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Why Good Governance Does Not Defeat Insurgencies

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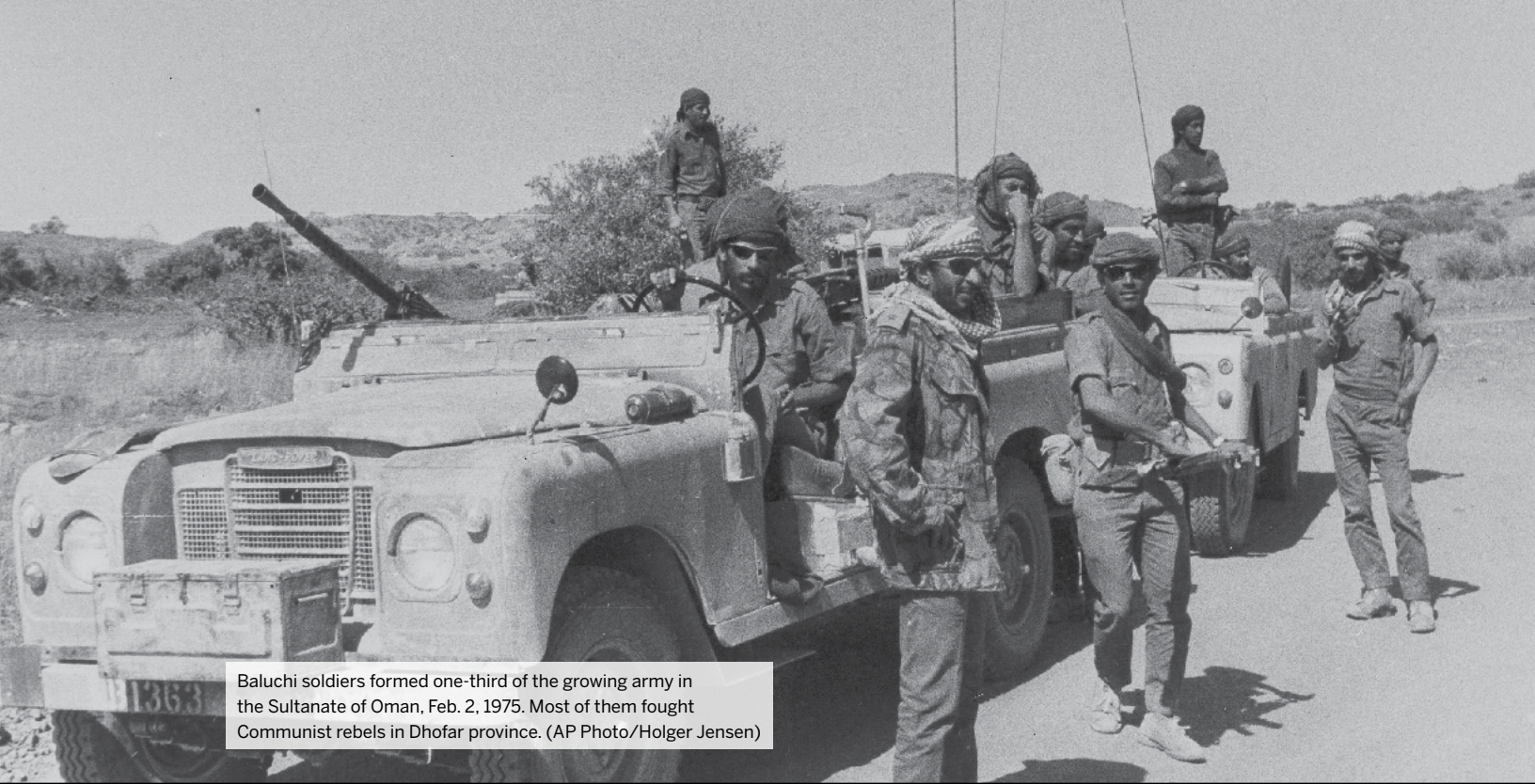
This policy brief is based on “The ‘Hearts and Minds’ Fallacy: Violence, Coercion, and Success in Counterinsurgency Warfare,” which appears in the summer 2017 issue of *International Security*.

Bottom Lines

Unnecessary reforms. Conventional wisdom holds that defeating an insurgency requires states to make liberalizing, democratizing reforms that address popular grievances. Liberal great powers such as the United States thus press reforms upon counterinsurgent client states as the path to success and long-term political stability. Such reforms are, however, unnecessary for counterinsurgency success.

Violence against civilians. Counterinsurgency success is also thought to require avoiding unnecessary harm to civilians. In fact, breaking the flow of resources to the insurgency, often through the brute-force control of civilians, is critical to success.

Unattainable political goals. Attempts by liberal great powers such as the United States to reduce violence in client states facing insurgency by introducing political reforms are likely to fail. Further, efforts to advance those reforms will raise human, moral, and financial costs for the intervening great power as well as for client states.



Baluchi soldiers formed one-third of the growing army in the Sultanate of Oman, Feb. 2, 1975. Most of them fought Communist rebels in Dhofar province. (AP Photo/Holger Jensen)

Liberal great powers that intervene to defend a client state confronting an insurgency frequently urge the threatened government to make liberalizing, democratizing reforms. This approach to counterinsurgency, which I call the “good governance” approach, is grounded in the belief that bad governance causes insurgency and thus good governance defeats it. Good governance includes establishing a more representative political system, fighting corruption, creating entrepreneurial opportunities, respecting human and civil rights, implementing the rule of law, investing in health care and education, and taking great care to avoid military harm to civilians for fear of creating more insurgents. These reforms are expected to increase popular support for the state while weakening the insurgency politically and militarily.

Research into three of the campaigns most often presented as examples of successful counterinsurgency—the 1946–60 Malayan Emergency, in which Britain defeated the Malayan National Liberation Army; the 1965–75 British-backed campaign in Dhofar, Oman; and the 1979–92 U.S.-supported campaign in El Salvador—reveals that good governance reforms are unnecessary for counterinsurgency success. Defeating insurgents instead requires brute force against civilians and the government’s accommodation of rival elites—what I call the “coercion theory” of

counterinsurgency success. Counterinsurgency success is an ugly business with high human and ethical costs despite liberal states' efforts to make it otherwise.

Unnecessary reforms

The claim that good governance should defeat insurgency has not undergone rigorous examination. Much research on counterinsurgency assumes that good governance produces success and investigates tactics widely believed to be crucial for that success, such as the short-term provision of goods to civilians.

Evidence supporting the claim that good governance defeats insurgencies is lacking. An examination of the counterinsurgency campaigns in Malaya, Dhofar, and El Salvador finds limited or no reforms before insurgent defeat and no increase in popular support for the governments in question. Although Malaysia achieved independence in 1957, the British had planned this since 1942; it was not a concession to the insurgency. In Dhofar, successive sultans resisted forming a more inclusive political system or ejecting Oman's British advisers. In El Salvador, the government adopted a more permissive attitude toward political activity late in the war than it had during the conflict's early years. This shift, however, merely returned to prewar levels of political oppression. The government still assassinated local opposition leaders and targeted communities with brute force. Salvadoran reforms followed the peace agreement rather than leading to it. In two of the three cases, Malaya and Dhofar, instead of costly reforms, the governments formed coalitions with rival elites—warlords, insurgent defectors, political rivals, or communal leaders—to gain information and military power to fight the insurgency. Rival elites included corrupt or brutal individuals and groups that liberal states generally protest against working with. Governments used these augmented capabilities to support their violent efforts to break the insurgents' will to fight, a process usually taking several years.

Violence against Civilians

The state's calculated, continued use of brute force against civilians has been critical to counterinsurgency success. Success requires cutting the flow of resources from the populace to the insurgency. In all three cases discussed here, the government's effort to break the insurgency's will by denying it resources included the use of violence against civilians.

In Malaya, British forces carried out vast clearing operations, burning down communities and forcing approximately half a million civilians into prison camps, where their movements and access to food and medical care were tightly controlled. More than 30,000 people were deported and 34,000 were held without trial for more than twenty-eight days. The British also practiced collective punishment and conducted a systematic terrorism campaign against civilians. Despite the British conviction that popular support was crucial for success, the government never gained it, yet it still defeated the insurgency.

In Dhofar, British-led forces turned villages into armed camps, where civilian behavior was monitored and controlled, and used artillery and aerial bombing in civilian-inhabited areas. Popular support for the government in Dhofar did not increase over time. Again, the government defeated the insurgency. In El Salvador, the government killed nonviolent political opponents, including priests and Archbishop Óscar Romero, torturing some to death and leaving their severed heads on city buses for morning commuters to find. Government forces systematically destroyed villages and raped, tortured, and killed peasants in areas supportive of the insurgency. In El Salvador, too, the public did not shift its support to the government; the fundamental division within the state over its future remained. The Salvadoran war, unlike the Malaya and Dhofar conflicts, ended with a peace agreement rather than the military defeat of the insurgency. The government's use of force did not prevent it from staying in power. The violence of these campaigns challenges the good governance theory's assumption that deliberate government harm to civilians prevents counterinsurgent success.

The Malaya, Oman, and El Salvador cases provide empirical confirmation of the coercion theory's most provocative predictions: successful counterinsurgency campaigns may require direct uses of violence against civilians and do not require reforms or popular support for the government.

Unattainable Political Goals

Liberalizing reforms are not only unnecessary for achieving counterinsurgency success; they are also difficult to implement, for five reasons.

First, governments that are willing and able to make reforms do so, leaving only the most challenging cases of full-blown insurgency.

Second, a government willing to make reforms may not have the ability to execute them, even with patron support. Making reforms to create a more representative, distributive, and just state has high costs for those with power and wealth. Democratization, for example, may cause leaders (and their supporters) to lose power. With the loss of power comes the loss of wealth in states where governing is primarily about patronage rather than public service. Reducing corruption similarly means reducing opportunities for elites to continue prospering from their position and helping their followers prosper, which in turn reduces their power in a political context in which patronage and influence determine power and wealth.

Third, violence hardens actors' positions and changes their calculations because it can intensify their sense of playing a zero-sum game and thus make it more challenging to achieve compromises needed to resolve the conflict.

Fourth, violence exacerbates the difficulties associated with establishing democracy in a non-democratic state, and democratization efforts may even increase violence. Perceptions of politics as a zero-sum game may persist as the democratization process begins. Those with power fear losing everything, while those who dream of gaining power may insist on taking everything. Compromise remains difficult and political contestation can escalate to violence, particularly in ethnically divided states.

Fifth, there is an inherent tension between the strategic goals of the good governance approach and the strategic necessities of defeating an insurgency. The government's need to accommodate warlords or other elites to gain intelligence on the insurgency and fighting power and to control the populace undercuts the good governance goal of empowering and serving the populace.

Conclusion

Counterinsurgency success requires the use of force against civilians and the accommodation of rival elites, sometimes including those responsible for horrific acts. By contrast, good governance reforms are unnecessary and often unattainable. Before intervening to support client states' counterinsurgency efforts, Western policymakers should assess the value of keeping client elites in power compared to the high moral and human costs of a successful counterinsurgency campaign.

Related Resources

Karl Hack, "The Malayan Emergency as Counterinsurgency Paradigm," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (June 2009), pp. 383–414.

Douglas J. Macdonald, *Adventures in Chaos: American Intervention for Reform in the Third World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

D. Michael Shafer, *Deadly Paradigms: The Failure of U.S. Counterinsurgency Policy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988).

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