

Review - Transforming Violent Political Movements

Written by Victor Asal

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VICTOR ASAL, JUL 20 2014

Transforming Violent Political Movements: Rebels today, what tomorrow?

By: Kevin E. Grisham

New York: Routledge, 2014

Kevin E. Grisham's latest book addresses an important topic, one whose significance has been underlined by the current situation in Iraq and Syria, with extreme violence being conducted by rebellious organizations. Grisham theorizes as to what factors impact the transition and transformation of violent rebellious movements into different types of organizations, specifically examining the factors that make such movements more likely to transition into political parties, criminal organization, or terrorist organizations. Using a theoretical approach which he refers to as the collective political violence transformative (CPVT) model, Grisham tests his arguments about organizational transformation on a number of case studies. His theoretical work is interesting (though there are a couple of key limitations I will discuss below) and his case studies – particularly the one on the provisional IRA – are well exemplified and relevant.

The CPVT model builds off the work of Charles Tilly, Doug McAdam, and Sidney Tarrow in their 2003 book *Dynamics of Contention*. It underlines the importance of an organization's environment and its power as it relates to the power of the state, drawing from political opportunity structure thinking. Grisham argues that antecedent conditions related to power distribution between the insurgents and the state impact what is possible in terms of transformation options for organizations, while distinguishing these antecedent conditions from political opportunity, which he also sees as crucial. As Grisham argues, 'there is a clear linkage between political opportunity structures and the transformation of guerilla movements' (p.39). Key to Grisham's argument is how core beliefs and associated frames are impacted by such antecedent conditions and the existing political opportunity structure. Drawing on the literature, Grisham suggests that the frames ('interpretative objects') of an organization 'play a mediating role between 'opportunity organization and action' (p.36). These frames and beliefs impact not only the relationships of the organization but also the internal dynamics of the organization, and interact to shape the transformational direction that an organization will take, given the environmental conditions an organization finds itself in. However, I note that the use of the contentious politics model to study insurgency is quite widespread, and the theoretical section would have been better served if Grisham had brought more of this literature (and related literature that does not necessarily stem from the approach of Tilly, McAdam and Tarrow) into his discussion of violent organizational transformation. For example, Flanigan's article 'Charity as Resistance: Connections between Charity, Contentious Politics, and Terror' (2006) would be useful here from a contentious politics perspective as would Lichbach's (1998) work on the 'rebel's dilemma'. By not engaging with this literature, Grisham weakens the impact of his argument. Overall, though, I found Grisham's extension of Tilly, McAdam, and Tarrow interesting and thoughtful both in the theoretical section and in its application to the case studies in the rest of the book.

Methodologically, most of Grisham's cases are based on secondary source material in order to do content analysis and to build his qualitative case studies. The one exception to this approach is his research related to the provisional IRA and Sinn Fein, for which he was able to conduct field research (and this is very likely to be the reason why this is the most compelling of the case studies). Other cases discussed include: the Spear of the Nation (or 'MK') and the African National Congress, the Abu Sayyaf Group, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia ('FARC-EP'). As Grisham notes, there is a significant difference between the depth of these case studies due to the availability of

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data, which makes some of the chapters feel a little lopsided in nature. Yet the methodological approach is consistent and Grisham does a good job of deploying George and Bennett's (2005) process tracing approach in his case studies particularly in those wherein he was able to collect more data.

The major missing component in the book was a detailed cross-case comparison which would have allowed the reader to better understand how the differences in the key components of CPVT model led to different outcomes across the different organizations. Such a comparison would have greatly enriched the book and I hope that Grisham adopts such an approach in his future works. The book's concluding chapter suggests a direction focusing on leadership, which seem like a fitting and fruitful next step. Despite certain drawbacks, overall I found *Transforming Violent Political Movements* an informative and interesting read, and would recommend it for students and researchers interested in violent organizations and how they evolve and change.

About the author:

Victor Asal is Director of the Center for Policy Research, an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, and the director of the Homeland Security Certificate and MPA Concentration in the Department of Public Administration & Policy at Rockefeller College. He received his PhD from the University of Maryland, College Park. He is the co-director, with R. Karl Rethemeyer, of the Project on Violent Conflict, and is affiliated with the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), a Department of Homeland Security Center of Excellence. His research focuses on the choice of violence by non-state organizational actors, as well as the causes of political discrimination by states against different groups such as sexual minorities, women, and ethnic groups. He has been involved in research projects funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, Defense Threat Reduction Agency, The Department of Homeland Security, The National Science Foundation, and The Office of Naval Research.