

Civil War Paths

Thursday, 22 June 2023 09:00 (1h 30m)

How do conflicts turn violent? How do civil wars unfold over time? How do distinct dynamics of civil war affect the post-war potential for peace? These are the driving questions of the Civil War Paths project “Understanding Civil War from Pre- to Post-War Stages: A Comparative Approach,” funded by a £1.2m UK Research and Innovation Future Leaders Fellowship. Addressing these questions, the papers in this panel analyse the evolution of civil wars in a subset of cases selected for the project from a process-oriented, actor-centered, and relational approach.

Shesterinina and Livesey outline the theoretical framework and research design of the project. They argue that civil wars follow different paths based on how they emerge, unfold, and end or transform and trace the foundations of different paths to the organisational origins of non-state armed groups in clandestine activities, social movements and state splinters. How non-state armed groups form shapes their embeddedness in the territories they seek to control and their capacity to engage with state forces. However, their interactions with other non-state, state, population, and external actors can change these trajectories in the course of hostilities.

Based on this starting point, empirical papers explore path-dependent and endogenous dynamics in cases that represent each of these formations, based on immersive fieldwork in the areas, to understand whether and how armed group origins condition the evolution of civil wars. Ketola examines the case of Nepal where the origins of the CPN-M as a clandestine political party had a significant effect on its strategy and forms of rebel governance. Yet, examining a wartime shift from clandestine to organised path, Ketola argues that endogenous dynamics are key to understanding post-war legacies. Problematising the social movement origins of armed groups in the case of Lebanon, Rouhana uses a bottom up approach to understand the conditions of possibility for violence at the brink of the war in 1975 and how violence was sustained for the next 15 years at the popular level. Álvarez-Vanegas asks whether the clandestine origins of the FARC-EP led to distinct organisational forms having roots in the peasant movement and contentious politics in Colombia. He traces the transformation of the organisation as a result of both internal and external dynamics. Sayra van den Berg focuses on the case of South Sudan where the origins of armed groups in regime fragmentation, particularly a coup d'état attempt, have been widely acknowledged but can be challenged by applying the combined memory studies and transitional justice framework as the very framing of the violence as a coup shaped mobilisation on both sides in the conflict.

Combined, the papers demonstrate the importance of disaggregating organisational trajectories of non-state armed groups for our understanding of different paths civil wars follow and redefine civil war as a complex process that connects the pre-war, war and post-war stages of conflict through evolving interactions between states, non-state armed groups, local populations, and external actors involved. These findings have implications for future studies of civil war and policy on this dominant form of contemporary armed conflict.

Track Classification: Political Violence, Conflict and Transnational Activism