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Debra Herrick

Why some rebel victories build states — and others break them

When rebel movements win civil wars and take power, outcomes vary widely. Some usher in sweeping political change and stronger states; others slide into authoritarianism or soon collapse. In a new book, UC Santa Barbara professor of political science Kai Thaler argues that ideology plays a central role in shaping those divergent trajectories.

“This book provides a new theory and draws on original evidence to show how ideology affects the way rebel groups are organized, how they behave when they’re fighting against the state, and what they do if they manage to take control of a country and become the government,” said Thaler, whose new book “When Rebels Win: Ideology, Statebuilding, and Power After Civil Wars” (Cornell University Press, 2025), traces how the ideas that animate rebel movements during war continue to shape governance once those movements assume power.

Much of the existing research on civil wars and their aftermaths, Thaler noted, has emphasized material explanations, things like natural resources or access to foreign funding. At the center of Thaler’s argument, however, is a challenge to approaches that treat material incentives as the primary drivers of rebel behavior. Those factors matter, he acknowledged, but they do not determine outcomes on their own.

“Even in contexts where there might be natural resources or foreign support available, rebel organizations can still go down very different paths depending on

the ideology that leaders in the group develop and build the organization around," he said.

Thaler identified two key dimensions of ideology. The first was the extent to which a rebel group sought to transform society once in power, including political institutions, economic systems and social relations. The second concerned who the group intended to benefit: a narrow elite or faction, or the population more broadly.

Those ideological commitments shaped how movements disciplined their fighters during war, structured leadership, interacted with civilians and governed after victory. They also influenced whether new regimes invested in state institutions or centralized power for personal gain.

The research drew on more than a decade of work, including extensive fieldwork in Nicaragua, Liberia and Uganda — three countries where rebel groups won control of the state and went on to rule in divergent ways. Across those cases, Thaler spent more than a year conducting interviews, working in archives and tracing how insurgent movements transformed into governing regimes.

In Nicaragua, he examined documents from the Sandinista National Liberation Front during its years as a rebel movement and later as a governing party in the 1980s. He interviewed former fighters, officials in the revolutionary government, civil society leaders and political opponents. In Liberia, where fewer archival records existed, Thaler relied more heavily on interviews to study the National Patriotic Front of Liberia. In Uganda, political tensions surrounding elections made interviews more difficult, leading him to draw more extensively on archival sources and secondary literature, particularly work by Ugandan scholars.

While his core cases focused on Nicaragua, Liberia and Uganda, Thaler extended the research across regions and decades, incorporating movements in Angola, Algeria, Iran and Afghanistan. Overall, the project examined rebel governance from the post–World War II period through the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan in 2021.

Thaler also emphasized the contemporary relevance of his research, with rebel victory in Syria in 2024 taking place too late to be discussed in depth in the book. Although negotiated settlements have become more common in recent decades, renewed geopolitical competition has increased the likelihood of rebel movements

taking power.

“We’re in a time where we’ve seen a couple of recent rebel victories,” he said, pointing to growing competition among global and regional powers. Foreign sponsorship, he noted, like Turkey’s role in Syria, could make rebel victory more likely by providing weapons, funding or direct military support.

Ultimately, Thaler cautioned against simple conclusions about whether rebel victories lead to stability or prosperity. “Even organizations that aim to build a stronger state may still go in a more authoritarian direction,” he said. “We’ve seen this even in cases that started out with seemingly very noble goals.”

The Orfalea Center for Global & International Studies will host a book launch for “When Rebels Win” on March 4 at 3:45 p.m. at Mosher Alumni Hall. Thaler will give a talk followed by a discussion with Sherry Zaks of the University of Southern California and Dan Slater of the University of Michigan.

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Books

Media Contact
Debra Herrick
Associate Editorial Director
(805) 893-2191
debraherrick@ucsb.edu

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