call on their experiences interacting with rebel organizations which were large and small, generous and stingy, strict and lax, hardline and softline. Meanwhile, I conducted interviews in and around rebel movements where ceasefires have been offered (Nagas in 1997 and Kukis in 2005) and where they have not been offered (Meiteis). Together, these interviews surrounded more than a dozen rebel organizations which vary across a host of organizational characteristics but all experience truce or crackdown together as a movement. This makes it easier to learn about the organizational-level effects of truce, comparing both over time and between cases.

4 Experiment Methodology

First, I test the theoretical claims about the motivations and behavior of rebel recruits with an innovative experiment. I designed and carried out the experiment after three months of interviews and observation inside rebel organizations, in collaboration with local research assistants from the relevant ethnic communities. Special care was taken to protect the safety and anonymity of enumerators and subjects, and all procedures were approved by the author's institutional review board. More details can be found in *Appendix 4*.

4.1 Subjects and Sampling

The first major empirical challenge of investigating recruits' motivations is finding a pool of likely recruits. In qualitative interviews, I ask current and former combatants why they joined, comparing across groups and over time, as many other studies do (Weinstein, 2007; Daly, 2016; Oppenheim et al., 2015). This approach helpfully narrows the investigation to the most knowledgeable decisionmakers, but it also excludes many potential recruits who had not joined but might have done so under different circumstances. Therefore, it can be hard to tell what separates the joiners from the non-joiners. Another option would be to try to survey the general population in order to find non-joiners in the general population.

However, only a small percentage of the population generally ever considers joining a rebel movement, and these individuals may have very different preferences than others in the population (Mueller, 2000).

The unusual context in Northeast India, however, allows me to study rebel recruitment as it is happening. Along with local research assistants, I designed and implemented a sampling strategy based on the real-life behavior of rebel recruiters in the region. By surveying in the locations that rebel groups recruit, I gathered a group of *potential recruits*: young men (aged 18-40) who are not yet rebels but are highly likely to be approached by rebel recruiters and would consider joining under the right circumstances. The sampling, therefore, was designed to be selective rather than representative; targeting the most likely recruits rather than proxying the wider population.

My research team, young locals of the same ethnicity as respondents, approached potential recruits in two types of locations where rebel groups are known to trawl for unemployed or idle young men. First, the team visited a variety of *community organizations* that organize volunteers for community works projects and local ethnic activism. These community organizations are unaffiliated with any rebel organization or political party, but they serve as a hangout for many idealistic (and often unemployed) young men. As a result, rebel groups frequently treat them as a convenient pool of recruits. Many current and former rebels I interviewed were volunteering for community organizations when they were initially approached by rebel cadres. Second, my research team approached young men in local *gathering places*: along the side of major roads, at tea shops and moonshiners, and in local sports stadiums (during non-event hours). Many young men idle in public places during the day, either out of boredom or with the explicit intention of becoming involved in militancy or crime. For both types of locations, research team spent time equally in both larger towns and smaller villages in order to get a wide cross-section of potential recruits.

In both types of locations, the research team approached young men in the regional language (Nagamese or Assamese), asked whether they would be willing to share their

opinions about Naga / Assamese / Bodo politics (which is understood to include the rebel movement), and offering a small gift for the respondent's time. The approach strategy was intended to tap into the twin motivations for recruitment described above: interest in ethnic issues and modest material compensation. Among these survey-takers, the team screened for the respondent's likelihood as a potential recruit by asking if they generally favored or opposed independence or statehood for their ethnic region. The survey was conducted in private (except on request of the respondent) with a combination of English (English is the language of schooling in the region and is commonly-spoken) and translations into the regional language.

4.2 Comparing Committed and Uncommitted Potential Recruits

The recruitment experiment is designed to compare the motivations of high-commitment recruits (the altruists who rebel leaders would like to attract) and low-commitment recruits (the self-oriented recruits who they would prefer to screen out). The sampling strategies were designed to gather two separate pools of recruits with very different average levels of commitment to their ethnic communities.

The first group, by spending their free time around community volunteer organizations, have given a fairly strong signal of their altruism. Community organization volunteers frequently work long hours for free, so only very community-oriented individuals tend to spend time there. In interviews, several high-ranking rebel officers described community organization volunteers as their ideal recruits: self-sacrificing, well-behaved, and committed to community causes.⁸ By contrast, the young men who were approached in local gathering places have given no such indication that they are community-oriented. During interviews, I spent two hours sitting in a homebrewing hangout watching off-duty rebels talk to potential recruits. Even the recruiters laughed at the idea that these young men would be committed

⁸Author interviews (U1, U16), Nagaland, 2016

Table 3: Demographics and Traits by Sampling Group

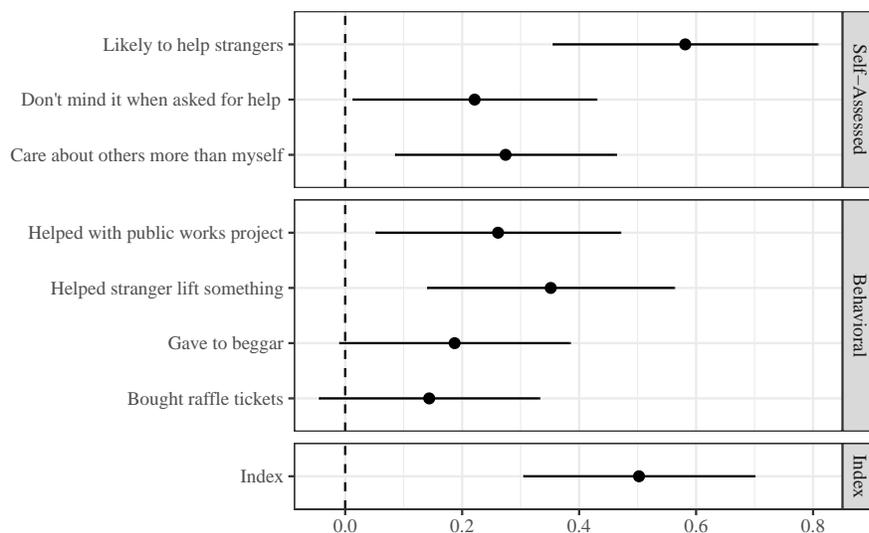
	Community Orgs	Gathering Spots
N	127	244
% Age <30	88	59
% Bachelor's Degree	59	43
% Originally From Village	35	55
% Unemployed	86	46
% Identify Strongly w/ Ethnic Group	88	93
% Support Talks w/ Government	80	72

to the cause or follow orders in the future.⁹ By comparing the answers of these two groups, we can learn about how the benefits of truce influence the decisions of these two groups of recruits to join rebel groups.

However, to confirm that the community organization group was indeed more altruistic than the gathering places group, I also asked the respondents a battery of self-assessment and behavioral questions. Those who are generally altruistic toward their communities, rebel leaders argue, will also be more self-sacrificing on behalf of the rebel movement. Therefore, I modeled some of these questions on common questions in social psychology, asking respondents to self-assess their own altruism. Other questions measured altruism with specific behaviors, asking about situations in the past when respondents would have had opportunities to engage in common community-oriented behaviors, such as giving money to a beggar or helping a stranger lift heavy objects. The results (Figure 1) show exactly what rebel leaders assert: the young men in community organizations are far more community-oriented on both fronts than those in gathering places. These groups are certainly different in other ways (Table 3), yet even adjusting for a wide array of demographic controls, the community organization group was substantially more altruistic than their peers. Their orientation toward the conflict also differed slightly: the low-commitment group was mildly more likely to strongly identify with their ethnic group than nationality and had a slightly hardline antigovernment ideology. If anything, these differences should bias against the main

⁹Author interview (C9), Nagaland, 2016

Figure 1: Respondents' Altruism: Community Orgs vs. Gathering Places



Each line is an OLS estimate (in standard deviations of the outcome) of the difference between activists and non-activists (the base category) for each survey response. Enumerator-Region pairing included as control.

argument, that the high-commitment community organizations group would be willing to endure more discomfort to mobilize against the government.

If young men from community organizations are so much more altruistic, then why do rebel organizations ever recruit from other locations? The answer is that community associations do not have any means to police their membership; they merely attract committed members. If rebel groups began requiring community organization recommendations, then opportunistic recruits would begin flooding in. In recent years, the major Naga armed factions began requesting that all new recruits provide a recommendation from local elders. Yet local elders have no incentive to refuse even troublesome youth, realizing that it would be better for them to be employed.¹⁰ As a result, armed groups do

¹⁰Author interviews with militants (U1, U12, U13, C10), Nagaland, 2016

not bother discouraging their members from talking to interested youth in low-commitment pools.

4.3 Conjoint Experiment

The theory posits that the lifestyle and safety benefits of truce attract low-commitment recruits to join a rebel group, while having less effect on high-commitment recruits. However, armed groups can vary over a host of other dimensions, making it difficult to identify the precise causes of a decision.

Therefore, rather than asking about real groups and real past behavior, I designed a conjoint survey experiment to test the effects of many different features at once. The experiment asks the potential recruit to imagine a hypothetical local armed organization fighting for separatism / autonomy for his ethnic group. Each hypothetical group was accompanied by a series of visual images representing the characteristics of the group in order to help less literate and non-English-speaking respondents remember and imagine the group (Figure 2). The activity then asks the respondent whether “someone like you” would join the hypothetical group. This phrasing, designed after Holland (2017), encourages the respondent to respond with their own preferences in a given situation while providing plausible deniability to admit their interest. Indeed, more than 40 percent of responses were that “some,” “many,” or “all” young men like them would join a given group (rather than “none” or “a few”) (more in *Appendix 1*).

The hypothetical group consists of six different features that current and former rebels cited in their decisionmaking (Table 4). Two of these are the primary effects of government forbearance: a more comfortable lifestyle and relative safety. For *lifestyle*, the group may offer no wages and a hard lifestyle (with an image of sleeping outside), small wages and an OK lifestyle (with an image of sleeping in a tent), or high wages and a good lifestyle (with an image of sleeping in a house). The highest level represents a lifestyle which is largely unattainable for rebels except in extreme material abundance (Weinstein, 2007). If

Figure 2: Example of Hypothetical Armed Group in Conjoint Experiment

Let us begin with one PRACTICE GROUP.

Strong (5,000 soldiers)



Strict Discipline



Leaders from the Same Tribe

tribe ✓ region ✓

Leaders Want to Make a Peace Deal with the Government



Offers High Wages, Good Lifestyle



Do you think a man like you would join this group?

- No one would
- Very few would
- Some would
- Many would
- All would

Next >

Table 4: Armed Group Features in Conjoint Experiment

Trait	Possibilities
Lifestyle / Wages (H1)	Offers no wages, hard lifestyle (Crackdown) Offers small wages, OK lifestyle (Truce) Offers high wages, good lifestyle
Ceasefire Offer (H2)	Government has offered a ceasefire [details follow] (Truce) Government has refused to offer a ceasefire [details follow] (Crackdown)
Reputed Discipline	Reputation for Loose Discipline Reputation for Strict Discipline
Ideology	(Softline) Leaders want to make a peace deal with government (Hardline) Leaders want to keep fighting until [region] is independent
Social Connections	Leaders from a different tribe [/community] and different area Leaders from a different tribe [/community] in the same area Leaders from the same tribe [/community]
Strength	Weak (200 troops) Medium-Strength (1,000 troops) Strong (5,000 troops)

Tribe/Community is a subset of Area in the NEI context. Ceasefire offer was clearly described to not be a prelude to peace talks (as described in Section 3).

truces do have an effect, it is instead by moving from the first to the second, relieving some basic lifestyle hardships. For *safety*, the group may have been offered a truce agreement or not, which should represent all of the direct safety benefits of truce, separate from lifestyle considerations.

The other four factors are non-truce-related: the group may be strong or weak, have strict or lax disciplinary systems, have leaders with or without community ties to the respondent, and follow a hardline or softline ideology. Including these other characteristics enables me to test alternative causal stories (Section 7), gauge relative strength of causal effects, and ensure that new information about lifestyle or ceasefire are not merely proxies for these other features based on past experience with armed groups (Dafoe, Zhang and Caughey, 2018).

Each respondent evaluated ten different hypothetical groups, each with new independently-randomized features. This allows me to separately measure the effect of changing each of these features on a potential recruit’s stated willingness to join the

armed group — and, more importantly, the differences in these effects between high- and low-commitment recruits. Following Hainmueller and Hiscox (2010), I report the OLS estimates for each effect. For robustness, I also reran all results using ordered probit, which yielded substantively identical results (full results in *Appendix 2*).

5 Experiment Results

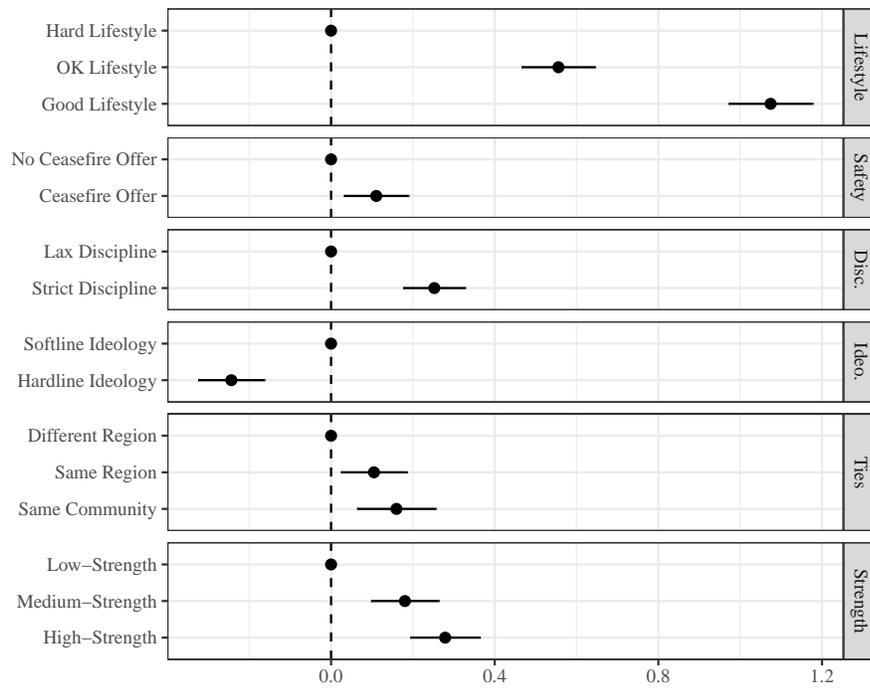
Figure 3 shows the OLS estimates of the effect of each armed group trait on respondents' willingness to join the group (on a 1-5 scale). All else equal, a recruit would prefer an armed group which offers a more comfortable lifestyle, has been offered a ceasefire by the government, demands more strict discipline, takes a more conciliatory stance toward negotiations, has leaders from the same sub-ethnic and regional community, and has more fighters.

The main theoretical claims, however, are about the differences between the motivations of high-commitment recruits (respondents interviewed in community organizations) and low-commitment recruits (those interviewed in public gathering spots). The lifestyle benefits (H1) and safety (H2) which result from truces should have a much larger effect on the low-commitment pool than on the high-commitment pool.

The results (Figure 4) dramatically confirm this claim. For the low-commitment respondents, lifestyle (the top two panels) was by far the most important factor in deciding whether to join an armed group. Holding all other factors constant, these recruits were nearly 0.75 scale points (about 0.75 standard deviations of the DV) more interested in joining a rebel group that offered even an OK lifestyle than one that offered a hard lifestyle. For high-commitment recruits, this wage effect is less than half as large, smaller than the effect of the group being militarily strong or of having leaders with tribal connections to the recruit.

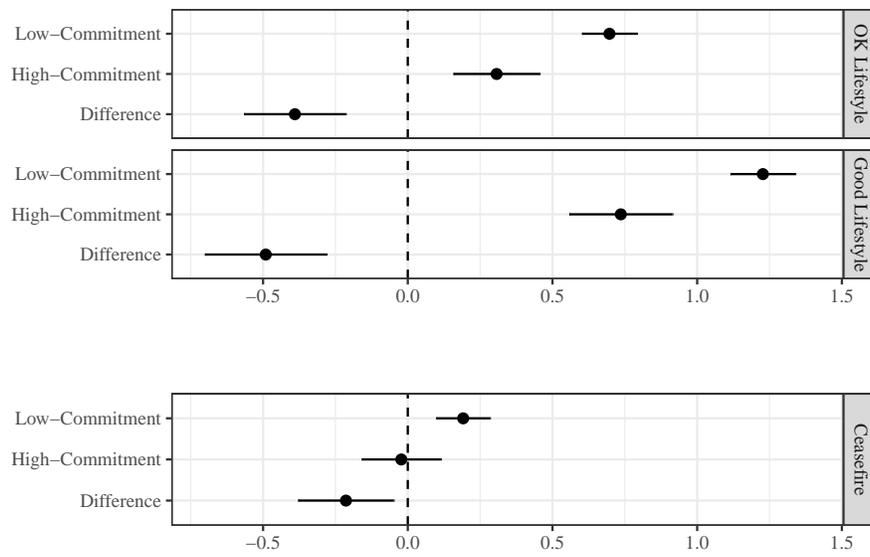
As a result, armed groups are likely to attract very different types of recruits depending on the lifestyle they can offer in crackdown and truce. The left panel of Figure 5 shows

Figure 3: Effects of Armed Group Features on Joining (Baseline)



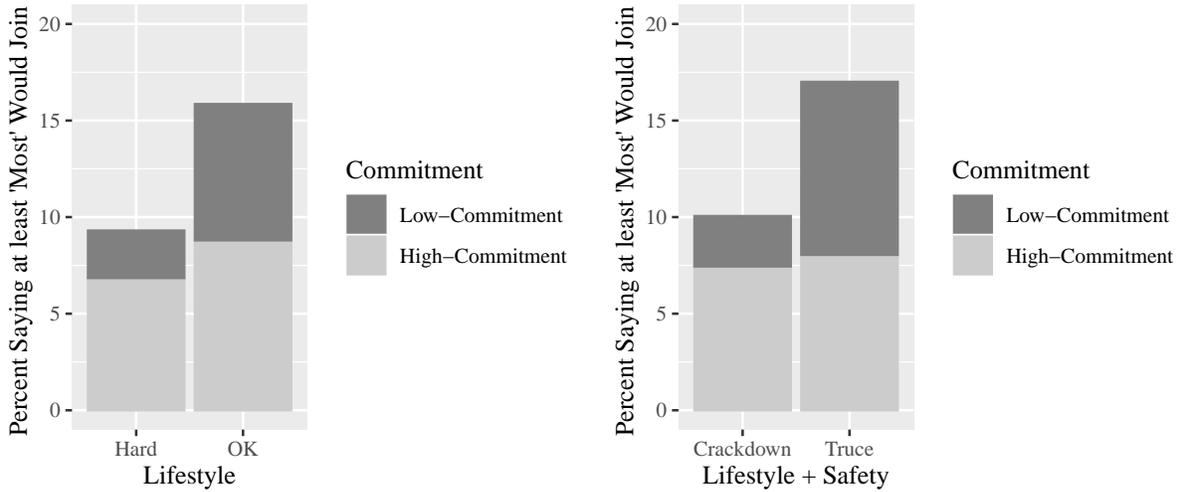
OLS with SEs clustered at respondent level, includes FE for recruiting pool. Group trait effects are relative to reference level for each category.

Figure 4: Effects of Material Benefits and Safety on Joining (by Recruit Type)



Treatment effect (OLS) of OK lifestyle or good lifestyle (vs. hard lifestyle) and ceasefire offer (vs. no offer) within each subgroup. SEs clustered at respondent level. FE for enumerator-region pair.

Figure 5: Proportion and Composition of Joiners, Crackdown vs. Truce



the proportion of recruits who are fairly likely to join a rebel organization (they say “Most” or “All” people like them would join), depending on the lifestyle that organization offers. For groups that offer a hard lifestyle (as is typical during crackdown periods), just under ten percent of respondents expressed interest, but the vast majority of these respondents are high-commitment types. Groups whose soldiers live an OK lifestyle (as is common during truce periods) attract slightly more respondents (16 percent), but nearly all of the additional interest comes from the low-commitment pool. This is exactly what the theory posits: the lifestyle benefits of truces undermine the natural screening process which keeps out low-commitment recruits. Importantly, this screening effect can be disrupted merely by avoiding the hardships of crackdown (moving from a hard to OK lifestyle), even if there are no high wages like those unlocked by plunder, diamonds, or drugs.

Even holding constant the lifestyle benefits, however, the safety of truces still has a differential effect on low-commitment and high-commitment recruits. The lower panel of Figure 4 shows how a ceasefire offer affects the two groups of respondents, all else equal. While ceasefire offers made low-commitment recruits substantially more receptive to joining, it had no effect on high-commitment respondents. This means that a period of truce, which brings both an OK lifestyle (rather than a hard one) and safety (rather than danger) should

disproportionately attract low-commitment recruits for both reasons compared to times of crackdown. The right panel in Figure 5 compares how adding these two effects can shape recruitment, comparing who joins when both treatments indicate a crackdown (hard lifestyle and no ceasefire offer) versus truce (OK lifestyle and ceasefire offer).

These differences between low-commitment and high-commitment respondents are consistent and robust across a number of additional tests (*Appendix 3*). First, low-commitment recruits are much more attracted by the benefits of truces than high-commitment recruits even when accounting for demographic differences between the two pools. Regression models which controlled for these available demographic characteristics — or more precisely, for the interaction between these characteristics and the relevant treatments — show very similar results. Secondly, these effects are consistent across all three conflict regions in the study (Naga, Assamese, and Bodo). In all three regions, the low-commitment recruits were more attracted by a better lifestyles and ceasefire offers. This is surprising given just how different the three settings are. The Naga movement — based in a remote hill region with a homogeneous and previously isolated population — is more similar to other center-periphery conflicts like those in Myanmar and Bangladesh. The Assamese and Bodo movements are rural but are based in far more densely-populated, diverse, and economically-developed regions — more similar to higher-salience and higher-intensity conflicts like those in Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Kurdistan. The consistency of the results, therefore, suggests that these theoretical building-blocks are likely to travel to other locations.

6 Organizational Effects: Semi-Structured Interviews

To investigate how periods of truce affect rebel organizations as a whole, I conducted in-depth interviews in and around rebel organizations in Northeast India. The main goal was to compare the trajectories of the two most prominent long-running separatist movements in

the Northeast: Nagas in Nagaland and Meiteis in Manipur. Both movements first took up arms against the Indian Army in the 1950s and 1960s, both were granted statehood in the 1960s and 1970s but continued to call for independence, and both saw a substantial surge in violence in the 1990s as rebels successfully reinvigorated long-running guerrilla campaigns. By the mid-1990s, both independence movements fielded almost 5,000 rebel troops split between a handful of rebel outfits. But in 1997, the Indian government offered a long-term truce to all Naga rebels while continuing to pursue Meitei rebels. Both movements had small but meaningful successes against government forces; instead the difference in strategies had more to do with the economic and symbolic stakes of the two conflicts. Manipur's Imphal Valley is more densely populated, ethnically heterogeneous, and economically productive than the Naga Hills, which made the government more reticent to redeploy troops and allow rebels to roam freely.

Within these regions, I interviewed 28 current and former rebels: foot soldiers, NCOs, and senior leaders from seven rebel organizations. I also interviewed 28 civilians who deal with rebel groups on an everyday basis: village chiefs, community association leaders, and journalists. Nearly all of these interviewees broadly supported the cause of autonomy/independence for their ethnic group, but they often had wildly different views of specific armed groups and leaders. These interviews lasted between thirty minutes and two hours, and were designed with two major goals in mind. First, for the 33 full-length interviews of Nagas and Meiteis conducted after the theory-building stage, I started with a fixed set of questions tracking rebel recruitment and behavior over time. This allows me to make clean comparisons over time and between movements (a qualitative difference-in-differences) to directly test Hypotheses 3-4. Second, I asked all 56 interviewees a set of more open-ended questions to fill in the causal process behind these events.

6.1 Truces and the Recruitment Process

In the years before the truce, Naga and Meitei rebel groups had broadly similar patterns of recruitment. Following the 1997 ceasefires, however, Naga saw the biggest influx of recruits in their long histories. The Naga factions more than doubled their ranks during the first few years of ceasefire (to about 10,000), and they have remained that size over the two decades since.¹¹ Nearly every Naga interviewee, both rebel and civilian, agreed that the easier lifestyle for rebels after 1997 was the single biggest change over the recent history of the movement and the cause of this influx. Asked how the movement had changed in general over the past two decades, nearly every Naga interviewee responded with some version of, “before the ceasefires, there was no money in rebellion.”¹² Meitei rebel organizations, by contrast, have remained consistently poor and have seen almost no change in their ranks (still under 5,000) over the past two decades under government assault.

These new Naga recruits, however, quickly gained a reputation for laziness and lack of commitment. Asked an open-ended question about whether the types of people joining rebel organizations had changed in the past two decades, the vast majority of Naga respondents (even those who were recent recruits) launched into complaints about the rising numbers of selfish “materialists” looking only out for themselves. Rebel leaders complained that new recruits are “out for themselves,” “join for the wrong reasons,” and “don’t know any better” than to misbehave.¹³ Nearly every rebel leader said that this change in recruits’ motivations was rapid and followed the the ceasefire offer. They also made clear that the soldiers recruited before the ceasefire are still highly committed, which is exactly what we would expect if this effect was primarily driven by the types of people joining rather than the circumstances of truce.¹⁴ Moreover, these reports do not appear to be merely driven by nostalgia for a bygone

¹¹Author interviews (U1, U13, U16), Nagaland, 2016

¹²Author interview with former cadre (C1), Nagaland, 2016

¹³Author interviews (U1, U7, U8, U9, U12, U13, U16), Nagaland, 2016

¹⁴Author interview with rebel leaders (U1, U8, U9, U12, U13, U16), Nagaland, 2016

Table 5: Change over Time in Types of Recruits

Question: Are there more, fewer, or about the same number of soldiers who joined for the wrong reasons in [respondent's ethnicity] armed groups today than there were twenty years ago?

	More	Same	Fewer	NR
All Naga Interviewees	18	3	0	3
All Meitei Interviewees	1	7	1	0

era. Even when pressed with a more direct question (Table 5), ethnic Meitei respondents unanimously agreed there had been little, if any, change over the past few decades in the dedication of rebel recruits.

Numerous rebel leaders complained that they wanted to demand greater lifestyle sacrifices to keep these recruits out, but they faced substantial pressure to keep lifestyle and wages competitive. The Naga rebel movement included three separate armed factions at the time of ceasefire, recruiting from areas that frequently overlapped. Numerous rebels recounted stories of recruiters approaching on-duty members of rival factions, promising better living conditions if they were to switch.¹⁵ As a result, over the course of the truce, in every major Naga rebel organization, training became substantially less harsh, and soldiers received dramatically improved material benefits: better housing, better food, and many more monetary and in-kind perks.¹⁶ Even in areas where single rebel groups had local monopsonies on rebel recruiting, organizational fragmentation left rebels vulnerable to recruitment competition. Even where splits were initially driven by personal disputes between leaders, new factions competed used the easier lifestyle of truce to poach recruits and soldiers.¹⁷ Mon, the largest town in Eastern Nagaland, was dominated by a single rebel

¹⁵Author interviews (U1, U5, U12, U13, U15, U16, C2, C6, K1), Nagaland and Manipur, 2016

¹⁶Author interviews with current and former rebels (U1, U4, U16, C1, C7, C10), Nagaland, 2015-2016

¹⁷Author interviews with current and former militants and community leaders (U12, U13,

organization, the NSCN-K, before the 1997 ceasefires. In the years since, it has also become fertile recruiting ground for two new factions, the NSCN-R and NNC-N, which has driven up lifestyle benefits for soldiers.¹⁸

6.2 Truces and Organizational Control

With this influx of low-commitment recruits, rebel organizations struggle to maintain control of their soldiers. In interviews with civilians in Nagaland, merely asking about soldiers disobeying orders sparked a host of stories describing the rise over time in extortion and abuse by soldiers, despite concerted efforts by rebel leaders to restrain them.¹⁹ But even current rebels complained about the rising tide of theft, rape, extortion, and defection in their own ranks and in the ranks of other rebel organizations. They overwhelmingly argued that “materialism” and “corruption” have become an increasing problem, and that soldiers have “less conviction than they once did.”²⁰ One local activist estimated that more than 50% of what Naga rebel cadres collect goes into their own pockets rather than into the organization’s coffers.²¹ Nearly all of these respondents traced the changes in behavior specifically to the 1997 ceasefires, and nearly all argued that the younger (post-ceasefire) recruits were much worse behaved than the older (pre-ceasefire) recruits, even today. By contrast, the major Meitei outfits have seen no significant change in their organizational control, despite increasing pressure by government forces to undermine rebels (Table 6). Meitei civilians have observed very little extortion or abuse by rebel soldiers. In recent

U16, C1, C10, A7, A10), Nagaland, 2016

¹⁸Author interviews with rebels and elders (C7, C8, C9, C10, A10), Nagaland, 2016

¹⁹Author interviews with elders and activists (A2, A3, A5, A6, A8, A12, A13, A15), Nagaland, 2015-2016

²⁰Author interviews with Naga militants (U4, U7, U8, U9, U12, U13, C7, C9), Nagaland, 2016

²¹Author interview (A15), Nagaland, 2015

Table 6: Change over Time in Soldier Misbehavior

Question: Has misbehavior in [respondent's ethnicity] armed organizations increased, decreased, or stayed about the same over the past twenty years?

	More	Same	Less	NR
All Naga Interviewees	18	4	0	2
All Meitei Interviewees	1	7	1	0

years, the Meitei groups have even cooperated to install and effectively enforce a new set of strict rules of engagement with civilians.²²

As a result of this misbehavior, Naga rebel organizations have increasingly struggled to keep community support and to demonstrate strength in their rare clashes with government forces. The years since the ceasefire, Naga rebels have seen a large decline in public support, largely driven by extortion and abuse.²³ In two separate incidents in Mokokchung and Zunheboto, civilians rioted and burned down local rebel bases following cases of abuse, and both communities have since refused to pay taxes to the offending rebel faction.²⁴ Meitei civilians, meanwhile, still widely approve of rebel organizations, despite the government's increased efforts to eradicate them.²⁵

Meanwhile, in their rare clashes with government forces, Naga rebel outfits have fared substantially worse since the ceasefire, despite their larger numbers. This is apparent looking at fatality data from UCDP (Sundberg and Melander, 2013) and an Indian monitoring organization, the South Asia Terrorism Portal.²⁶ During the 1990s, Naga rebels killed more than twice as many government soldiers as they lost of their own soldiers. Since the ceasefires, rebel-government clashes has resulted in three times as many rebel fatalities as government

²²Author interviews (M2, M3, M4, M5), Manipur, 2016

²³Author interviews (A2, A3, A5, A6, A7, A8, A12, A13, A15, A20), Nagaland, 2015-2016

²⁴Author interviews (A6, A12, A13, A14, A15), Nagaland, 2015-2016.

²⁵Author interviews (M2, M3, M4, M5, M8), Manipur, 2016

²⁶Data available at www.satp.org

fatalities. Meitei rebels, meanwhile, have continued to kill government forces at relatively consistent rate despite a concerted effort by government forces to build up counterinsurgent forces and use more aggressive offensive measures against Meitei groups.

7 Alternative Strategies for Organizational Control

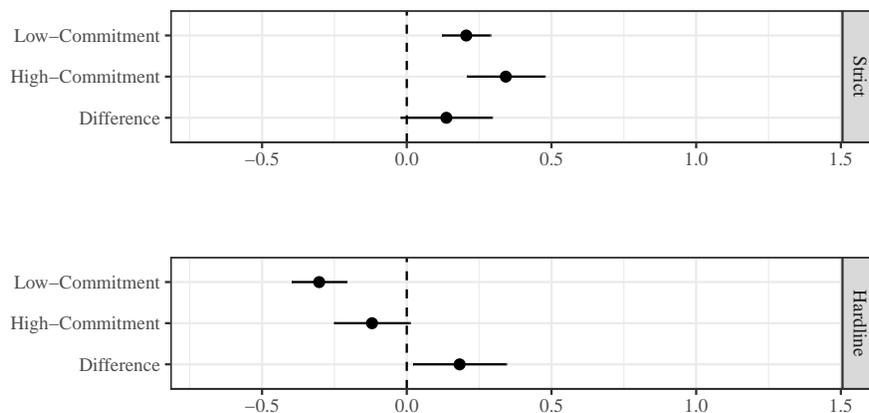
Rebels in Northeast India have attempted – as rebels often do – to mitigate misbehavior by implementing strict disciplinary systems and positioning themselves as ideologically extreme. However, the experimental and interview evidence for the effectiveness of these two strategies in Northeast India is mixed at best – and it provides reasons for skepticism toward both strategies more generally.

7.1 Disciplinary Systems

First, rebel leaders try to limit misbehavior by building systems to monitor soldiers' behavior and punish misbehavior (Shapiro, 2015; Worsnop, 2017; Gutierrez Sanin and Giustozzi, 2010; Humphreys and Weinstein, 2006; Gates, 2002). By setting and enforcing strict standards for conduct, leaders hope to incentivize low-commitment recruits to follow orders or deter them from joining in the first place. Rebel groups in Nagaland, Assam, and Manipur have all the appearance of strict managers: they all have strict legal codes regulating cadre behavior and harsh punishments for offenders.

In the recruitment experiment, one of the randomly varying factors was the rebel group's reputation for discipline; the hypothetical group could have strict rules and punishments or loose rules and punishments. If respondents thought rebels' disciplinary systems were effective, then low-commitment recruits should be deterred and high-commitment recruits, who would follow rules anyway, should be unaffected. The results (top panel of Figure 6) are mixed. On one hand, low-commitment recruits were not deterred by strict discipline as these theories should predict – both pools of respondents preferred to join a group

Figure 6: Effects of Strict Discipline and Hardline Ideology on Joining (by Recruit Type)



Effects of strict (vs. loose) discipline and hardline (vs. softline) ideology. Same OLS model as Figure 4.

with strict discipline over one with loose discipline. While high-commitment respondents did respond slightly more favorably to strict discipline, the difference was relatively small and statistically insignificant. On the other hand, the positive effects overall suggest that discipline and recruitment are not intrinsically at odds. If armed groups successfully manage soldier behavior, it could be an asset in recruitment rather than a liability.

Interviews in Nagaland, though, cast doubt on the effectiveness of disciplinary systems in practice and help explain why low-commitment recruits may not see them as a deterrent. Since the 1997 ceasefire, every major Naga rebel organization has implemented some sort of three-strikes system for misbehavior, with a third offense punishable by death. Yet Naga rebel leaders readily admitted in interviews that soldiers have been nearly impossible to monitor once they leave the camp, and uncommitted soldiers can easily get away with unauthorized theft and abuse.²⁷ Even if they can effectively detect misbehavior, rebel leaders may not be able to catch deserters or defectors if they can escape areas of rebel

²⁷Author interviews (U1, U7, U13, U16), Nagaland, 2016

control. Numerous Naga officers and combatants complained that soldiers who were at risk of receiving a third strike simply deserted or defected to a rival faction.²⁸ These hint at two reasons why state militaries tend to be able to enforce discipline more effectively, even in peacetime: state militaries typically have greater administrative capacity and deeper territorial control.

7.2 Extremist Outbidding

Second, rebel leaders may try to establish a distinct ideology in order to attract the most committed recruits. “Outbidding” theories (Bloom, 2005; Kydd and Walter, 2006) posit that rebel leaders are able to credibly signal their commitment to the stakes of conflict by adopting a hardline anti-government ideology. By doing so, they may hope to attract the most committed recruits and overcome the organizational effects of ceasefire.

The evidence from the recruitment experiment, however, provides strong evidence that even the most committed recruits are not necessarily ideological extremists. In Northeast India, the most discussed ideological dimension is whether the group has a hardline or softline approach to government negotiations. Therefore, I randomized whether the group was described as “pro-talk” or “anti-talk,” which is how many rebel groups describe themselves. If a more extreme ideology helps a group distinguish itself as ideologically pure, then high-commitment respondents should be attracted to the hardline “anti-talk” groups. Instead, in all three regions, both high-commitment and low-commitment recruits were less likely to express interest in joining a rebel group with a hardline ideology.

The interviews confirmed that even highly committed rebel recruits disliked, or were at least ambivalent about, extremist ideologies. After 16 years in a socialist armed group, one former rebel neither knew nor cared what the word socialism meant.²⁹ Those rebels who

²⁸Author interviews with militants and civilians (U16, C7, A2, A3, A6, A15), Nagaland, 2015-2016

²⁹Author interview with former NSCN-K soldier (C7), Nagaland, 2016

did care about ideology, meanwhile, generally described themselves as pragmatists who will support a reasonable compromise. This seems to line up with recruitment patterns over time: after the NSCN-IM announced a framework peace agreement with the government, hundreds of defectors and recruits flocked to the group, including the principal founder of a rival faction.³⁰ Rather than creating incentives for rebels to outbid each other, these results suggest that recruitment competition can just as easily put pressure on rebels to appear moderate, making it cheaper for governments to buy off rebel groups (Cunningham, 2014).

8 Conclusion

This paper brings new theoretical and empirical scrutiny to the question of how violence and forbearance shape rebel organizations. In doing so, it challenges a number of key scholarly and policy assumptions about civil conflict.

First, it calls into doubt the value of violence for states facing rebel competitors. Following the call by Kalyvas (2006) to distinguish violence from conflict, there has been substantial debate about how states ought to effectively wield violence against rebel organizations (Lyall, 2010; Berman and Matanock, 2015) and whether to do so against rebels' supporters (Lyall, 2009; Sewall et al., 2007). These debates generally assume that targeted violence against rebels should be an important goal of counterinsurgency. Yet where the Indian government has suddenly opted out of crackdowns altogether, allowing rebels to operate freely, rebel organizations have eroded into indiscipline and chaos. While extremely intense counterinsurgency might be enough to drive even committed rebels off the battlefield, more moderate levels of government violence may actually help rebels screen out uncommitted recruits when compared to forbearing punishment entirely. Moreover, this effect should actually be strongest where government crackdowns are effective, precisely-targeted, and consistent across groups. For governments attempting to undermine militant competitors

³⁰Author interviews with Naga militants (U1, U16, C6), Nagaland, 2015-2016

and cement territorial control, it suggests a new strategy of counterinsurgency based on laissez-faire acceptance rather than violent crackdown.

Second, it demonstrates how seemingly straightforward decisions can have unexpected effects when filtered through individual motivations and organizational structures. Government counterinsurgency generally has a very straightforward logic: making rebels' lives dangerous and uncomfortable should reduce rebel numbers and weaken rebel forces. Yet a greater quantity of recruits does not necessarily translate to higher quality rebel groups. On the one hand, this paper provides innovative experimental evidence for the argument that the most effective rebels are those who are willing to endure sacrifices for the group (Weinstein, 2007). It also clarifies this argument and connects it to issues of war and peace, showing that even modest changes in lifestyle and safety, such as those brought about by a long-term truce, can sabotage rebels' screening processes. At the same time, it provides detailed case evidence of the organizational processes that prevent rebel leaders from adapting to new circumstances. On one side, rebel leaders are constrained by recruitment competition, forced to allow in new recruits they would otherwise like to exclude. On the other, they lack many of the structural advantages of state militaries, unable to effectively evaluate new recruits or monitor and punish misbehavior. Taking these forces into account, government inaction may weaken rebels more than counterinsurgency.

Lastly, this work highlights the murky politics between war and peace. International actors often pressure combatants into a truce, believing it will ultimately lead to disarmament and conciliation. Instead, truces come with a whole new set of challenges. Freed of worries about survival, armed actors can play a much more varied and chaotic set of roles in society in times of truce. This can potentially strengthen the hands of the state, weaken rebel organizations, and put arms in the hands of opportunists, potentially complicating civilian protection and peace negotiations. As a result, this paper contributes to a growing understanding (Staniland, 2012, 2017; Daly, 2016) that armed politics do not end when guns stop firing.

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