Structural Integrity and Cohesion in Insurgent Organizations: Evidence from Protracted Conflicts in Ireland and Burma*

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Abstract

Why insurgent organizations stay together over time and why they maintain the fight under stress are questions of major concern for our understanding of war duration, conduct, and outcome. *Structural integrity* is the property of an organization remaining as a single intact entity, while *cohesion* refers to the creation and maintenance of cooperative effort towards the attainment of the organization's goals. Although closely related, the conflation of structural integrity and cohesion is problematic. The body of the paper is a structured comparative analysis of two cases, the Irish Republican Army and the Karen National Union. First, this analysis demonstrates that cohesion and structural integrity are discrete concepts that each helps us to understand part of why, and how, insurgent organizations keep up the fight. Thus, despite much recent emphasis on "spoilers" in the conflict literature, understanding why armed organizations stay together or fragment is not enough. We also need to understand what makes insurgents perform effectively in the organization's interest. Second, it points to some limitations of existing theories of structural integrity and cohesion in insurgent organizations, and allows the author to conclude by suggesting some fruitful avenues for future research on these dynamics.

*"As far as people like I were concerned, as Martin [McGuinness] said at that '86 Ard Fheis…*i *we believed that anyone who left then, the only place that they were going was home. Those who stayed with him and the leadership would lead us to the Republic. Right? I always remember him saying that. And I also remember him saying that they would be the cutting edge of the IRA, which would also lead us to the Republic…"*

Anonymous former Provisional Irish Republican Army volunteer, author interview, 2007.

"I never went into a battle. I am a coward. I never wanted to die. Just to kill. So I always fought in an unconventional way. A guerrilla way. I want to let them know that they can't destroy us. We can also destroy them. We can kill them. And we can still kill them up to now."

Saw Mutu Saepo, General Officer Commanding, Karen National Liberation Army, author interview, 2008.

INTRODUCTION

The quote from a former Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) volunteer above refers to a conflict within the PIRA at its 1986 *Ard Fheis*. At the convention, the organization's membership debated whether it would change its constitution, acknowledge the legitimacy of the partitioned Dublin and Stormont Parliaments, and begin to give up the armed struggle in favor of electoral politics. Despite disagreement over the passage of the controversial constitutional change, the PIRA stayed almost entirely intact. A handful of members left, forming the Continuity IRA. The rest, like the volunteer quoted here, kept faith that the leadership of the PIRA would fulfill its promise of a united Ireland. The PIRA had itself been formed in 1969

from the splitting of the IRA into two factions, the Provisional IRA and the Official IRA. In 1997, another faction, the Real IRA, broke from the PIRA, again over disagreements about the use of armed rather than peaceful means. Specialists on the conflict have long speculated over the varied nature of the splits in 1969, 1986, and 1997. A range of explanations exists including changes in personal loyalty to the leadership, changes in the composition of the organization's membership, and changes in the capacity of the organization to fund and arm itself. The question that these events raise is *what explains why insurgent organizations fragment or stay together*?

The second quotation points to a different dynamic. The Karen National Union (KNU) is a rebel armed organization that has been engaged in a 60-year war for autonomy from the Burmese state. Like the IRA it was rent by ideological disputes for much of the 1950s and 1960s and after a period of stability in the 1970s and 1980s, experienced a series of further splits from 1995 to 1998, and another in 2007 (Human Rights Watch, 2002, Thawnghmung, 2008). Regardless of any shifts in strategy, the ability of the PIRA leadership to ensure that its members worked in harmony towards the organization's interests was greatly hampered by the prevalence of informers and spies in its membership and the self-serving criminal activities of large parts of its membership. In contrast, for most of its existence, despite a high level of fragmentation, the KNU's young soldiers have fought fiercely and have killed thousands of Burmese soldiers with ruthless efficiency (Anderson, 2004, Falla, 1990). Even today, with barely enough bullets or food to survive, the KNU continues to inflict substantial damage against the enemy, with a kill-ratio on the order of 50:1 vis-à-vis the Burmese military. The second question that arises from these dynamics is *what explains the commitment of an insurgent organization's members in war?*

Why insurgent organizations stay together over time and why they maintain the fight under stress are questions of major concern for our understanding of war duration, conduct, and outcome. Although closely related, the conflation of these two dynamics is problematic. *Structural integrity* is the property of an organization remaining as a single intact entity, while *cohesion* refers to the creation and maintenance of cooperative effort towards the attainment of the organization's goals. As this paper will show, structural integrity and cohesion do not necessarily covary. Thus, while analysts of insurgent organizations should take both dynamics into account, they are the result of different causal mechanisms and should be conceptually distinguished. In this sense, the focus on "spoilers" in the conflict literature is valuable but also insufficient (Kydd and Walter, 2003, Nilsson, 2008, Pearlman, 2009, Stedman, 1997). It may be true that the greater the number of armed organizations that exist in a given conflict, the more difficult will be resolution (Cunningham, 2006), but organizational fragmentation (or its inverse, structural integrity) by itself cannot explain the duration, outcome, or recurrence of armed conflict. Rather, it needs to be supplemented with an understanding of what makes members of an armed organization continue to contribute effort towards the goals set out by the organization's leadership under extreme personal risk. Understanding why armed organizations stay together is simply not enough.

Structural integrity and cohesion have widespread relevance to the study of conflict, including to the internationalized insurgencies the U.S. currently faces in Iraq and Afghanistan. Learning that armed Sunni tribes could be detached from the foreign-led insurgency has proven crucial in lowering the intensity of conflict in Iraq since the "surge" of 2007 (Ricks, 2009). Similarly, to effectively combat the Taliban in Afghanistan, the U.S. requires knowledge of both the degree of centralized authority in the Taliban and the commitment of rank-and-file soldiers to

the Taliban's objectives. As David Kilcullen (2009) has recently argued, many of the fighters the U.S. faces in Afghanistan may be "accidental guerrillas." That is, while many fighters neither share the Taliban's goals nor have any loyalty to that organization, they put up stern and effective opposition when the U.S. engages them in the field.

Until recently, scholarship on these distinct but related dynamics has been divided along sub-disciplinary lines. The study of commitment in combat has been the preserve of military sociology while the study of the fragmentation of armed organizations has mostly been limited to political science and international relations. In recent years, however, as the latter have begun to draw on the sociology of the military, some conceptual confusion has arisen (Pearlman, 2009, Pearlman, 2007, Staniland, 2009, Weinstein, 2007). Both sets of scholars have been using the same term, "cohesion," to represent these two quite different dynamics. For clarity, I disambiguate the concept. I retain the term cohesion for the sense in which it was first employed by military sociologists to explain the effectiveness and resilience of armies in battle.[ii] As no perfect antonym exists, the opposite of cohesion can be termed *disintegration*. It can be seen in "the prevalence of internal conditions which make effective military operations difficult, if not, in some cases, impossible. These conditions are desertion, mutiny, assassination of leaders, and other factors, such as drug usage, which destroy discipline and combat effectiveness" (Gabriel and Savage, 1978:31). I term the property of an organization remaining unified, *structural integrity*.[iii] The opposite of structural integrity can be termed *fragmentation*. It refers to the splitting of an organization into two or more separate organizations. It is distinct from disintegration, which refers only to individual or group dissent or desertion. Disintegration doesn't include the phenomenon of individuals or groups leaving the organization to set up or join an alternate organization.

It is important to stress that cohesion and structural integrity are organization-level concepts rather than a group-level ones. A group can be defined broadly as "two or more interdependent individuals who influence one another through social interaction" (Forsyth, 1999:5), while an organization is defined as a collection of individuals who are engaged in a specific type of mutually oriented activity, with one or more criteria of membership, and the presence of an authority (and, or constitutional) structure (Hechter, 1987:16). Groups can exist within and without organizations. "Armed groups" are thus something of a misnomer. In civil war contexts we are referring to non-state armed entities that have the defining characteristics of organizations not groups. For this reason, the scope of this paper is limited to what are typically called insurgent organizations.[iv] Insurgent organizations must deal both with the challenge of fostering commitment to achieving to the organization's goals among its members and with ensuring that the organization maintains its structural integrity.[v]

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First it shows that a singular focus on either structural integrity or cohesion is likely to provide, at best, a partial explanation of the dynamics of insurgent organizations. Unlike political parties or firms, the main task of insurgent organizations is to fight. Efforts to explain the causes and effects of factionalism, which are adapted from political economy models of party politics and industrial economics, are ill-suited to the context of an insurgency. In war we need to understand how, when, and why members of armed organizations are willing to kill and die. Conversely, simply understanding the motivations of individual insurgents is insufficient to explain the broader dynamics of conflict duration or outcome. We also need to understand the degree to which these motivated individuals remain part of a stable organizational structure. Second, the paper demonstrates that while we there is great value in bringing together structural integrity and cohesion, the causes

and effects of these dynamics have to be analytically decoupled. Cohesion and structural integrity in armed organizations result from different causal processes and do not necessarily covary. The appearance of organizational unity may mask the fact that soldiers refuse to fight, or simply fight in their own, rather than the organization's interest. Similarly, armed organizations, especially those like the Taliban that rely on an already decentralized command structure, can be subject to fragmentation, while still maintaining the fight against the enemy very effectively. Any unifying framework must ensure that it incorporates the operation of multiple mechanisms at different levels of analysis.

In the body of the paper that follows, through a structured analysis of the two cases introduced above, the IRA and the KNU, I demonstrate that cohesion and structural integrity are discrete concepts that each helps us to understand part of why, and how, insurgent organizations keep up the fight. This analysis points to two potentially fruitful avenues for future research on these dynamics: on structural integrity, one causal factor that appears to be consistently important, but which has been neglected in the comparative literature thus far, is the effect of strategic interactions with state security forces. Unless interactions in the field of combat, intelligence, and diplomacy are controlled for by analyzing multiple cases (which could be sub-national) in conjunction, then we may misattribute a factor internal to the organization as a fundamental cause of fragmentation, when it is in fact only a proximate cause. With respect to cohesion, greater attention should be paid to the role of organizational socialization, or the extent to which members come to identify the organization's goals as their own over time. The decision to stay in, rather than join, an armed organization is important in its own right, but is a dynamic that is often missed by a narrow focus on insurgent recruitment (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008, Viterna, 2006).

INTEGRATING COHESION AND STRUCTURAL INTEGRITY IN EMPIRICAL

RESEARCH

This section discusses the challenges of operationalizing cohesion and structural integrity. Like any research project on illicit entities, the simple collection of reliable raw data is a significant obstacle. However, with the appropriate research strategy, a surprising volume of relevant data can be gathered (Nordstrom and Robben, 1995, Sluka, 2007). Once an armed organization stays together it may be said to have structural integrity. However, there are no degrees of "staying togetherness." Thus, in empirical research the focus has to be on the degree of fragmentation. The main concerns are with its frequency and with the relative size of units that split from the original organization. The task must then be to explain the conditions that precipitate splits at any given moment and which make splits of different intensity more likely. I term the tendency for there to be multiple splits *extensive fragmentation* and the tendency for individual splits to be larger *intensive fragmentation*. Extensive fragmentation can be measured by the number of splits that an organization and its sub-organizations experience over time. This measure could be annualized to control for the length of the organization's existence. If an organization existed for 20 years before its dissolution and demobilization and experienced four splits over its life time, it would have an extensive fragmentation score of 4/20 or 0.200. Intensive fragmentation can be measured by the proportion of the organization's membership that splits to form a new organization. If the same organization has approximately 3,000 members, and a group of 250 leave to set up a new organization, this gives an intensive fragmentation score of 0.083. Because it is proportional, intensive fragmentation refers only to a single split. Once a new organization is formed, each case of intensive fragmentation in the future has to be analyzed separately. In isolation, intensive and extensive fragmentation scores

are meaningless, but could be productively employed in comparative research. It has to be borne in mind, however, that fragmentation by itself provides only a partial explanation for outcomes of interest like the duration and conduct of war. For more complete explanations, we must also take account of cohesion.

Cohesion entails a positive component that structural integrity does not. Thus, we can set out indicators for *both* cohesion and disintegration. Cohesion implies that the organization continues to exist, but it focuses on the production of effort towards a common goal, above and beyond mere structural integrity. Cohesion refers to the extent to which soldiers follow orders at a minimum and also to the extent to which they take actions intended to further the goals of the organization. Here I take the goals of the organization to be synonymous with the goals of the leadership. The leadership may be an individual or group but it has a formally distinct status from the rest of the organization. No agreement exists on how cohesion should be operationalized, and unlike fragmentation, it is difficult (if not impossible) to apply a numerical metric to it. Even in state militaries where data is much more rigorously collected, there is yet to be a satisfactory quantitative analysis of cohesion (Henderson, 1985). As a consequence, assessments of cohesion remain, for now, necessarily qualitative.

The best approach to measuring cohesion and disintegration is to use controlled, contextualized research designs that allow us to capture variation, while controlling for other factors. For example, the extent to which orders are followed in insurgent organizations can be seen especially during ceasefires (entered into in good faith) when orders to halt attacks on the enemy are observed. In other cases, it can be seen in the willingness of fighters to make extreme sacrifices, even including suicide, on the battlefield. Disintegration may be seen in rough data

from post-conflict revelations of the presence of government agents in the organization, the volume of assassinations of the organization's own members in "policing" actions, and the prevalence of activity, such as self-serving criminality, that runs counter to the purported goals of the organization. Some of these data will be available for some organizations but not for others. Thus, comparative research on cohesion across different organizations poses a greater challenge than is the case for structural integrity. More feasible, as the following section demonstrates, are comparisons within the same organization over time. Making an assessment of cohesion requires the use of as many independent sources as possible including interviews, ethnographic fieldwork, and the consultation of primary and secondary documentation. This is the approach that has been followed below. Despite the difficulties of gathering data on cohesion, there is no excuse to ignore it.

In the two case studies that follow, I first give the historical background of each organization, situating them in the context of the conflict. I then set out the level of extensive and intensive fragmentation in each organization. As noted, in insurgent organizations, cohesion is more difficult to observe. Here I exploit different empirical strategies to exemplify the causes of variation in cohesion. In the IRA case, cohesion varies over time, so where appropriate, I disaggregate these periods and highlight episodes of transition between high and low levels of cohesion and disintegration. Although these within case temporal variations are not strictly independent of one another, they allow us to evaluate some of the prevailing hypotheses regarding cohesion. In the KNU case, because data on cohesion is much scarcer, especially prior to 1990, I assess cohesion cross-sectionally between the KNU and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), which split from it in 1995. Evidence for this section comes from published and unpublished sources as well as six months of fieldwork in Northern Ireland and

the Thai-Burma border area. In a following section, I compare the IRA and KNU, and use the evidence put forward to evaluate the main theories of structural integrity and cohesion.

The Irish Republican Army

The IRA is one of the most extensively studied armed organizations in the world. Most of the emphasis has been on the period 1969-2007, commonly known as *the Troubles*, during which time, over 3,600 people lost their lives (Bean, 2007). By the early 1960s in Northern Ireland, severe state repression had dealt a major blow to the IRA's continued existence as a military force. Public protest against the harsh treatment of Irish Republicans at the hands of security forces in the North or South was muted, and there was no major public enthusiasm for the revival of the armed struggle. The IRA had itself decided by 1954 to prohibit any violent actions against state forces in the South. Coogan (1995:65) goes so far as to state that by 1962, "there was no IRA". In this year, the Army Council of the rump IRA issued the following statement, "The leadership of the Resistance Movement has ordered the termination of 'The Campaign of Resistance to British Occupation'… all arms and other materials have been dumped and all full-time active service volunteers have been withdrawn" (in Coogan, 1995:66). The 1966 commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Easter Rising rekindled an awareness of Irish Republicanism in a new generation of Northern Irish Catholics (Taylor, 1997), but by the late 1960s the IRA still had only about 50 or 60 members.[vi] Moreover, in the public eye, at least since its total defeat in the so-called "Border Campaign" of the 1950s, the IRA had begun to recede as a locus of Republican resistance. During the late 1960s, it was the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement that gained considerable momentum with many thousands of Catholics marching for their rights. However, the movement was met by a violent response from Protestants. Amid the

hostility, almost 1,600 Catholic families were forced to flee their homes (Moloney, 2002). Catholics in Northern Ireland came to demand protection, resulting in a potentially massive groundswell of support on which the IRA could capitalize if it acted quickly. However, the IRA did nothing. "The attacks by Loyalist mobs, aided by B Specials and police, on Catholic areas of Belfast exposed the inability of the IRA to defend Catholic areas" (Dillon, 1999:7). Because of its inaction, Catholics turned on the IRA, mocking in graffiti that the letters I-R-A stood for *I-Ran-Away*. Ultimately, local elements erected barricades in Belfast and created Citizens Defence Committees (CDCs) that were not part of the IRA (Feeney, 2002).

Structural Integrity in the IRA

The split of 1969-70 was as much a battle among political entrepreneurs for control of the flood of potential new recruits as it was the fragmentation of a pre-existing organization. Certainly there was little love among most of the few rank-and-file for IRA Chief of Staff Cathal Goulding. Although the IRA was characterized by a long institutional legacy in which the Chief of Staff, in consultation with the Army Council, controlled the direction of the organization, by the late 1960s the organization was internally divided over ideology and tactics. The IRA's leadership had taken an ideological turn to the left under Cathal Goulding and Tomas MacGiolla, and when the former began loading the Army Council with his cronies, rebels justified the split by accusing him of attempting to make the IRA into his private army. Based in Dublin, far from the violence unfolding in the North, Goulding vastly underestimated the upsurge in demand for armed protection. Because he and much of the rest of the IRA Army Council in Dublin didn't share the same experience of Protestant pogroms in the Catholic ghettoes of the North, there was a strong feeling that the Army Council no longer represented the interests of the people.

Goulding's authority was in tatters. Eventually, it was men in the IRA with a traditionalist philosophy, such as Leo Martin, Joe Cahill, Billy McKee, Seamus Twomey and Gerry Adams, all of who would later become prominent in the PIRA, who came to join and dominate the CDCs and gain legitimacy as the vanguard of Republicanism. The split of January 1970 was intensive, with perhaps half of its small membership, by then mostly limited to senior figures, leaving to create the PIRA (*intensive fragmentation:* 0.500).[vii]

The other half of the IRA became known as the Official IRA (OIRA), and its members as "the stickies." By 1974 the OIRA had practically wound up its campaign, and many of its disgruntled members left to form the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) or to join the PIRA. Meanwhile, the PIRA would main intact until 1986. Following on from the decision to wage a long war, the leader of Sinn Féin, the PIRA's political wing, Gerry Adams, and his close confidents were convinced by the electoral success of Sinn Féin's capitalization on the 1981 hunger strikes that a political solution to the conflict was both feasible and necessary (Bean, 2007, Beresford, 1989). However, Adams was well aware of the failures of past attempts to persuade Republicans of the virtues of participatory politics (Moloney, 2002). Abstentionism – the refusal to take seats in the Dublin and Stormont Parliaments – was a long held tenet of IRA policy going back to partition of Ireland in 1921. At the September 1986 PIRA General Army Convention (GAC), the organization passed resolutions allowing members of Sinn Féin to contest elections in the partition parliaments. However, a number of members of the Army's Executive Council (one level broader than the Army Council) contested the legitimacy of the GAC's resolutions, and split off to form their own organization, which ultimately became known as the Continuity Irish Republican Army (CIRA). A faction would also split from Sinn Féin and set itself up as Republican Sinn Féin under the leadership of Ruairí Ó'Brádaigh. However,

Adams's politicking had been largely successful. The intensity of the split was very low. Although we cannot be precise, the best estimates are that as few as five percent of the organization departed (*intensive factionalism*: 0.050).[viii]

Over the course of the early 1990s, the PIRA, along with Loyalist paramilitary organizations moved towards ending the armed struggle. In 1995, the Belfast Accord was signed, and both sides committed themselves to the demilitarization of the conflict. Not all members of the respective Republican and Loyalist communities were on board, however. At a PIRA GAC in October 1997, Mickey McKevitt, Quartermaster General of the PIRA called for a vote of no confidence in the Adams-McGuinness leadership, and a withdrawal from the peace process. McKevitt and his wife, Bernadett Sands-McKevitt, were outvoted on the twelve-person Executive Council and the McKevitts left the PIRA with several others (English, 2003:296, Harnden, 1999:429-31, Mooney and O'Toole, 2003:33). In November, the dissidents created a new organization, calling itself *Óglaigh na hÉireann*, but the name the Real IRA stuck (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003). The organization recruited dissidents from a number of PIRA strongholds in the North (Mooney and O'Toole, 2003:47). As in 1986, the split was small, again comprising perhaps five percent of the PIRA's membership (*intensive fragmentation*: 0.050).

Over the course of its existence from the late 1960s to 2007, when it declared the war over, the PIRA experienced 3 splits, the first in its formation, the second in 1986, and the third in 1997. This gives it an *extensive fragmentation* score of 0.079.[ix]

Fig. 1 about here

The Karen National Union

The Karen National Union (KNU), established in 1947, officially launched its armed Revolution against the Burmese government in 1949, making the ongoing conflict in Burma the longest-running civil war in the world. While the Burmese collaborated with Japan during the Second World War, ejecting British forces from Burma in 1942, the Karen remained loyal to the British, and as a consequence suffered considerably at the hands of the Japanese-sponsored Burmese Independence Army during the war (Smith, 1991). After the establishment of The Republic of the Union of Burma on 4th January 1948, the Karen were fearful of further Burmese reprisals. Instructions were given by KNU headquarters in Rangoon to local district party organizers to set up local defense militias, known as the Karen National Defence Organisation (KNDO). Meanwhile, soon after independence, civil war broke out between left and right wing Burmese factions. Karen loyalty in fighting the Communists was not rewarded, and KNU leaders decided to take matters into their own hands, occupying towns across Burma in early 1949 and beginning the 'Karen Revolution'.

Structural Integrity in the KNU

By the early 1950s, influenced by the declining dynamism of the Karen rebellion and by developments abroad, the KNU began to experiment with Communism, a development that would precipitate the organization's first split. In September 1953, Mahn Ba Zan and other KNU leaders set up a vanguard party, called the Karen National Unity Party (KNUP). The KNUP outlined a shift in policy to the left. It centralized the KNU, reorganized the Karen Armed Forces (KAF) along Maoist lines into three divisions (regular, guerrilla and village defense), and set up agricultural cooperatives in some KNDO controlled villages. Yet the KNU's transition to Communism was a gradual and incomplete one. Because China was tacitly supporting the

Communist Party of Burma (CPB), an enemy of the KNU as well as the Burmese state, it found itself driven into an alliance with the nationalist *Koumintang*, large parts of which were displaced into Northern Burma after 1954 (Lintner, 1994). Nevertheless, by the early 1960s, the leftist KNUP had come to dominate strategy in the broader KNU organizational structure. Dissatisfied with this ideological turn, a senior figure in the KNU, Tha Hmwe, left the organization in April 1963, setting up the Karen Revolutionary Council (KRC). Only about 400 men left with Tha Hmwe from a total of 10,000 (*intensive fragmentation*: 0.040) (Smith, 1991). Sporadic engagements occurred between the KRC and KNUP factions, and in 1964, Tha Hmwe was captured by the Burmese and his KRC organization rolled up.

A more successful reassertion of the right wing of the KNU took place in 1966. Over the course of the 1950s, the KNU began to develop at a different pace in the two main areas of Karen habitation; the predominantly Karen populated jungle area along the Thai-Burma border and the more densely populated and multi-ethnic Delta region. The eastern military command became increasingly dominated by *Sgaw* hill Karen, in particular, Shwe Hser, commander of the KNU's 6th brigade in Dooplaya district, and Bo Mya commander of 7th brigade in the Paan-Papun districts to the north. The KNUP, in contrast, was based predominantly in the Delta. In 1966 when Bo Mya was head of the KAF's Eastern Division, he seized control of the Dawna Range and much of the Thai border region and ordered all KNUP officers and cadres to leave the territory. In a sense, it was an internal coup, with the minority, elitist leftist wing of the organization being forced out (*intensive fragmentation*: 0.040) (Smith, 1991). Being a Sgaw Karen from the Eastern hills, Bo Mya was a leader with whom the people could identify, unlike the Karen intellectuals from the Delta. The KNU's eastern division under Bo Mya benefited from taxes on illegal trade across the Thai border and he was able to maintain an army of some 10,000

and reform the KNU into an ethno-nationalist movement for the first time (Smith, 1991: 222). In 1967, Mahn Ba Zan and four other senior KNUP officials returned to the KNU, resulting in the triumph of Bo Mya in his ascension to presidency of the KNU in 1976.[x] Mahn Ba Zan and Bo Mya formed the Karen National Unity Front (KNUF), which was part of a reconciliation between the two groups after 1967, but from 1970, KNU had replaced KNUF on most policy documents, and it has remained the predominant representative body for the Karen ethno-nationalist movement ever since (South, 2008). With Bo Mya's coup in the Eastern region and the subsequent series of military defeats suffered by the KNUP in the Delta, the Karen insurgency became concentrated almost entirely in the Karen State area.

With Burma's military regime, then known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), primarily occupied with fighting the CPB, the KNU consolidated its territorial control in the East. However, with the collapse of the CPB in 1989, the SLORC reoriented itself towards combating the ethnic armies on its periphery. From the early 1990s, SLORC forces pounded Karen strongholds in an increasingly intense series of operations. This pressure ultimately culminated in the KNU split of 1994-95. Tapping into widespread war fatigue, in December 1994, a Buddhist monk, U Thanza, created the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) in opposition to what he perceived as the Christian dominated KNU.[xi] U Thanza's organization was posed not simply as an alternative to the KNU, but as a way out of the conflict for Karen civilians. With the nominal emphasis on Buddhism, the split is often characterized in religious terms. The majority of the KNU's leadership has traditionally been, and continues to be, Christian, while in contrast, the majority of the KNLA's rank-and-file soldiers are Buddhist. According to Rogers (2004), prior to 1995, 80 percent of new KNLA recruits and two thirds of those at the front were Buddhist. In reality, many Christians and

animists joined in the mutiny, while most of those who remained with the KNLA were Buddhist and animist (HRW, 2002).[xii] Thus, rather than religious differences *per se*, it was the fact that Buddhists perceived that they were shouldering an unequal share of the fighting, which caused their alienation from the organization (Bachoe, 1994).[xiii] The DKBA attracted approximately 300 rank-and-file Buddhist KNLA soldiers who felt that they were kept ill-fed and ill-supplied at the frontlines while, as far as they were concerned, Christian KNU leaders at the base in Manerplaw lived relatively well. Despite the high profile of the event, the intensity of the split was relatively low (*Intensive fragmentation*: 0.060).[xiv]

From 1996 to 1998, the KNU experienced a series of minor splits. In a similar process to the DKBA split, in the mid-1990s the SLORC actively sought to break off parts of the KNU. In 1996, the SLORC offered Thu Mu Heh, commander of the KNLA's sixteenth battalion in southern Karen State assistance in the creation of his own armed organization, the Nyein Chan Yay A'Pweh, or Peace Group (Thawnghmung, 2008:35). The organization is now more commonly known as the Karen Peace Army (KPA) (Human Rights Watch, 2002). The KPA never exceeded more than 300 members despite efforts to forcibly recruit Karen civilians (*intensive fragmentation:* 0.029). In 1997, Perry Moe of Thandaung formed a small organization from the KNU's second brigade. In 1998, Padoh Aung San's Karen Peace Force (KPF) defected from the KNU. These small factions control patches of territory in Karen State, where they engage in low level racketeering operations (Ball and Lang, 2001, Thawnghmung, 2008). In addition to these organizations, which continue to operate inside Burma, a number of factions have broken away from the KNU to pursue their agenda abroad. In 1997 the Karen Solidarity Organization (KSO) was founded by Mahn Robert Zan and in 1998, the Working Group for

Karen Unification (WGKU) was founded by Doctor Marta (Thawnghmung, 2008). The precise size of the latter splits is unknown but is in the range of tens to low hundreds.[xv]

In 2006, another faction split from the KNLA. On 30th January 2007, Maj-Gen Htain Maung (formerly a Brigadier-General and the Commander of the KNLA's 7th Brigade) was dismissed from the Karen National Union (KNU) for entering into negotiations with the SPDC without the approval of the KNU Executive Council. Htain Maung and his supporters formed a breakaway faction, which they named the KNU-KNLA Peace Council (PC). Initially comprised of only about 15 soldiers plus family and friends, the KNU-KNLA PC set about recruiting more soldiers to expand its military (*intensive fragmentation*: 0.005). The KNU-KNLA PC has enlisted Karen men and boys from inside Burma (including Nyaunglebin District and Irrawaddy Division), from Karen villages in Thailand (including Htee Nuh Hta village on the Moei riverbank) and from Mae La refugee camp (KHRG, 2007). Htain Maung has been characterized as a sell-out by the KNU, accepting rights to engage in industry inside Burma in return for the defection of part of his brigade.

Over the sixty years of its existence, the KNU has experienced nine splits, of varying intensity, in which new organizations were created.[xvi] This gives an *extensive fragmentation* score of 0.150.

Fig. 2 about here

Cohesion in the IRA

Cohesion in the IRA has gone through several distinct phases as illustrated in figure 3. While cohesion cannot be enumerated precisely, the present section estimates cohesion to be in a

low, medium, or high range, on the basis of interviews with former IRA volunteers and a review of the extensive secondary literature. Throughout the 1960s, when the IRA was little more than a disparate rump organization, cohesion was chronically low. Despite explicit instructions to the contrary from the leadership, scattered attacks continued to occur, most of these on property (Feeney, 2002:241). Thus, while the organization remained structurally intact, disintegration was rife.

Fig. 3 about here

When the PIRA first came into operation, Active Service Units (ASUs) were usually formed on a neighborhood basis, as the CDCs had been. Members were all known to each other and internal security was not a problem.[xvii] The number of PIRA members increased steadily over 1970 and 1971, but two events in late 1971 and early 1972 were to vastly increase the volume of new recruits. The first was the introduction by the Northern Ireland Government, on 9th August 1971 of extra-judicial measures of detention and internment of suspected terrorists (Taylor, 1980). This heavy-handed and seemingly indiscriminant tactic resulted in a deluge of applications for membership of the PIRA from outraged youth. The second event was Bloody Sunday – the shooting of 26 civil rights marchers in Derry City on 30th January 1972. For almost all of the former PIRA members with whom I spoke, this event more than any other was the main motivation in joining the organization.[xviii] The main consequence of these events was a massive increase in the size of the PIRA. By 1973, the organization is estimated to have had as many as 3,000 members. The new members were not traditional Republicans, as the men who founded the PIRA had been; rather they were motivated by their everyday experience of British tanks and soldiers on the streets, and attacks by Loyalist militias. With the State's security forces

unprepared, the PIRA was able to inflict substantial damage in a range of operations on loyalist and State forces. In these years, collateral damage caused by PIRA actions was minimal, and members largely acted in the organization's interest (De la Calle and Sanchez-Cuenca, 2007). There was little internal dissent in terms of ideology, and in the early 1970s cohesion was high.

Yet this massive increase in numbers was soon to contribute to disintegration so severe that the organization was almost wound up in 1976 (Dillon, 1999). Along with the increase in size came a decline in quality of recruits, and more troublingly, increased infiltration of the organization by British security forces (Gilmore, 1998). The infiltration was so deep that I was told of an attempted PIRA action (apocryphal as it may be) in which four of the five members of an ASU on a job were agents or informants of the security services![xix] The number of attacks against British and Northern Irish security forces declined as a proportion of operations. The PIRA was increasingly occupied with internal policing operations (Collins and McGovern, 1997), and the number of civilians killed in collateral damage rose precipitously after the early 1970s (De la Calle and Sanchez-Cuenca, 2007). The organization had become disintegrative.

Partly as a consequence of British security force actions, by 1976 a clear *de facto* shift in control of the organization had occurred. The British had decided that the Adams-McGuiness leadership was one they could deal with, which would have important implications for the cohesion of the PIRA (Moloney, 2002). After the near implosion of the IRA following the aborted 1975 truce, a number of younger figures, in particular Gerry Adams in Belfast and Martin McGuinness, rose to prominence. The Adams-McGuinness leadership set about instituting a change in strategy. All pretensions to a mass rebel army were abandoned and the PIRA made its resolution for the 'Long War' (O'Brien, 1993). The organization was radically

rationalized. The number of members was slashed and internal security took on greater importance than ever. The organization was reduced to about 300 full-time members. The Adams-McGuinness leadership was highly selective about the men and women it retained and those it let go.[xx] Many of the old guard, the Republican ideologues, were pushed to the sidelines, while new members were inculcated with a sense of loyalty to the leadership and to the PIRA as an organization. At this time a new manual, the 'Green Book', was prepared for the instruction of volunteers. Cohesion in the organization increased substantially after this reorganization.

Cohesion was enhanced, in part, by the socialization of PIRA members through their common prison experiences (English, 2003). In the early 1970s, prisoners underwent a militaristic regime of physical and ideological indoctrination. As the former IRA volunteer and political prisoner, Anthony McIntyre puts it, "In the early 1970s the command structures of the prisoners were very militaristic and hierarchical in nature, reflecting more the discipline and order of a conventional army. Later they were based more on collective leadership combined with communal responsibility, input and accountability" (McKeown, 1998). Many of the hundreds of Republicans that passed through the prison system came out with a strong identification with the PIRA. The hunger strikes of 1981, which resulted in the deaths of ten Republicans, nine from the PIRA, and one from the INLA, reinforced the sense in which loyalty to the organization was demanded by the blood sacrifices made in its name. The shared burden experienced by members of the PIRA served to bind them together with the organization. To leave the PIRA was to discredit its past.

Despite this high level of cohesion in the late 1970s and early 1980s, dissention was soon to reemerge. During the mid-1980s, Gerry Adams had begun to engage in secret talks with the

British. If these talks had become public, a coup within the IRA would almost certainly have resulted. His preference for the removal of abstentionism was not shared by the majority of PIRA members at the time (Moloney, 2002).[xxi] The Adams-McGuinness leadership had to devise a way in which to move towards politics, but to minimize disintegration and avoid fragmentation. Instead of suggesting an abandonment of the armed struggle, Adams and the Northern leadership proposed a (albeit self-contradictory) policy of the "ballot paper and the Armalite." Danny Morrison, an IRA strategist, describes his articulation of the new strategy at the 1981 *Ard Fheis* as follows (Bean, 2007:63), "I had to convince a lot of IRA people… [and] reassure them that by taking part in electoral politics there was not going to be any diminution in the armed struggle… I wasn't being deceptive, because at that stage I still saw armed struggle as being the priority." What this meant was that while Sinn Féin would contest elections and take up parliamentary seats, the military wing would supposedly escalate the armed struggle. Moloney (2002:292) describes the mood, "With tons of weaponry stored away and many middle-ranking IRA activists aware that a big offensive was in the pipeline, the notion that Adams was about to sell out just seemed absurd." By giving the rank-and-file what they wanted, that is, more guns, Adams was able to convince them of the leadership's bona fides. Looking back, several volunteers expressed to me their utter disbelief at what transpired. They feel that they were completely blindsided by the leadership. At the time, the perception that the Adams-McGuinness leadership was "in the trenches" with the rest of the PIRA was widely held. In addition, those members who had been prepared to speak against the leadership in 1986 were quietly removed. One former volunteer told of how he was ordered to keep a dissident quiet:[xxii]

> [Adams's men] were telling me if I knew [volunteer X] to tell him to remove his
> name from the list of nominations to *Ard Comhairle*. And that was, quote Mr.

Adams, "an army order." I was manipulated then. Maybe because I was naïve. I was used by this present leadership to remove anyone they deemed as a threat to where they've ended up today. I won't ever forget that about that '86 split.

Yet such incidents were rare. Those who stepped out of line would face the consequences, but few did. By a combination of appeals to the legitimacy of the PIRA as the locus of Republicanism (especially through an idolization of the hunger strikers), the enforcement of group norms through coercion and socialization, and the centralization of control over a vast arsenal of weaponry to fight the war, the Adams-McGuinness leadership maintained a relatively cohesive organization right through the years of peace negotiations in the early 1990s. However, the need for increased resources to be spent on coercive measures to ensure cohesion implies that it was somewhat less than optimal (figure 3) (Collins and McGovern, 1997).

The mid-1990s saw a return to disintegration. It was clear that there would be gainers and losers in the PIRA as a result of the peace process. Those who had the most to gain were, ironically, the ones who had kept themselves at greatest distance from the bombing and the bloodshed. The PIRA men and women who had done the much of the dirty work were often marginalized by the Sinn Féin as it attempted to carve out an image with broader electoral appeal. As Adams and McGuinness dropped their denim jeans and camouflage jackets for designer suits, dissent within the ranks of the PIRA grew. The 1997 split was just one manifestation of this dissention. The 1990s also saw units of the PIRA branch out into a whole range of criminal activities, especially the drug trade even though nominally remaining within the PIRA (Dillon, 1999). The killing of an Irish policeman, Gerry McCabe, on 7th June 1996 in Adare, Co. Limerick, by members of the PIRA following an unauthorized raid on a police

escorted postal van was just the most high profile of these incidents. The incident caused much embarrassment for the political leadership and nearly derailed the whole peace process (Cusack and Breen, 1996). The use of so-called "proxy bombs" – that is, the coercion of non-PIRA members into undertaking suicide bombing missions – in the early 1990s is another example of the PIRA's increasing unwillingness to make sacrifices of its own (Bloom and Horgan, 2008). By the mid-1990s, cohesion in the PIRA was very low once again.

Cohesion in the KNU and the DKBA

Despite its various splits, the KNU continues to fight and inflict substantial punishment on Burmese forces. They can, and do, kill as General Mutu tersely put it. Unfortunately, however, the underdeveloped nature of the Burmese state and the country's extreme media censorship mean that systematic evidence on cohesion in the KNU for the last 60 years is unavailable. Thus, we cannot conduct the same kind of temporal analysis for the KNU as we did for the PIRA. However, in contrast to the PIRA case discussed above, this is an ongoing conflict, and so the KNU presents an opportunity to examine some of the processes by which cohesion is maintained today.

The KNLA is subordinate to the KNU Executive Committee. While each of the KNLA's seven brigades has operational autonomy, their broader orders come from General Headquarters (GHQ). There are approximately 5,000 KNLA regulars.[xxiii] The heaviest fighting is currently in 2nd, 3rd, 5th, and 6th Brigade areas, while 1st and 4th Brigades are lighter.[xxiv] After the 1994-95 losses of territory, the KNLA ended the use of conventional war. It is interesting that, on the basis of anecdotal evidence, what seems to have been the KNLA's period of lowest cohesion in the late 1980s coincided with the time during which it had greatest access to resources (Smith,

1991). KNLA control over many of the major trading gates to Thailand provided millions of dollars a year in revenue, yet this did not enhance the organization's cohesion or effectiveness. In fact, this stage saw mid-level commanders enriching themselves contrary to the organization's best interests. The KNU strategy to defend its lucrative territories was, in tactical terms, an unmitigated disaster. Prior to the loss of Manerplaw, the KNLA wasted a huge amount of manpower and ammunition in battles of attrition with the Burmese military. Bullets have since become precious commodities.[xxv]

It is ironic that now the KNLA has lost much of its capability to wage offensive operations, tactically it is fighting a much more appropriate war. Today it is a wholly guerrilla army, engaging in hit and run attacks with small arms and especially mines (Selth, 2001: 23). With the use of pressure activated mines, civilians are inevitably frequent victims,[xxvi] but the KNLA also uses command-detonated mines in ambushes to minimize civilian casualties. The Karen-Burmese war now appears very much as a classical low intensity insurgency. In the 11 months from 1st June 2007 to the 1st of May 2008, there were 466 total engagements with Burmese forces, and 677 total skirmishes (the latter including land mine operations). The kill and wounded ratios in the conflict favor the KNLA to the tune of almost 50:1 and 75:1 respectively. On this evidence, the KNLA, although greatly reduced from its peak size, is cohesive and extremely effective, even if it has struggled to maintain its structural integrity since the mid-1990s. Given the fissiparous tendencies at the political center of the organization, and the Burmese military's preference for dividing and conquering the KNU piecemeal, this cohesion on the battlefield is remarkable.

Table 1 about here

The DKBA is, in contrast, quite a different animal. Even if not a direct creation of Burmese military intelligence, the DKBA quickly began to receive overt political and military support from the Burmese government. The SLORC, in an episode reminiscent of Ephialtes's betrayal of the Spartans at Thermopylae, used the former KNLA troops that had joined the DKBA to exploit a secret path to the KNLA's mountain stronghold at Manerplaw. While the SPDC had promised the DKBA control over Karen State in Eastern Burma, this bargain was never kept (Human Rights Watch, 2002:132). As it became apparent that the pretentions that the DKBA had of securing greater political autonomy for the Karen would not be realized, most of the 300 or so KNLA volunteers who had joined, left either for civilian life or to rejoin the KNLA. As of the mid-2000s, the DKBA had 2,000-3,000 soldiers (Human Rights Watch, 2002:133). The DKBA forcibly recruits men from Karen villages, and if individuals flee their families are required to pay up to 50,000 Thai Bhat in compensation (Karen Human Rights Group, 2009). The DKBA also recruits a large number of children and also impresses captured KNLA soldiers to serve with it (Human Rights Watch, 2002:134). One former KNLA soldier said, "[m]y officer surrendered to the DKBA with his whole group. That was three years ago. I didn't want to go. I didn't want to be a DKBA soldier" (Human Rights Watch, 2002). KNLA soldiers who are forced to fight for the DKBA are not given any additional training or indoctrination.

Nevertheless, the DKBA has continued to operate in alliance with the SPDC against the KNLA. Whatever its original ambitions, the DKBA now has no political goals (Karen Human Rights Group, 2001:59-74). Mostly it is employed as a proxy force by the Burmese military (Karen Human Rights Group, 1996). The DKBA now survives on its own means, which encourages the decentralization of operations, self-seeking activity, and general disintegration.

Most of its activities are now dedicated to extortion, drug trafficking, and other illegal operations like mining and logging (Karen Human Rights Group, 2006:12, South, 2006:9). According to Thawnghmung (2008:34), "the DKBA's command structure is weak. Many of its units enjoy almost complete autonomy, and some even answer to local Tatmadaw commanders, for whom they serve as a proxy militia." More recently, the DKBA has been given the option of converting itself into a border guard, in which it will drop its current name and serve the Burmese state more directly (Karen Human Rights Group, 2009).

The Karen Human Rights Group (1996) asserts that the DKBA "has become notorious for their viciousness in looting and torturing villagers," although the behavior of individual units of the DKBA depends greatly on the character unit's commander. The DKBA has also been known to encourage, if not force, its recruits to consume amphetamines known locally as "horse drugs" to make its soldiers brave (Karen Human Rights Group, 1996). With many child soldiers and other coerced recruits, and low provisioning of its soldiers, cohesion in the DKBA is low. It is militarily ineffective, primarily targeting civilians. As table 2 shows, out of 45 engagements and five skirmishes in the year from mid-2007, the DKBA not only suffered greater casualties, but crucially was also much more likely to surrender than face capture. In contrast, in the KNLA, soldiers tend to fight to the death.

Table 2 about here

DISCUSSION

Explaining Variation in Structural Integrity and Fragmentation

The IRA and KNU are worlds apart. Yet the leaderships of both organizations have had to deal with the twin challenges of keeping their organization intact and wielding its members towards a common purpose. The KNU has experienced a much higher number of splits, giving it an extensive fragmentation score of 0.150 to the IRA's 0.079. However, on average, splits have been more intensive in the IRA (0.500, 0.050, and 0.050) than in the KNU (0.040, 0.040, 0.060, 0.029, and 0.005). What might account for this variation? Prevailing theoretical explanations of structural integrity and fragmentation fall into four categories: (1.) material resources, including funding from an external actor (Staniland, 2009, Weinstein, 2007); (2.) the organization's representativeness of the underlying community (Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008); (3.) organizational structure (Eilstrup-Sangiovanni and Jones, 2008); and (4.) leadership charisma. The only one of these factors I find to be significant in both cases is material resources. More important seem to be the interactions between insurgent organizations and the armed forces of the state.

From a purely internal perspective, it would appear that fragmentation in the IRA was driven not by conflicts over the end goal but by disagreements over the relative merits of the use of violent or peaceful means to achieve it. However, such disagreements were much more frequent within Sinn Féin-IRA than the small number of splits would suggest. Indeed, even when such tensions were at their peak in the mid-1980s, the split that occurred in 1986 was of very low intensity. One plausible explanation for the structural integrity of the PIRA is the way in which resources and weaponry were brought in and distributed throughout the organization (Staniland, 2009). The increased centralization of control in the PIRA from 1978 and the massive influx of weaponry from Libya in the mid-1980s convinced the rank and file that the leadership was not about to abandon the armed struggle (Moloney, 2002). This undoubtedly minimized the intensity

of fragmentation in the organization in 1986.[xxvii] Moreover, it can be plausibly argued that as funding for the organization was decentralized in the early 1990s, the opportunity for factions to break away from the PIRA was enhanced. Criminality, especially involvement in narcotics distribution, increased substantially from this period.

However, this resource-based perspective ignores the role of the PIRA's strategic interaction with British and Northern Irish security forces and Loyalist militias. Indeed, the PIRA was formed precisely because of Loyalist aggression against Catholic civilians. Its persistence seems inexplicable without the influx of recruits that was precipitated by the actions of the security services, not least the introduction of internment without trial in 1971. By the mid-1980s, the British had realized that the PIRA in its more streamlined form could not be easily defeated by military means alone. This meant that they needed a faction with which they could deal. The structural integrity of the PIRA was from then in the interest of the British as well as the PIRA's leadership. By the mid-1990s, a peace process had been initiated, which proposed a resolution similar to the failed Sunningdale Agreement of 1973. However, a number of underlying conditions had changed by the mid-1990s that would make the latter peace accord more successful. The overwhelming support of Republicans for the Belfast peace accords of 1998 confirms the shift in public opinion away from the use of force. The public, Catholic and Protestant, had become weary of the violence. The leadership of Sinn Féin saw in this shift a great electoral opportunity, and its Republican credentials were deployed to significant success in the post-Accord period. The Sinn Féin leadership was from this point incentivized to control its own armed wing and end the violence. As a consequence, the British and Northern Irish security forces could, with some aggressiveness, pursue disarmament of the PIRA and other insurgent organizations. Although the PIRA's decision to support the Accord precipitated the

RIRA split of 1997, the RIRA has never posed a significant threat to the peace process, the Omagh Bombing of 1998 notwithstanding. Most of the RIRA's activities of the last decade have been criminal rather than political. In a remarkable shift from earlier practice, the Sinn Féin leadership publicly condemned the RIRA's renewed activity in 2009 (McDonald, 2010). The structural integrity and fragmentation of the IRA seems inexplicable without reference to the carrots and sticks presented to it in its interactions with the state and other armed organizations.

Similarly, in the KNU, the internal dynamics of the organization would suggest that cleavages occurred because of the increasing dislocation of individual brigades from GHQ. The DKBA and Peace Council "splits" were highly localized, based on the opportunism of a number of middle-ranking KNLA commanders and the effective mobilization (through persuasion and coercion) of previously disorganized segments of the Karen civilian population. Because, since 1974, KNLA brigades were required to be self-financing (Raksakul, 1995), by the late 1980s the vast disparities in the resources available to individual brigades meant that some had become virtual fiefdoms. Brigades 6 and 7, which controlled the lucrative border checkpoints to Thailand, were earning most of the KNU's annual revenue of $50 million through the levy of a 5% tax on all products passing through their territory. The DKBA, KPA, Perry Moe, KPF, and KNU-KNLA-PC splits are best understood in terms of isolated units that exploited the opportunity to enrich themselves at the expense of the larger Karen movement. Even Bo Mya's coup of 1966, while often described in ideological terms, is also explicable in terms of a wealthy, militarily effective organization carving out a fiefdom of its own.

Ultimately, maintaining access to its lucrative sources of income became an end in itself, resulting in major operational errors by the KNU.[xxviii] However, while the influx of resources in a

decentralized, or bottom up manner caused an increase in disintegration (or a reduction in cohesion), it did not directly precipitate fragmentation. The organization did not split during the 1980s. Rather, it retained its structural integrity until decisive action was taken by the Burmese military in the early1990s. The KNU's addiction to the income from the logging trade led to the adoption of "dead position warfare" tactics, which handed the tactical advantage to the more heavily armed and manned *Tatmadaw* or Burmese Army (Falla, 1990:358). The *Tatmadaw*, which had by then defeated the CPB and negotiated surrenders with a number of other high profile rebel organizations (Zaw Oo and Win Min, 2007), was able to focus its military energies on the KNU, all the while imposing ever greater costs on the underlying Karen civilian population. In addition, in the early 1990s, led by new Burmese chief of intelligence, Khin Nyunt, the SLORC began to employ classic divide and rule tactics, offering lucrative enticements like logging rights to whole rebel armies, and in the case of the KNU, individual brigades, give up their arms. In both the IRA and KNU cases it seems that strategic interaction is a crucial if often neglected factor in precipitating organizational fragmentation.

Explaining Variation in Cohesion and Disintegration

There are four main theoretical explanations of cohesion in armed organizations: 1.) ideology (Posen, 1993); 2.) selective incentives (Collier and Hoeffler, 2004); 3.) discipline (Rush, 1999, Strachan, 2006), and 4.) primary group solidarity (Shils and Janowitz, 1948). As has been noted above, cohesion has varied from one extreme to the other in the PIRA. While some of the standard theoretical models do help us to make sense of this variation, others are less useful. The IRA case challenges the idea that the more ideologically motivated are recruits, the higher will be cohesion. In the 1960s, the IRA, to the extent that it existed, was filled with

ideologues. That is, they were volunteers that had either been members of the IRA for decades themselves, or were from traditional Republican families. As we saw, this did not result in high levels of cohesion. After the massive influx of volunteers who were motivated by more temporal concerns such as revenge and anger, the PIRA took on a very different character. The immediate effect was an increase in the effectiveness of the organization. Over the coming years, however, internal security suffered as the organization was more easily penetrated by British military intelligence. In 1975-76, the PIRA nearly imploded as a result of British espionage. Yet, the organization came back from the brink, and with the takeover of the PIRA by the Young Turks, Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, the number of volunteers was drastically culled, and discipline reasserted. Yet, more important than discipline *per se* was organizational socialization. Socialization was enhanced throughout the 1980s primarily because of the shared sacrifice that members of the organization had made in living on the run, serving time in British jails, and dying in significant numbers. These were sacrifices that other Republicans did not have to make and they tended to enhance solidarity within the PIRA, while increasingly distancing it from the broader Republican movement. As the conflict began to wind down towards the end of the 1980s, however, discipline in the organization began to wane. When the 1987 decision to engage in electoral politics began to take effect, the armed struggle took second place, and operations were frequently postponed or cancelled because of the imperatives of Sinn Féin's office seeking strategy (Collins and McGovern, 1997). With no clear armed strategy, and the decentralization of monetary incentives, volunteers began to act independently, sometimes in explicitly military operations, but increasingly in operations with dubious political relevance like the 1996 robbery in Co. Limerick referred to above. Cohesion declined precipitously from the early to mid-1990s. There was no longer a governing military objective around which members could cohere.

The KNU's armed wing, the KNLA, has maintained higher levels of cohesion than the DKBA. The major reason appears to be that the KNLA continues to uphold higher standards of recruitment, training, and discipline. Training in the KNLA lasts for twelve weeks and is largely based on British Army methods that have been passed down since the KNU's origins fighting under the British in the Second World War. Training takes place under an Adjutant branch and each brigade also has a training unit. New recruits are put through severe tests of stamina and endurance, as in a regular army.[xxix] In contrast, in the DKBA, soldiers receive minimal (if any) training. In the KNLA, soldiers receive no salary and are not allowed to marry during their first seven years in the army (Falla, 1990). DKBA recruits are also barely compensated, but serve because of coercion or desperation rather than a deeper sense of duty.[xxx] Former DKBA recruits report great dissatisfaction with the conditions of their service and of the leadership. In contrast, KNLA soldiers are allowed up to one week of leave per month (Human Rights Watch, 2002) and from my observations, appear to be healthy and well motivated. Additionally, once recruits join the KNLA, membership is for life. Some soldiers have this fact inscribed on their skin. Soldiers often carry declarations of war against the Burmese, or even KNLA insignia on their bodies (Falla, 1990, Tucker, 2003). As Falla (1990:93) remarks, "There was no going back to civilian life in Burma for a young man marked like that." In contrast, those forcibly recruited to the DKBA appear to be ready to defect at the most convenient opportunity (Karen Human Rights Group, 2001). Finally, especially since the loss of its base at Manerplaw, the KNLA has dedicated greater attention to protecting Karen civilians, in conjunction with its main task of fighting the *Tatmadaw*. The DKBA's attacks on Karen refugee camps inside Thailand have won it no respect from the desperate civilian population. The latter dynamic certainly has not facilitated organizational socialization in the DKBA. While it has been pointed out in other

contexts that the abuse of civilian populations can work to enhance cohesion in armed organizations (Cohen, 2009), this should not be seen as a freely generalizable phenomenon. The killing of unarmed civilians often has a degenerative effect on a professional army (Browning, 1992). In contrast to the DKBA, the KNLA's stock has risen among civilians in recent years with the intensification of SPDC ethnic cleansing (Thawnghmung, 2008). This enhances the status conferred by organizational membership for volunteers and increases organizational cohesion. What the comparison between the KNU and the DKBA suggests is that in addition to the well-known mechanisms of organizational socialization, including recruitment, training, and discipline, organizational cohesion is affected by the nature of operations that the organization is required to perform. When an organization is dedicated primarily to resource extraction (e.g. narcotics, extortion) rather than fighting an opposing military or defending one's constituent civilian population, the sense of collective burden sharing across the organization is reduced, and cohesion is negatively affected.

CONCLUSION

Although efforts to get inside the dynamics of armed organizations have great potential to contribute to explanations of the conduct and outcome of war, in both the domestic and international arena, the above analysis urges caution. On structural integrity and fragmentation, the increasing tendency to investigate rebel organizations hermetically sealed off from strategic interaction with the state may result in misattributing causality to variables internal to the organization, when in fact external factors may be more important. Massive military operations by the state can lead to the immiserization of the organization's frontline troops, the loss of access to material resources, and the attrition of an organization's essential middle cadre of

junior officers who link rank-and-file to the leadership. In addition, state militaries and intelligence services may engage in explicit divide and rule tactics. Thus, while certain limited predictions regarding structural integrity and cohesion may be possible from *ex ante* conditions internal to the insurgent organization, the endogenous dynamics of war should be central to any explanation of these outcomes. In particular, we have seen that while the nature of resource accumulation in the organization affects cohesion in the organization, in the absence of interactions with the military and intelligence forces of the state, it seems to have little effect on structural integrity.

In terms of cohesion and disintegration, although this paper has been unable to rigorously test existing hypotheses, a number of general observations can be made. First, the factors that affect structural integrity do not appear to be the same as those that affect cohesion. We have seen in both cases that high cohesion and structural integrity do not necessarily align. Second, cohesion seems to be greatly affected by the endogenous dynamics of the conflict. In the Irish case, we have seen that periods of more intense fighting between British and PIRA correlated with higher levels of cohesion. Even with many of its volunteers in jail in the 1980s, the PIRA retained its discipline, and obeyed orders from the leadership. When fighting went into recession, disintegration emerged as volunteers independently sought outlets for their abilities as illicit soldiers. In the Karen case, disintegration was highest when there was a perception among the rank and file that commanders in the base areas were not sharing an equal portion of the burden of war. Both of these observations point to the importance of a shared sense of sacrifice within an armed organization in maintaining cohesion. While training and other rituals also work to socialize members of an armed organization into identifying with the goals of the leadership (Cohen, 2009), without the *practice* of acting towards a common activity, the leadership simply

cannot turn cohesion back on at the switch of a button. This Durkheimian emphasis on shared practice points to new avenues for research in insurgent organizations (King, 2006).
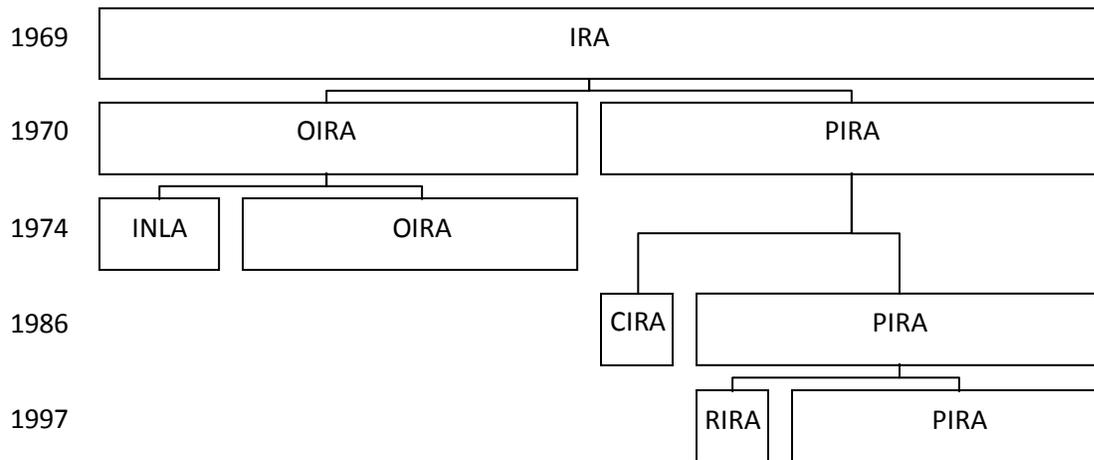
Ultimately, this paper stresses the need to analytically decouple structural integrity and cohesion. However, it also warns against a singular focus on one of these dynamics at the expense of the other. In this sense, the present focus on the factionalism of armed organizations and the emergence of "spoilers" is at risk of producing misleading results. Certainly, the fragmentation of armed organizations is important. It affects their ability to control territory and conduct military operations. However, unless we also take into account changes in cohesion, we are likely to get predictions of military activity very wrong. We need to take into account the effectiveness, leadership, resilience, and resourcefulness of the organization. In the both the PIRA and KNU cases, several organizational splits were followed by an increase, not a decrease, in the effectiveness of military activity. This paper has suggested explanatory mechanisms behind these dynamics, but it is for future research to determine their validity.
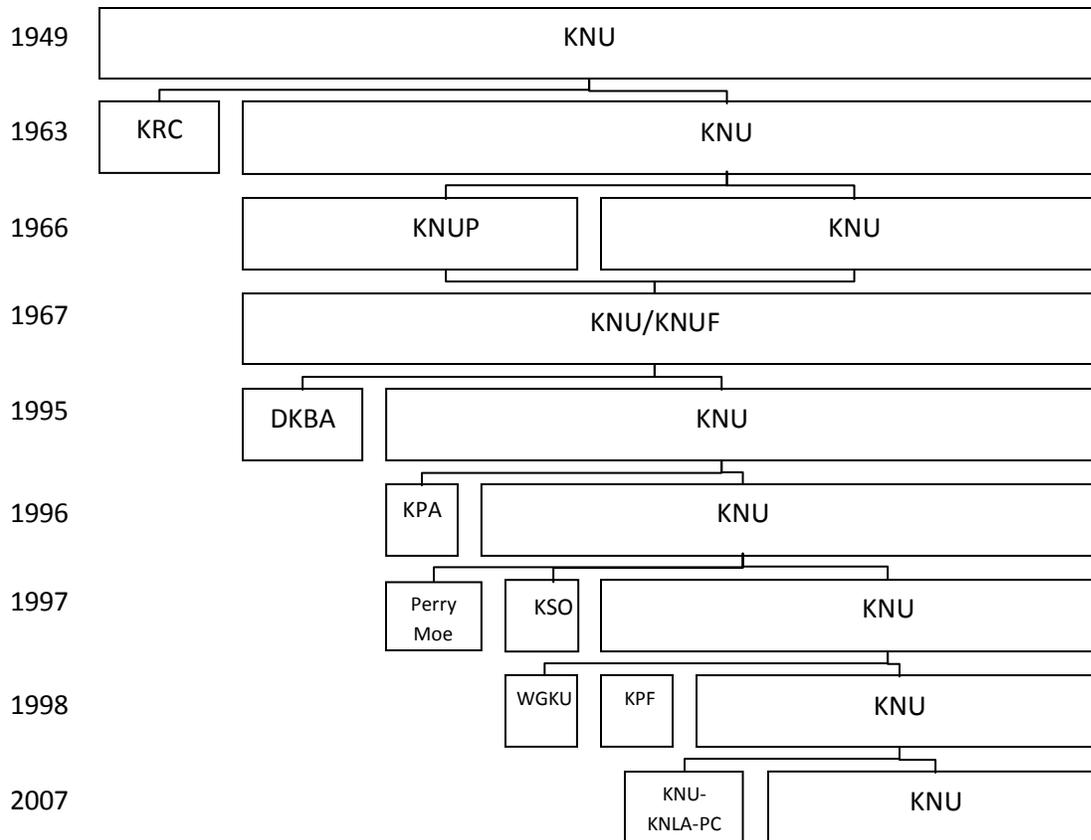
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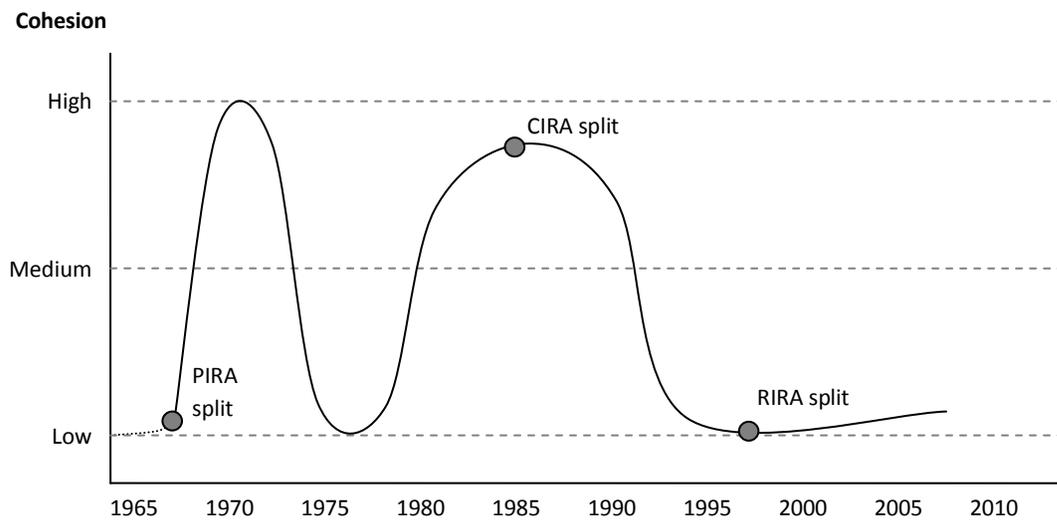
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Fig. 1 Fragmentation in the IRA

1969	IRA
1970	OIRA / PIRA
1974	INLA / OIRA
1986	CIRA / PIRA
1997	RIRA / PIRA

Fig. 2 Fragmentation in the KNU

1949	KNU
1963	KRC — KNU
1966	KNUP — KNU
1967	KNU/KNUF
1995	DKBA — KNU
1996	KPA — KNU
1997	Perry Moe — KSO — KNU
1998	WGKU — KPF — KNU
2007	KNU-KNLA-PC — KNU

Fig. 3 Cohesion and Fragmentation in the PIRA

Table 1. Casualty Figures, 1 June 2007-1 May 2008

	Killed	Wounded	Surrender
SPDC	499	1201	24
KNLA	11	16	2

Table 2. Casualty Figures, 1 June 2007-1 May 2008

	Killed	Wounded	Surrender
DKBA	41	15	18
KNLA	5	5	7

NOTES

[i] Party conference

[ii] This echoes the official army definition, but is expressed in more concise terms National Defense University. (1984) *Cohesion in the Us Military*. Defense Management Study Group on Military Cohesion. Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press.

[iii] The reason to assign the word cohesion to one and not the other is in a way arbitrary and is not meant to reflect a value judgment on these separate fields of study. Indeed, the word cohesion has been used in a variety of other fields. For example, social cohesion refers to the density and intensity of social relations entirely outside of the organizational context Stansfeld, SA. (1999) Social Support and Social Cohesion. *Social determinants of health*:155-78.. The study of armed organizational fragmentation being more recent, I see no harm in urging scholars in this nascent field of research to use a separate term, also adopted from engineering.

[iv] It could, however, have application to most armies in the early modern period, that is, up until the French Revolution. After the development of the national army at this time, fragmentation is not a major concern for most state armies.

[v] These pressures apply in differing degrees to state militaries also, but for clarity of exposition these organizations are not considered here.

[vi] Interview, former IRA volunteer (Derry 2007); Feeney, Brian. (2002) *Sinn Féin : A Hundred Turbulent Years*. Dublin: O'Brien Press. puts the number at about 70.

[vii] This estimate comes from a former IRA volunteer who was one of the original founders of the PIRA in Derry (author interview, Derry 2007). Exact figures are difficult to establish, but published accounts of the split roughly accord with this figure, Moloney, Ed. (2002) *A Secret History of the Ira* 1st ed. New York: W.W. Norton, Bell, J. Bowyer. (2000) *The Ira, 1968-2000 : Analysis of a Secret Army*. Cass Series on Political Violence,. London Portland, OR: Frank Cass, Coogan, Tim Pat. (2002) *The Ira*. Fully rev. and updated, 1st Palgrave ed. New York: Palgrave for St. Martin's Press, English, Richard. (2003) *Armed Struggle : The History of the Ira*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press..

[viii] Interview, former IRA volunteer (Derry, August 2007). Ruairí Ó'Brádaigh gives similar estimate in his official biography White, Robert W. (2006) *Ruairí Ó Brádaigh : The Life and Politics of an Irish Revolutionary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press..

[ix] This score refers to the PIRA. I therefore exclude the 1974 INLA split from the OIRA.

[x] Interview, Khaing So Nai Aung, (Aug 2008)

[xi] In fact, the original organization was called the Democratic Buddhist Karen Organization (DKBO). The DKBO was nominally the political wing of the faction, but it exists only on paper, with the DKBA being the only active organization.

[xii] "Whither KNU", see http://www.hartford-hwp.com/archives/54/148.html

[xiii] Interview, David Tharckabaw, (August 2008)

[xiv] "Comment – Curtain is coming down on KNU," *Bangkok Post*, (19 February 1995)

[xv] Interviews, David Tharckabaw (August 2008) and David Taw (July 2008).

[xvi] A more notorious armed Karen faction was the "God's Army", created and led by two pre-teen Karen twin boys. It was more an autonomous, pro-Karen and anti-Burmese armed millennial group, than a faction of the KNU. It is thus excluded from the present analysis.

[xvii] Interview, former IRA volunteer (Derry, July 2007)

[xviii] Interviews, former IRA volunteers (Derry, June and July 2007)

[xix] Interview, former IRA volunteer (Derry, July 2007)

[xx] The removal of hundreds of members from the PIRA does not qualify as fragmentation as these individuals do not join or form another organization.

[xxi] Interviews, former IRA volunteers (Derry, June and July 2007)

[xxii] Interview, former IRA volunteer (Derry, July 2007)

[xxiii] Interview, Mo Byu, (August 2008)

[xxiv] Interview, Mo Byu, (August 2008)

[xxv] Interview, Brigadier Isaac, (August 2008)

[xxvi] Interview, Brigadier Isaac, (August 2008)

[xxvii] Interview, former IRA volunteer (Derry, July 2007)

[xxviii] "Comment – Curtain is Coming down on KNU," *Bangkok Post*, (19 February 1995)

[xxix] Interview, Brigadier Isaac, (August 2008)

[xxx] Interview, Brigadier Isaac, (August 2008)