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A Slippery Slope: The Domestic Diffusion of Ethnic Civil War

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Why do most civil wars occur in a relatively small number of countries? We answer this question by analyzing how civil wars diffuse in multiethnic states. Our theory outlines two motivation and two opportunity mechanisms that trigger additional ethnic rebellions in the same state. First, ongoing civil wars motivate members of other ethnic groups to mobilize in reaction to the negative externalities of nearby conflict. Second, ethnic groups emulate nearby rebel groups as a means of addressing preexisting grievances. Third, fighting multiple civil wars drains state capacity, opening the door for additional challengers to rebel against the government. Finally, long-lasting civil wars signal that the state is unable to defeat active rebels, thus creating incentives for new challengers to take up arms. We test our mechanisms in all multiethnic states with a history of armed conflict between 1946 and 2006. Using Geographic Information Systems, we construct overlap and minimum distance measures between ethnic groups' settlement patterns and conflict zones. Our statistical analysis indicates that new ethnic civil war onsets are more likely in the vicinity of ongoing armed conflicts. Ethnic civil wars also diffuse as governments face an increasing number of rebels and longer rebellions.

Research on intrastate armed conflicts shows that the majority of civil wars cluster in a small number of states. According to the widely used UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Database (ACD), 30 states experienced more than 60 percent of all new civil war onsets between 1946 and 2013 (Gleditsch et al. 2002; Pettersson and Wallensteen 2015). In explaining this conflict trap, political economists refer to low state capacity, poverty, and the presence of lootable resources. All these factors create opportunities for rebels to finance their activities and escape government repression (Collier et al. 2003; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Collier 2007). In contrast, scholars who study rebel motivation usually emphasize horizontal inequalities and past warfare as the basis of collective grievances which, in turn, trigger repeated cycles of civil war (Gurr 2000; Petersen 2002; Stewart 2008; Cederman et al. 2013). Regardless of their theoretical focus, most conflict researchers thus focus on recurrence mechanisms to explain the conflict trap.

We argue that civil wars which diffuse within states offer an important, alternative explanation for states caught in the conflict trap. We define “diffusion” here as the spread

of civil war from one government–rebel dyad to another, previously peaceful government–group dyad. To explain the dynamics of civil war diffusion within states, we investigate the slippery slope that governments enter as they decide how to deal with an initial challenger. Our theory suggests that ongoing civil wars (1) provide motivation for other ethnic groups to rebel in order to protect their members, and (2) broaden their opportunity to extract concessions from the government by means of rebellion. Regarding motivation, we argue that peaceful groups suffering from the negative externalities of ongoing civil wars fought near their homes are more likely to rebel. Moreover, previously aggrieved groups find inspiration in the armed struggle of neighboring groups. With respect to opportunity factors, governments that are unable to decisively end civil wars signal weakness to potential challengers. The longer civil wars endure, and the more opponents a government fights, the higher its costs of fighting and the more likely that additional groups will rebel.

We ground our approach in the bargaining framework for understanding conflict (see Fearon 1995). In the context of civil war onsets, it highlights information asymmetries and reputational concerns that affect the strategic interaction between a government and a non-state challenger (Walter 2009a). Breaking from traditional two-player models, we theorize how one government–rebel interaction affects the motivation and opportunities for civil war onsets between other dyads. Moreover, we define “motivation” more broadly than most bargaining models; we include collective grievances, such as frustration due to political exclusion or direct government repression (Cederman et al. 2013, 40, 47). Our understanding of opportunity captures weak states that cannot stop rebellions from breaking out (Fearon and Laitin 2003, 76). Motivation and opportunity are jointly necessary in bringing about bargaining situations in which civil wars become

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possible. Yet, even if rebels possess both motivation and opportunity, civil wars occur only when the government does not give in to rebel demands due to, for example, reputational concerns. In this article, diffusion serves as a source for both motivation and opportunity. But it does not necessarily do so simultaneously. Where diffusion creates motive for armed rebellion, opportunity may derive from processes other than diffusion (and vice versa).

We test our hypotheses on a dataset of ethnically divided states—with more than two groups—between 1946 and 2006. Since civil wars can diffuse only if at least one civil war broke out, we remove all country-years from the data without any prior or ongoing intrastate conflict. Although other salient group identities exist, we follow Walter (2009b) in focusing on ethnic groups as our unit of analysis. We do so because ethnicity constitutes the most frequent, politically relevant cleavage of the post-World War II era (Wimmer 2002; Denny and Walter 2014).¹ “Ethnic civil war” designates those intrastate conflicts that involve rebel organizations that (1) claim to act on behalf of and (2) recruit from an ethnic group.² Such groups define membership by one or a combination of linguistic, religious, and ethnosomatic markers, and their members share a putative belief in common ancestry (Weber 1978).

Using geo-coded data on ethnic settlement patterns (Wucherpfennig et al. 2011) and conflict zones (Hallberg 2012), we employ Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to measure the proximity of ethnic groups’ homelands to ongoing ethnic and non-ethnic civil wars. Our findings provide support for both the motivation and the opportunity mechanisms. New ethnic civil wars are most likely to erupt close to ongoing intrastate conflicts, where the resulting negative externalities motivate nearby ethnic groups to rebel. As states experience more and longer-lasting intrastate conflicts, opportunities emerge for additional ethnic groups to violently challenge the state. Adding these diffusion variables to our models of civil war strongly improves their predictive power.

The next section situates our study in the existing literature on conflict diffusion. We then detail our theoretical mechanisms before explaining our data and methodological approach, and present our results.

Recurrence, Diffusion, and the Conflict Trap

Previous studies of intrastate conflict often adopt country-level research designs. They thus implicitly assume uniformity across states’ territories in terms of “the underlying political and economic conditions that make [rebel] enlistment attractive that are likely to drive a second or third civil war” (Walter 2004, 372). Inevitably, these scholars understand the clustering of civil wars in a small number of states as cases of conflict recurrence. Similarly, scholars tend to focus on recurrence dynamics when studying grievances as a key motivation of rebel groups (Cederman et al. 2010, 97–98; Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013, 64; Cederman et al. 2015). Yet, data from the Armed Conflict Database reveals that almost 60 percent of all civil wars break out while another distinct government-

rebel dyad fights an ongoing civil war (Pettersson and Wallensteen 2015). Moreover, approximately half of these conflicts are fought by a rebel organization without any prior conflict history. Thus, recurrence cannot account for at least 30 percent of all intrastate conflicts, and domestic diffusion plausibly contributes to a majority of all civil war onsets.

Nevertheless, existing work on the domestic causes of civil war rarely studies diffusion dynamics within states, or at most, treats it as a control variable (Walter 2009b, 127; Forsberg 2013, 335). This focus on recurrence contrasts with an expanding research program on the transnational diffusion of civil wars.

This study builds upon the literature on civil war diffusion.³ Generally, conflict researchers pay more attention to transnational civil war diffusion (see Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006; Gleditsch 2007; Braithwaite 2010; Cederman et al. 2013) than to domestic dynamics. These studies identify both opportunity factors such as rebel sanctuaries outside states’ territories (Salehyan 2007) and motivation mechanisms such as cross-border ethnic links (Cederman et al. 2013) as crucial drivers of civil war onset. Braithwaite (2010) shows that more capable states are at lower risk of infection from neighboring civil wars because they can restrict cross-border movements. However, governments usually find it difficult to quickly increase their capacity to fight rebel forces to resist transnational contagion.

Arguably, governments exert more influence on the risk of domestic conflicts to diffuse. While recent research studies how multiple rebel actors compete among one another within one civil war (Bakke et al. 2012; Christia 2012; Cunningham et al. 2012), or within one self-determination movement (Cunningham 2011, 2013), this article differs from their research program in two ways. For one, it stresses interactions across distinct civil wars rather than within the same conflict. For another, it emphasizes how ongoing intrastate conflicts constitute positive externalities to potential challengers to start their own rebellions. Yet, most existing work highlights the negative externalities that derive from competition between rebel groups (see Cunningham 2006; Cunningham et al. 2012).

As a key building block of how active *and* potential rebel actors interact, we need to consider the intentions and actions of their states. Toft (2002, 2003) argues that state leaders in the post-World War II era care deeply about territorial integrity and therefore tend to violently confront those who challenge it. Walter (2006, 2009b) generalizes the argument for governments of multiethnic states that care deeply about their reputation vis-à-vis ethnic minorities. Afraid of appearing weak, governments aim to discourage future rebellions by fighting initial ethnic challengers to demonstrate high resolve. Lake (2011) applies this logic to explain why Saddam Hussein rejected American demands in 2003. He argues that the Iraqi leader feared a weakened reputation, which would have encouraged subsequent Kurdish and Shia uprisings. Despite empirical challenges to reputation theory in the context of post-conflict concessions after 1989 (see Forsberg 2013), descriptions of government attitudes and policy toward ethnic minorities in many postcolonial states, for example Nehru’s India (Guha 2007, 197), suggest that governments do care about maintaining a tough

¹Even many communist rebel organizations highlighted ethnic differences in order to recruit their fighters (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010, 420).

²For reasons of readability, we sometimes use *civil war*, *intrastate conflict*, or *rebellion* instead of ethnic civil war. While we focus exclusively on ethnic civil war as an outcome in this article, ethnic groups may also observe non-ethnic civil wars.

³As opposed to important research on counterinsurgency, which focuses on containing the scope and intensity of one civil war (Schutte and Weidmann 2011; Toft and Zhukov 2012; Zhukov 2012).

reputation to protect their territorial integrity. However, rather than weighing in on the debate over the merits of reputation theory, this study explores the *consequences* of governments' decisions to fight domestic challengers.

Unfortunately, most mechanisms of transnational conflict diffusion, such as cross-border sanctuaries and ethnic kin, do not directly apply to domestic dynamics. Civilians displaced by intrastate conflicts constitute an exception. They likely produce many of the same negative externalities that originate from cross-border refugee flows (see Bohnet et al. 2013). Since internally displaced people outnumber international refugees by a factor of two (Office for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2015, 2), it seems plausible that domestic diffusion dynamics are even more likely than transnational ones. The estimated effect of control variables measuring ongoing conflict in Walter's (2009b, 127–29) and Forsberg's (2013, 335–36) empirical analyses lends support to such a conclusion. Yet, both studies stop short of offering a comprehensive explanation for these patterns. In the following, we advance theoretical arguments on the motivation and opportunity for domestic civil war diffusion.

A Slippery Slope: Diffusion in War-Torn States

How does civil war diffuse within states? We focus on states where potential challengers observe past or ongoing civil war between a government and another rebel organization. Theoretically, these actors include any politically organized social groups within a state, but in this article we concentrate on those rebel organizations that claim to represent ethnic groups. Our choice is motivated by the observation that the majority of rebel organizations of the post-World War II era claim to fight on behalf of and recruit their members from an ethnic group (cf. Sambanis 2001, 269; Denny and Walter 2014, 199). In this study of conflict diffusion, we set aside the causes of the first civil war onset in a state. Rather than focusing on governments' decisions to fight initial challengers to signal their resolve to potential challengers (cf. Walter 2009b), we investigate how ongoing ethnic and non-ethnic civil wars affect the motivation of and the opportunity for potential ethnic rebel groups to challenge the state.

Motivation

Civil wars are rare events, as most individuals are loath to risk their lives in rebellions with uncertain outcomes. Often, conflict researchers refer to Olson's (1965) collective action problem to explain the inability of radical leaders to set up viable rebel organizations. According to this logic, individuals who face the choice between risking their lives fighting a rebellion and less risky private pursuits tend to opt for the latter. Yet, as Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug (2013, 45–48) argue, grievances shared by members of one ethnic group may provide the emotional impetus to overcome the collective action constraints, and thereby provide a basis for rebel mobilization. While their theory describes the choices of individuals prior to the outbreak of any civil war, we apply it to domestic civil war diffusion.

Civil wars that directly affect members of peaceful groups create grievances among these members. In turn, these grievances may provide motivation for a new rebellion. Governments often lack detailed local knowledge of the regions where they fight civil wars (Fearon and Laitin 2003, 80). As a result, they frequently rely on

indiscriminate violence to coerce their opponents, which harms both rebels and innocent bystanders (Kalyvas 2006, 146–73). In areas where multiple ethnic groups are intermixed, collateral damage from fighting and indiscriminate violence easily affects members of ethnic groups not involved in the ongoing civil war. The direct experience of civil war violence transforms individuals' views of violence: "Unlike many interstate wars, civil wars brutalize civilians as well, most obviously by unremitting exposure to violence" (Kalyvas 2006, 56). Suffering from the negative externalities of a civil war they did not start, individuals become more susceptible to the messages of radical group leaders, who blame their suffering on the state. Thus, government actions that aim at subduing one rebellion may provoke feelings of fear and resentment among members of previously peaceful ethnic groups, who observe coethnics' suffering (Petersen 2002, 25). Under these conditions, individuals who do not directly experience civil war violence may join a new ethnic rebel movement due to feelings of ethnic solidarity (cf. Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013, 47–48).

Even if state forces avoid inflicting collateral damage on members of previously peaceful groups, reliance on less severe forms of coercion can trigger civil war diffusion. Discussing transnational diffusion, Danneman and Ritter (2014) show that governments in neighboring states proactively increase levels of repression to avoid contagion. We argue that a similar logic also explains why civil wars diffuse within states. When governments attempt to contain ongoing civil wars, they aim to limit the movement of rebel forces and supplies. To achieve this goal, they increase the use of police forces and paramilitary units even in the neighborhood of conflict zones. The onset of repression may, however, prove to be counterproductive. Particularly in regions that previously did not feature much government presence, the sudden appearance of government forces may create grievances triggered by a change from indirect to direct rule (Hechter 2000). For example, the Indian government's policy toward ethnic groups in the country's northeast includes unchecked and brutal security forces (EgretEAU 2006, 30) and support for local autocracies (Lacina 2009). Radical elites of peaceful ethnic groups can frame this onset of repression as a motivation for civil war against the state (Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013, 40–44). Thus, the very actions that would allow governments to contain existing rebels create the motivation for additional ethnic groups to rebel. This argument relies on the same "negative externalities" logic as the direct experience of civil war violence. Yet, we also expect to observe a higher likelihood of civil war onset for those ethnic groups not directly affected by ongoing fighting, but living close by where police and military forces aim to contain civil war.

A second mechanism of civil war diffusion stresses the emulation of another group's strategy of violent resistance to overcome preexisting grievances. Rather than experiencing civil war violence or associated repression directly, the uprising of one ethnic group provides inspiration to peaceful groups. Emulation becomes particularly likely if these groups already harbor grievances against the state. When the state excludes ethnic groups politically or discriminates against them, the resulting grievances make them more likely to rebel (Gurr 2000; Cederman et al. 2010; Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013). However, horizontal inequalities such as political exclusion do not change much over time (Stewart 2008, ch. 4; Cederman et al. 2015, 815), whereas civil wars occur only infrequently. An ongoing rebellion in the neighborhood of an

aggrieved ethnic group demonstrates the viability of armed resistance against the state, and thereby assists radical elites in spreading their message of violent rebellion to a larger set of members of aggrieved groups. In analogy to our argument, Weidmann (2015, 289) shows that marginalized ethnic groups draw inspiration from media reports of ethnic civil wars in other states, and Bakke (2013) describes how foreign fighters provided new framing strategies for rebel leaders in Chechnya. Thus, proximity to ongoing conflict may not only create new grievances, but the combination of preexisting grievances and emulating nearby rebellion as a strategy to overcome these grievances exerts a multiplicative effect on the likelihood of new ethnic conflict onsets.

Spatial proximity plays a critical role for this emulation mechanism because civil wars usually occur in peripheral areas where information transmission is difficult. In rural and inaccessible areas, little infrastructure exists by which the state can control the rebels (Fearon and Laitin 2003). The same factors that make civil war more likely also reduce the publicity of these conflicts (Kalyvas 2006, 41). Moreover, governments have little interest in publicizing successful and enduring armed resistance directed against them. In 1950s India, “[f]ew Indians outside the north-east, and virtually no foreigners, knew of the Naga conflict at the time” (Guha 2007, 282). As a result, information about these wars tends to travel through interpersonal contacts such as internally displaced people or messengers from other rebel groups, a mechanism that is well known in transnational diffusion studies (Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006). Indeed, Guha (2007, 616) argues that rebel organizations such as the “UFLA, the Tripura National Volunteers, the Kuki National Army, and the Meitei rebels all took inspiration from the Nagas, creators of the mother of insurgencies in the north-east” (see also Egretau 2006; Bhaumik 2007).

We argue that both the negative externalities of conflict and the indirect emulation of nearby, ongoing civil wars provide the motivation for members of previously peaceful ethnic groups to rebel. We anticipate further that these mechanisms have a greater effect on politically marginalized ethnic groups.

H_{1a}: *Ethnic groups are more likely to rebel when ongoing civil wars directly affect their own territory than when they do not.*

H_{1b}: *Ethnic groups are more likely to rebel closer to ongoing civil wars than farther away.*

H_{1c}: *Politically excluded ethnic groups are more likely than non-excluded groups to rebel closer to ongoing civil wars than farther away.*

Several objections challenge our theoretical account. For example, governments should foresee the slippery slope they enter when fighting a challenger in a remote corner of their country. We contend that two factors make it difficult for governments to accommodate rebel demands initially: first, lack of information about the capability of rebel organizations may lead governments to fight initial challengers to avoid giving concessions to weak rebels (Walter 2009a, 248). Governments cannot easily observe rebel fighters or their support from the civilian population, which makes it very difficult to estimate their true strength. Too much confidence in their ability to defeat this initial challenge may make governments underestimate the likelihood of civil war diffusion.

Second, conceding to demands by early challengers portrays governments as weak, and could spur even more

subsequent challenges (Walter 2006, 2009b). Although governments do engage opposition movements through political channels prior to and during civil wars (Cunningham 2011), ongoing violence complicates this process and can indirectly undermine the efficacy of this nonviolent bargaining (Chenoweth and Schock 2015, 436–37, 446). When a challenger demands concessions during times of increased instability and armed conflict, governmental concerns about signaling weakness magnify. States face severe informational challenges when estimating the “true” strength of a new rebel organization. Thus, they frequently face situations in which fighting seems the better of two bad options.

An alternative explanation of the link between geographic distance and additional civil war onsets suggests that civil wars should break out where they are feasible (Collier et al. 2009). Undeniably, the majority of civil war occurs far away from a state’s power center, where the government is most vulnerable (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Buhaug 2006). If a state moves its forces to fight one ethnic rebellion, it arguably enjoys better access to the neighboring peaceful groups than to groups far away from the conflict zone. Combining feasibility and diffusion arguments, civil wars should break out far away from ongoing intrastate conflicts, where government forces are absent. In contrast, we reiterate our argument that government forces near peaceful ethnic groups constitute the problem rather than the solution. By creating new grievances, they are more likely to contribute to additional rebellions than to prevent their emergence.

Another opportunity-based challenge to our argument suggests a spatial pattern of civil wars similar to our theoretical argument. Rebel organizations require weapons and military training to seriously challenge the state (Salehyan 2007, 219). Plausibly, they should be in greater supply close to ongoing conflict zones. Yet, existing empirical studies describe typical rebel organizations as weak and weapons and supplies as scarce (Fearon and Laitin 2003, 79–80). In the context of the Syrian uprising, Pearlman (2014) reports that a Free Syrian Army’s “local battalion’s arsenal was so limited that every three members shared a gun.” Thus, most rebels find it very challenging to contribute weapons to other groups without undermining their own survival chances.

Opportunity

Whereas our motivation-based mechanisms help explain where civil wars diffuse, our opportunity-based arguments account for its timing. If members of ethnic groups possess sufficient reason to rebel, they can observe ongoing civil wars to determine when the government is most vulnerable. Both the duration and count of active intrastate conflicts provide information to potential challengers about the right timing of rebellion.

First, ongoing civil wars weaken the government, and therefore open up opportunities for additional rebel groups to fight. Both theoretical and empirical studies of civil war show that armed conflicts are costly (cf. Powell 2006; Walter 2006; Hartzell and Hoddie 2007) and destroy state capacity (Collier et al. 2003; Walter 2004). Intrastate conflicts cost more resources as their duration increases, and thereby contribute to the domestic diffusion of civil war. Paying the ongoing costs of one civil war lowers state strength and shifts the balance of power in favor of additional groups that now stand a credible chance of obtaining government concessions through fighting. Even if

governments do not weaken to the extent that rebels would obtain outright victory, ongoing civil wars can contribute to the domestic diffusion of civil war. According to Hegre (2004, 249), “civil wars become long when no parties have the ability to achieve a decisive victory.” Thus, when governments reveal to potential challengers that they are unable to defeat active rebel organizations, potential challengers become more optimistic about their ability to inflict costs on the government (Slantchev 2003). They are then more likely to rebel because their chances of gaining concessions increase when the government fights protracted civil wars (Hartzell and Hoddie 2007, 59).

A similar dynamic unfolds when potential challengers observe the government fighting multiple civil wars at the same time. Government forces risk overstretching themselves, resulting in similar cost effects as described above (Walter 2009b, 129). At the very least, an increasing number of ongoing rebellions signals that the state is losing control over various parts of its territory quickly. Members of previously peaceful ethnic groups may start to believe that the state is vulnerable. Rather than capturing a long-term process of decreasing state capacity, the multiplication of civil wars occurs on a shorter time scale, particularly in weak states that previously portrayed an image of strength. The count of civil wars thus captures more abrupt processes of conflict diffusion than observed conflict duration. We capture our two opportunity arguments in the following hypotheses:

H_{2a} Observing longer ethnic civil wars makes peaceful ethnic groups more likely to rebel than observing shorter or civil wars.

H_{2b} Observing more ethnic civil wars makes peaceful ethnic groups more likely to rebel than observing fewer or no ethnic civil wars.

One challenge to our opportunity argument suggests that armed conflicts do not weaken governments, but actually increase their strength as they invest in state capacity. Famously, Tilly (1975) argues that interstate wars played an important role in creating powerful leviathans in Europe. However, research on state formation outside Europe finds that the predominant type of violent conflict of the past 60 years, intrastate conflict, weakens states (Thies 2010). Slater (2010, 5) refines the argument by showing that only “especially threatening” forms of political contention increase state capacity, which excludes most forms of ethnic civil wars.

Before describing our data and empirical strategy, we reiterate that our motivation and opportunity mechanisms are complementary rather than jointly necessary to trigger civil wars. While we argue that new onsets require both motivation and opportunity, ongoing civil wars need not create both. Where they provide motivation to previously peaceful groups, the opportunity for fighting may be present due to the peripheral area in which the original civil war takes place. When ongoing civil wars weaken the government and thus create the opportunity for potential challengers to rebel, these challengers may have suffered from various horizontal inequalities for some time. Therefore, our motivation and opportunity diffusion arguments should best be understood as independent pathways toward the conflict trap.

Data

To test our theoretical arguments, we draw on the Ethnic Power Relations dataset (EPR-ETH) that codes politically relevant ethnic groups and their access to state power between 1946 and 2009 (Cederman et al. 2010; Cederman,

Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013). EPR-ETH considers an ethnic group as politically relevant whenever group leaders make nationwide political claims on its behalf or the state discriminates group members politically, for example by restricting voting or citizenship rights. We drop all group-years from our data in states without a prior experience of civil war, as such experience is necessary for civil wars to diffuse domestically. Additionally, we consider only those states that contain at least three politically relevant groups: one group-government conflict dyad, and at least one observer group not currently engaged in conflict. This leaves a dataset of 49 states with 415 ethnic groups and 127 ethnic civil war onsets.

The main reason for relying on the EPR-ETH data is its spatial extension, GeoEPR-ETH, which codes the settlement patterns of ethnic groups over time (Wucherpfennig et al. 2011).⁴ According to GeoEPR-ETH coding rules, ethnic groups either concentrate in a particular region of a state or disperse throughout the entire territory. Their settlement patterns may change over time due to migration, expulsion, or changes in state borders. To measure our main explanatory variables, that is, the overlap between an ethnic group’s territory and ongoing civil wars as well as the distance to those conflicts, we rely on data describing Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) conflict zones between 1946 and 2006 gathered by Rustad et al. (2008). Overlap is the relative share of an ethnic group’s territory affected by one or more ongoing civil wars in the UCDP conflict zones data. Additionally, we compute the minimum distance between an ethnic group’s territory and a conflict zone for each group-year along with the maximum distance of an ethnic group’s territory to the state border, and then normalize the conflict distance by this measure. We thus obtain the distance to a conflict zone relative to the maximum distance to the state’s border. A relative measure is better suited for cross-country comparisons between territorially small states such as Sri Lanka and very large entities such as India than an absolute one.⁵

Figure 1 illustrates our approach. It displays conflict zones and ethnic settlement patterns in Chad.⁶ EPR-ETH considers five relevant ethnic groups in Chad between 1998 and 2002. Out of those, two groups, the Toubou and the Zhagawa, observe conflict directly on their territory.⁷ The other three groups, the Sara, the Hadjerai, and the Arabs, observe the civil war from a considerable distance. In line with our motivational mechanisms, we expect a higher risk of a Toubou or Zhagawa rebellion.

Turning to the opportunity mechanisms, we measure observed conflict duration as the maximum observed duration of any active ethnic civil war within a given country-year. We assess the maximum because the longest-running civil war should exert the strongest negative impact on

⁴We are not aware of any other encompassing dataset that would allow us to code potential ethnic challengers that also provides information on their geographic location. Cunningham’s (2011) database of self-determination movements and Chenoweth and Stephan’s (2011) data on resistance campaigns provide alternative conceptualizations of potential challengers. However, neither dataset provides the geographic coding necessary to test our theoretical argument.

⁵We discuss alternative operationalizations of distance in our Robustness section below and present these specifications in the Supplementary Material.

⁶The depiction of conflict zones is taken from Hallberg (2012, 227).

⁷Since the conflict fought by the Movement for Democracy and Justice in Chad (MDJT) is considered as non-ethnic by our conflict data, the Toubou are considered as currently peaceful despite the fact that the entire conflict took place on their territory.

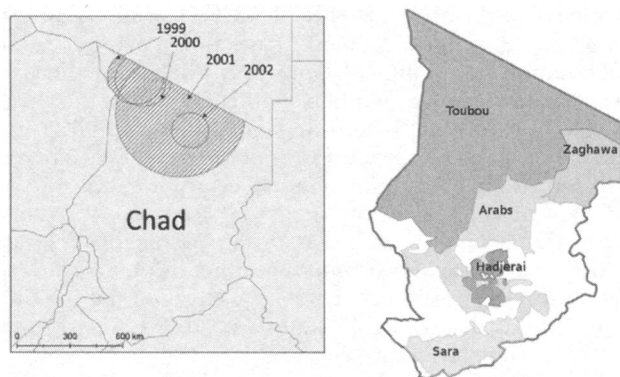


Figure 1. Examples of ethnic groups' settlement patterns (right) and conflict zones (left) in Chad

state capacity, and therefore provide the most relevant signal to potential challengers. Relying on EPR-ETH and its link to the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Database (ACD) (see Gleditsch et al. 2002; Harbom and Wallensteen 2010; Wucherpfennig et al. 2012), we code this variable for all peaceful ethnic groups that observe another ongoing ethnic civil war within the same state. Ethnic groups involved in any civil war neither observe their own conflict duration nor remain in the sample after they start fighting for the duration of their own civil war episode. We measure the observed conflict count, the sum of all ongoing ethnic civil wars in a state, as an alternative indicator of state capacity. Again, ethnic groups do not observe their own onsets.

In order to account for the possibility that common exposure to the same underlying factors rather than diffusion explains the clustering of civil wars within states, we include the standard controls in the civil war literature. Distance to the capital provides a rough proxy for state capacity vis-à-vis each individual ethnic group. More distant groups should be more capable of challenging the government than groups closer to the capital (Buhaug 2006). We compute this variable by combining information from the GeoEPR and CShapes datasets (Weidmann et al. 2010; Wucherpfennig et al. 2011). Exclusion from state power and recent loss of relative power within the state indicate ethnic grievances (Cederman et al. 2010; Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013). Both vary over time and should increase the risk of new onsets. The ratio of demographic group size to the sum of all ethnic groups in the government assesses relative bargaining power.⁸ Ethnic groups' capacity to challenge the government grows with increasing size. However, very large groups are usually already included in the government, and are therefore able to rely on nonviolent strategies to obtain their objectives (cf. Lacinia 2014). Thus, we expect an inverse U-shaped curve between group size and the likelihood of new onsets. The number of past civil wars for each group captures both grievances—by proxying for feelings of revenge and resentment resulting from prior fighting—and a control for temporal dependencies. Following previous research, we expect prior civil wars to increase the likelihood of recurrence (Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013, 64). In addition, we employ the cubic polynomial of

⁸Should the group itself be part of the government, the ratio is calculated with respect to the remaining government group(s).

time since the last conflict or independence to account for non-linear temporal dynamics (Carter and Signorino 2010). We derive all group-level variables from the EPR-ETH data.

At the country level, we control for lagged and logged GDP per capita and population size as the main indicators of state weakness (Hunziker and Bormann 2013). In line with existing findings, we expect larger and poorer states to face a higher risk of conflict (see Sambanis 2002). Finally, we include the number of ethnic groups in a state as suggested by Walter (2006, 2009b) as an indicator for the threat of additional rebellions. According to Walter, more groups imply more potential challengers, and more determination on behalf of the state to repress conflict before it breaks out.

Our outcome variable is the onset of ethnic civil war in a given year, as coded by the ACD2EPR dataset (Wucherpfennig et al. 2012), which links all EPR groups to rebel organizations in the Armed Conflict Database (ACD) (Gleditsch et al. 2002; Harbom and Wallensteen 2010). We code a new onset for a given state-group dyad in years with more than 25 battle deaths. Additionally, new onsets enter our dataset only when we do not observe fighting in the dyad in the two preceding years. Finally, we consider only civil wars in which a rebel group from the ACD dataset makes an exclusive claim to fight on behalf of an ethnic group in EPR-ETH and recruits its fighters from the same group (Wucherpfennig et al. 2012). By definition, warring ethnic groups cannot fight two civil wars simultaneously. As a result, ethnic groups that are currently involved in one ethnic civil war do not appear in our sample. Our Supplementary Material provides more detailed information on our sample of states, along with descriptive statistics and a correlation matrix of the major variables.

Analysis

We test our theoretical expectations about the domestic diffusion of civil war by estimating a series of logistic regressions with country-clustered standard errors. To ensure that the estimated associations between our main explanatory variables and new civil war onsets are not a result of high-dimensional correlations with other variables, we always display base models that include only the main explanatory variable but no controls other than peace years (see Achen 2005). This strategy also allows us to effectively demonstrate how strongly alternative explanations impact the original effect of our diffusion variables.

Location of Civil War Diffusion

Table 1 displays five logit models that test the link between the location of ongoing civil wars and new conflict onsets. The results lend strong support to our expectation that ethnic groups in the proximity of ongoing intrastate conflicts are more likely to experience new civil war onsets. More precisely, the positive effect of overlap between an ethnic group's settlement area and an ongoing civil war zone on civil war risk in Models 1 and 2 supports our expectation that groups directly affected by ongoing conflicts are more likely to rebel (H_{1a}). The results of Models 3 and 4 reinforce this conclusion: the farther away an ethnic group's settlement area is from an ongoing civil war, the less likely this group is to rebel (H_{1b}). The effect of our relative minimum distance measure is more robust to the inclusion of control variables and also substantively

Table 1. Domestic civil war diffusion and distance to conflict, 1946–2009

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Overlap	1.858*** (0.397)	1.055** (0.368)			
Rel. Conflict Distance			-4.390*** (0.556)	-4.346*** (0.629)	-2.261* (1.118)
Excl. × Confl. Dist.					-2.634* (1.333)
Excluded		1.333*** (0.275)		1.494* (0.678)	2.266** (0.855)
Downgraded		1.441** (0.443)		1.433* (0.682)	1.622* (0.701)
Relative Size		3.111 (2.209)		4.021 (4.751)	3.951 (4.816)
Relative Size ²		-4.254 (2.794)		-5.024 (6.289)	-6.579 (6.242)
Past Conflicts		0.907*** (0.179)		0.833* (0.355)	0.772** (0.284)
Log(Capital Distance)		0.264** (0.095)		0.230 (0.127)	0.016 (0.154)
Log(# of Groups)		-1.221*** (0.366)		-1.355** (0.420)	-1.311** (0.494)
Log(GDP p.c.)		0.064 (0.201)		-0.164 (0.250)	-0.169 (0.225)
Log(Population)		0.376 (0.272)		0.765* (0.370)	0.877** (0.339)
Peace Years	-0.182*** (0.051)	-0.155* (0.063)	-0.262* (0.115)	-0.327** (0.117)	-0.327** (0.125)
Peace Years ²	0.004 (0.003)	0.003 (0.003)	0.010* (0.005)	0.013* (0.005)	0.013* (0.006)
Peace Years ³	-0.00002*** (0.000)	-0.00002*** (0.000)	-0.0001*** (0.000)	-0.0002*** (0.000)	-0.0002*** (0.000)
Constant	-3.199*** (0.354)	-10.232* (4.909)	-1.205 (0.822)	-13.156 (7.433)	-14.475* (6.533)
Observations	12,945	11,013	10,094	10,092	9,433
Log-Likelihood	-651.407	-526.864	-267.978	-218.318	-211.694
AIC	1,312.813	1,081.728	545.957	464.635	453.388

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$., Country-clustered standard errors in parentheses.

stronger than the overlap variable.⁹ Whereas overlap separates only those groups directly affected by civil war from those that are not, relative conflict distance captures both the direct effect of ongoing violence on ethnic groups, and differences between potential challengers that are not directly affected. The stronger effect of the relative distance variable therefore suggests that civil wars diffuse above and beyond the direct experience of civil war violence on potential challengers' territory. We argue that this additional effect is due to attempts by the state to contain civil wars within a certain territory, which nearby ethnic groups perceive as threatening and repressive.

Model 5 provides support for our emulation mechanism. Interacting the distance to conflict zone with the political status of a potential challenger, we find that excluded ethnic groups are more likely to rebel in reaction to ongoing civil wars in their neighborhood than included groups (H_{1c}). Both the log-likelihood and the AIC statistic of Model 5 show improved model fit compared to the simpler additive Model 4. Figure 2 plots the difference in the predicted probability of civil war onsets for excluded and included groups as a function of distance to the nearest ongoing civil war. The graph clearly reveals that the

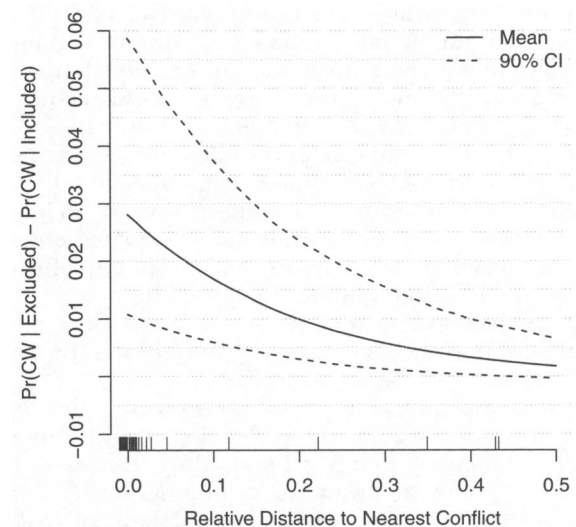


Figure 2. Difference in probability of new ethnic civil war onset between excluded and included groups as a function of relative distance to conflict (Model 5)

likelihood of civil war is greater for excluded ethnic groups as opposed to included groups and that the difference decreases as their settlement territory moves farther away from ongoing civil wars. In sum, even ethnic groups

⁹Since both overlap and relative distance are measured as shares of a total, they are on the same scale bounded by 0 from below and 1 from above, and we can directly compare the estimated effects even in non-linear logistic regressions.

that do not directly experience ongoing civil war violence have a higher likelihood of rebelling but this relationship becomes stronger for groups, which harbor preexisting grievances against the state.

The group-level control variables in Table 1 generally confirm earlier findings. Ethnic groups excluded from executive power or downgraded in their political status within the past two years are more likely to rebel than included groups. Conflict risk initially increases as groups grow in size but decreases after a threshold. Although the quadratic specification is not always statistically significant, it outperforms linear or logarithmic specifications of the group size variable in terms of model fit. The number of previous intrastate wars and increasing distance to the capital also increase the likelihood of new ethnic civil wars. In contrast, the number of groups in the country correlates negatively with additional onsets in line with Walter's (2009b) argument that ethnic groups anticipate that governments are not going to accommodate them in multiethnic states with many potential challengers. While our group-level variables affirm earlier findings, the estimates of our country-level controls are not as robust. Civil wars are still more likely in more populous states, although the variable fails to be statistically significant in Model 2. Interestingly, GDP per capita ceases to exert a negative effect on additional conflicts. We believe that the variable's lack of relevance in our models results from our sample, which includes only those states that have experienced civil war at least once. Our analysis does not include most stable and wealthy developed countries, which implies a much lower variation in our GDP per capita variable compared to studies that focus on all states. Another potential explanation is that our main explanatory variables also proxy opportunity factors to some extent. We now turn to test these arguments as expressed in Hypotheses H_{2a} and H_{2b} .

The Timing of Civil War Diffusion

So far our empirical results of internal civil war diffusion support motivation rather than opportunity arguments: we do not find a higher likelihood of additional onsets for ethnic groups far away from ongoing civil wars, and thus removed from the reach of government forces. Additionally, the predicted probability of civil war onsets is higher for aggrieved ethnic groups than for those included in the government coalition, thus reducing the plausibility of purely opportunity-based explanations such as the availability of weapons, which should affect all groups equally. Although the location of fighting seems to proxy motivational factors, we argue that ethnic groups consider opportunity factors when considering the timing of rebellion.

Table 2 displays four logit specifications that investigate our opportunity arguments in the domestic diffusion of civil war. Models 6 and 7 estimate the effect of the observed civil war duration on additional onsets, while Models 8 and 9 look at the observed length of civil war duration. States that are unable to rapidly subdue ethnic rebellions are likely to find themselves in an increasingly undesirable position relative to potential challengers. As an intrastate conflict between ethnic rebels and the government drags on, previously peaceful ethnic groups are more likely to take up arms against the government (H_{2a}).

Similarly, as governments face more and more rebellions, the risk of additional civil wars increases (H_{2b}). Although we find that more potential challengers

decrease the risk of additional civil war, in line with Walter's reputation theory (2009b, 124–27), more actual challengers increase this risk. Once civil war breaks out and other ethnic groups reach the conclusion that civil war is a feasible strategy, the risk of civil war diffusion increases with each additional rebellious ethnic group.¹⁰

Since the estimated effects of our control variables are almost identical to the results displayed in Table 1, we move on to discuss the substantive meaning of our findings. The difference in risk of civil war diffusion between states that manage to end their first rebellion quickly and those that fail to do so is substantial. A peaceful ethnic group from an average state in our sample observing another civil war that has lasted for ten years—just above the average duration of civil wars (Kreutz 2010)—is almost twice as likely to rebel as a group living in a state where an ongoing civil war lasts for only one year.

These results are even more striking when we consider that risk of civil war diffusion increases with the number of ethnic groups by state. As our analysis estimates the risk of civil war for each group individually, and most states in our sample include more than ten ethnic groups, the probability of diffusion increases with each additional observing ethnic group. Governments of ethnically heterogeneous societies thus face a higher risk of facing multiple challenges at the same time, and each additional rebellion increases this risk even further. An average ethnic group that observes one conflict is about 1.6 times as likely to rebel as a group in a state without currently active civil wars. If a government fights three civil wars, the risk of diffusion more than triples, and it grows even faster for each additional internal conflict. States such as India, Burma, Sudan, and Ethiopia that experienced multiple civil wars simultaneously exemplify these statistics.

We end our analytical section by presenting evidence that our main explanatory variables contribute to our ability to predict civil war onsets in conflict-prone states. Figure 3 displays three Receiver Operating Curves (ROC) that are based on the motivation and opportunity specifications with the best model fit statistics, respectively (Models 5 and 9). Additionally, we present a controls-only model that includes no information on the domestic diffusion dynamics. ROC plots move away from the 45-degree diagonal into the upper left corner as the ratio of true over false positives increases. In other words, the larger the area under the curve, the better the predictive capacity of the model. The graph clearly reveals that our diffusion variables improve the in-sample predictive capability of our model relative to a standard, non-diffusion model. Model 9, which includes the count of ongoing civil wars (dotted line), has better predictive power than the controls-only model (solid line) but performs worse than Model 5, which includes the interactive effect between exclusion and relative distance to civil wars (dashed line). To conclude, these results suggest that proximity to ongoing intrastate conflicts is a better predictor of the domestic diffusion of civil wars than observing their count or duration.

Alternative Explanations and Robustness Checks

So far this study shows that ethnic civil wars are more likely to diffuse within a state when ongoing civil wars are close to the territory of ethnic groups (motivation

¹⁰Walter (2009, 129) makes a similar observation about the number of ongoing peaceful and violent challenges.

Table 2. Domestic civil war diffusion and timing of new onsets, 1946–2009

	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Obs. Conflict Duration	0.055*** (0.015)	0.065** (0.021)		
Obs. Conflict Count			0.349*** (0.042)	0.423*** (0.072)
Excluded		1.307*** (0.292)		1.398*** (0.424)
Downgraded		1.724*** (0.484)		1.452*** (0.423)
Relative Size		4.886* (2.337)		3.113 (2.264)
Relative Size ²		-6.226* (3.031)		-4.323 (3.079)
Past Conflicts		0.615* (0.260)		0.743*** (0.175)
Log(Capital Distance)		0.289** (0.091)		0.252** (0.085)
Log(# of Groups)		-1.308*** (0.320)		-1.612*** (0.283)
Log(GDP p.c.)		0.207 (0.207)		0.042 (0.181)
Log(Population)		0.396 (0.252)		0.473* (0.198)
Peace Years	-0.140** (0.053)	-0.145* (0.065)	-0.178*** (0.039)	-0.209*** (0.050)
Peace Years ²	0.003 (0.002)	0.002 (0.003)	0.005*** (0.001)	0.006** (0.002)
Peace Years ³	-0.00001*** (0.000)	-0.00001*** (0.000)	-0.00004*** (0.000)	-0.00005*** (0.000)
Constant	-3.424*** (0.408)	-11.460* (4.908)	-3.460*** (0.353)	-10.726** (4.019)
Observations	12,945	11,013	12,945	11,013
Log-Likelihood	-658.717	-518.560	-642.364	-490.804
AIC	1,327.435	1,065.119	1,294.727	1,009.609

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$., Country-clustered standard errors in parentheses.

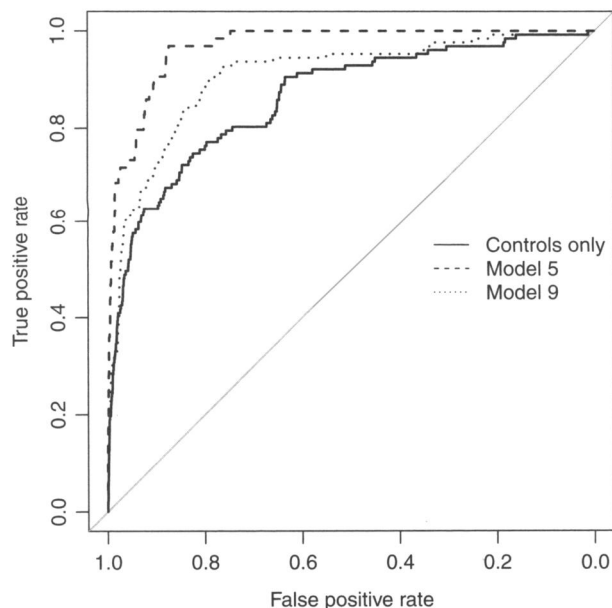


Figure 3. Predictive accuracy of diffusion variables (in-sample)

mechanisms), or when ongoing civil wars endure and when there are many ongoing intrastate conflicts (opportunity mechanisms). Next, we discuss alternative explanations that might undermine our results and probe the

robustness of our findings.¹¹ Three main concerns arise regarding our conclusions: endogeneity, omitted-variable bias, and concept validity of our main variables.

First, all diffusion studies suffer from potential endogeneity issues that threaten to invalidate our conclusions. We discuss “simultaneity” and “anticipation” as threats to our results. Simultaneity presents the more direct and obvious form of endogeneity in diffusion studies: within one country-year, multiple ethnic civil wars break out, and our estimate overstates the strength of the estimated relationship because all of these conflicts affect one another although only earlier conflicts should affect later conflicts. Our results indicate that additional conflicts become more likely when civil wars have been ongoing for several years, thereby providing evidence against the simultaneous outbreak of multiple rebellions within the same year. Potentially, new onsets that we attribute to diffusion from enduring civil wars actually started much earlier and remained below the battle-death threshold. This is unlikely as well, because we rely on UCDP’s low-intensity measure of intrastate conflicts that records a civil war when fighting results in at least 25 battle deaths.

Anticipation constitutes the more threatening type of endogeneity. From this vantage point, governments or potential challengers base their decision of fighting today on

¹¹Our supplementary material presents all robustness tests. We refer to all tables in the supplementary material by adding an “S” before the table number.

civil wars they expect to occur in the future. We can neither observe this possibility nor remove it by lagging our explanatory variables. However, the implication of this strategic interaction should strengthen our results rather than weaken them, because governments that anticipate the domestic civil war diffusion would concede to initial challengers rather than fight them. Thus, our sample is probably lacking a number of civil wars that could have broken out if diffusion were of no concern.

The second potential threat to the robustness of our results is omitted variables that invalidate the empirical tests. We recognize that our dataset encompasses a wide variety of countries with heterogeneous cultures, histories, and political systems. It also covers over half a century, during which major shifts in the international system occurred and may have had indirect effects on conflict patterns within states. This raises the concern that our results may be in part due to unobserved variance between and within states over time. Using group, country, and year fixed effects, we rule out a large number of alternative explanations but continue to find robust results for the key empirical relationships (Table S3).

A third potential concern is that our main explanatory variables are not valid measurements of the underlying concepts. For example, our normalization of distance to civil wars might not faithfully represent actual geographic distance. We demonstrate that our results are robust to a number of alternative specifications, such as actual geographic distance, distance to a conflict's center rather than its border (both S4), and different temporal lag structures for the conflict distance variable (S5).

Similarly, the duration and count of ethnic civil wars might not proxy state capacity but rather pick up ethnic groups' common exposure to radically exclusive and repressive government policies that are not captured by our other grievances variables. We address this concern in two ways. On the one hand, we employ Vreeland's (2008) X-Polity scores as a statewide proxy for repression levels. On the other, we replace our key explanatory variables with other plausible proxies of state capacity: both longer interstate wars and non-ethnic civil wars should decrease the capacity of the state to fight potential domestic challengers. Finally, some long-lasting civil wars might not be very intense and therefore do not capture decreasing state capacity. Instead, we add observed battle deaths in ongoing civil wars as a proxy (Lacina and Gleditsch 2005). In all cases, we find a positive effect on civil war diffusion (S6).

Conclusion

In this study, we investigated the domestic diffusion of ethnic civil wars. Our theory suggests that governments of multiethnic states that begin to fight one civil war enter a slippery slope that might lead to the subsequent outbreak of additional intrastate conflicts with other ethnic groups. More specifically, we argue that ongoing civil wars increase the motivation of nearby, currently peaceful ethnic groups to rebel. Where ongoing civil wars directly and negatively affect these ethnic groups, they create grievances among the affected group members. Moreover, ethnic groups with preexisting grievances that observe ongoing rebellions nearby are encouraged to rebel themselves in order to improve their situation. In addition to these motivational mechanisms, which predominantly account for the location of additional civil wars, ongoing intrastate conflicts affect the opportunity of potential challengers to fight, and

thereby explain the timing of diffusion. When the state fails to defeat ongoing rebellions, potential challengers realize that their own rebellions have a chance to result in concessions from the government. Similarly, when governments face multiple civil wars simultaneously, the risk of additional onsets increases.

Our work has important implications for efforts to prevent civil wars. Research by Toft (2002, 2003) and Walter (2006, 2009b) highlights that governments of multiethnic states fight rather than accommodate initial challengers to signal their resolve to other potential challengers. However, our findings indicate that governments enter a slippery slope once they start fighting one challenger. The negative externalities of fighting, coupled with the potential signal of weakness sent by a long campaign against a tenacious rebel group, can encourage additional ethnic groups to rebel. The findings of this study imply that governments do not need to worry only about their reputation, but also about their capacity to quickly defeat an original rebellion. Hence, our theory offers an explanation why some governments extend autonomy or power-sharing to initial and subsequent challengers while others do not.

The possibility that capacity considerations overwhelm reputational concerns and result in compromise solutions provides reasons for hope. But our findings suggest that nonviolent domestic diffusion dynamics may prove even more powerful in resolving conflicts. Recent research suggests that mechanisms of emulation and proximity also aid the transnational diffusion of nonviolent movements (Braithwaite et al. 2015). It is plausible that our framework of intrastate diffusion would hold for nonviolent movements as well as violent ones, specifically if nonviolent movements prove to be successful in extracting policy concessions, as they seem to be (Chenoweth and Stephan 2011). Where governments allow nonviolent movements to emerge instead of repressing them, a virtuous cycle of peaceful political engagement for potential challengers may emerge.

Our study also identifies important avenues for future research. Our findings indicate that potential challengers benefit from additional rebellions by other ethnic groups. But most existing research emphasizes the conflictual relationships of rebel groups within the same intrastate conflict (Christia 2012; Cunningham et al. 2012; Staniland 2012; Metternich et al. 2013). Thus, in addition to studying alliance formation between active rebel groups (Bapat and Bond 2012), future research should ask when, and how, rebel organizations seek to encourage the outbreak of new civil wars in order to broaden their front against the government. This requires additional theoretical work on multi-actor interactions, as well as more accurate data on battle locations and outcomes. The development of event datasets, such as the UCDP Georeferenced Event Data (Sundberg et al. 2012), will enable conflict researchers to model a more dynamic interaction between multiple rebel organizations, potential challengers, and the government—one that reflects changes in the balance of power throughout multiple civil wars. Additional research in this area promises a better understanding of the local drivers of civil war dynamics; it thereby will contribute to building more robust post-conflict orders (cf. Autesserre 2007).

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