Navigating Hard Times: Civilian Strategic Action Amidst Political Violence

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IN 2002, the mountainous Aceh Besar region in Sumatra, Indonesia, suffered a rise in violence amidst a long-standing separatist conflict. As the Indonesian military and the Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* [GAM]) clashed, those without weapons faced intense pressure, and many were killed. However, civilians could not, and did not, sit idly by and wait things out. They did what they could to survive, improve their lives, and help others. For instance, in June that year, a young man suspected of supporting GAM arrived at a mosque in need of help. The local Islamic teacher (*ulama*) was hesitant, but offered the young man sanctuary. When the Indonesian military arrived, the *ulama* hid him and refused to allow soldiers into his mosque, protecting the young man. Islamic leaders had long witnessed abuses by both sides, and responded with actions such as withholding the names of students whose families were linked to combatants, leading prayers for peace, and offering safety to those in trouble. As the Islamic leader explained, "All *ulama* have to remain neutral here, so we kept teaching. But how can we do nothing when we see injustice? We have a responsibility to stand up."[1] Face to face with armed groups, Islamic leaders and other unarmed civilians navigated these challenges strategically, doing what they felt was just or necessary.

Confronted by mass violence, what can civilians — ordinary people and local leaders — do to survive? What options are available to unarmed forces? Many studies of war focus exclusively on armed groups, especially research on international warfare. When civilians are discussed, they tend to be framed exclusively as victims, reflecting the sober reality of civilian victimization. However, a growing body of research approaches civilians as purposeful actors making difficult decisions in restricted contexts. In this article, we argue that, even in the direst circumstances, civilians are able to make choices and navigate hard times; whether helping themselves or others, these may be the most important choices they will ever make. Civilians are often victims of violence, but they are not nameless, inert, anonymous victims — nor

are they always neutral. The decisions that civilians make in times of mass violence can mean the difference between life and death, and in aggregate, may even transform armed groups and shape the course of conflict. Although the room for maneuver is limited, civilians can help others, even in the face of genocide and other mass atrocities. Analyzing civilians as agents who can help themselves or others amidst mass political violence will shed light on an important question of our time — how to conceive a way of helping those struggling in hard times.

This article aims to provide examples of civilian strategy in violent conflicts, showing how these options unfold and why they matter. We begin by providing an overview of concepts and scholarly research, laying out broad strategic options. We then draw from our separate research experiences, categorizing civilian actions in Southeast Asian separatist conflicts, focusing somewhat on local religious leaders, and analyzing civilian rescuers in the context of state-led genocide. We conclude with some implications. While not intending to downplay the challenges faced by civilians in war and genocide, we highlight how ordinary people find hope and courage in the worst of crises.

Concept

To begin, it is useful to define what we mean by civilians. We use the term 'civilian' interchangeably with 'non-combatant', understanding that there are distinctions between the two, but they tend to blur in practice and in popular discourse. A combatant is an armed member of an armed group in war, someone representing a direct mortal threat to others, while a non-combatant is an unarmed individual. Meanwhile, a civilian is someone who is not a member of an armed group. However, one may be a medic or army engineer (a non-combatant member of the armed forces) or may be part of a partisan resistance movement (a civilian combatant). Even these basic definitions are blurred in civil wars, where combatant status extends beyond state militaries to rebel, militia, and terrorist groups, forces that may then lack formal membership. The Geneva Convention defines civilians as persons "who are not members of the armed forces";[2] this was later refined to include medics and other unarmed members of armed forces and to exclude members of non-state armed resistance groups. The Fourth Geneva Convention states that, in civil wars, those deserving of protection are "persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms".[3] Civilian non-combatants, then, may include farmers, students, workers, and other ordinary folks, but also veterans,

politicians, religious leaders, activists, and other societal actors, provided that they are unarmed, non-members of armed groups. These are persons who, in the face of violent conflict, are not members of armed groups and remain unarmed, meaning that they do not represent a direct mortal threat to others and thus must not be considered legitimate targets of violence. As we will discuss, this does not mean that they are uninvolved in conflict or necessarily innocent, as civilians may support armed groups, indirectly contributing to violence. However, as unarmed forces surrounded by violence, civilians require protection for moral and legal reasons.

Historically, the study of war was limited largely to wars between states, focusing on Great Powers (including the 'Great Men' at their helm), state militaries, and decisive battles. The study of war was long dominated by mainstream international relations, which tended to prioritize state actors, with little attention to non-state armed groups or civilians. At the margins of research on interstate war, we see early concern for civilians limited mostly to International Humanitarian Law (IHL). Buttressed by religious and humanistic values, IHL constrained combatants from open action that directly harms civilian populations.[4] The resulting Principle of Non-Combatant Immunity serves as the foundation for the well-meaning, often painfully accurate understanding of civilians as powerless victims.

Although wars within states, referred to as civil or intrastate wars, has always existed and claimed countless lives, their importance was long overshadowed by wars between states.[5] Civil wars are far more numerous and, in aggregate, more deadly than wars between states, but have been afforded less attention, sometimes subsumed as part of the machinations of Great Powers rather than evaluated in their own right. The shift toward what some scholars have characterized as 'New Wars'[6] after the Cold War brought new attention to civil wars, including an increasing appreciation for civilian well-being alongside a blurring of who counts as a civilian. For example, the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) encourages the protection of civilians amidst civil wars, genocide, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, with potential intervention against states found to have failed to follow through on this responsibility. R2P thus provides important attention to civilian well-being, elevating human security over state security. However, such doctrines are not easily applied to non-state armed groups with irregular membership and opaque command structures.[7] As Gade observes, "new types and tactics of warfare" have "blurred the distinction between combatants and non-combatants",[8] demanding a critical reevaluation of

the civilian/ combatant binary. We thus see greater concern for the brutal realities experienced by civilians precisely as the lines between civilian and combatant were blurred after the Cold War. Despite ambiguity, distinctions between those who kill and those who do not remain important, with a growing sense of urgency to protect civilians.

Increasing scholarly interest in civil wars has helped to fuel research and advocacy for protecting civilians. This line of work echoes the dominant view of civilians as victims. To be clear, this framing is far better than ignoring civilians, capturing the reality faced by many people in war, and is perhaps necessary to promote their protection. Various international organizations, such as the agencies of the United Nations, as well as non-governmental groups such as the Red Cross, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International, have played important roles in assisting civilian victims and alleviating their suffering. In terms of scholarship, notable studies have examined factors driving civilian victimization, such as how combatants are organized, the presence of natural resources, recruitment patterns, combatant ideology, combatant strategy, and more.[9] The study of civilian victimization is clearly an important area of research, promoting a better understanding of why civilians are abused and what to do about it. However, in this approach, abused civilians exist as independent variables, with non-combatants acted upon by armed groups. There is little sense that civilians may be actors, strategizing to survive and even prosper. Even if our goal is only to understand civilian victimization, it seems that armed groups may attack civilians because of their actions, as civilians may help or betray either side.

Classic guerrilla warfare theories identify civilians as integral to the success or failure of rebellion, providing information and provisions that may sustain rebel groups. To take one famous metaphor, civilians represent the sea in which rebels may swim. This has led counterinsurgency efforts to focus on hearts and minds, seeking to win over civilians as a means to deprive rebels of support. The hearts and minds metaphor suggests that support for rebellion can be diminished through development, aid, propaganda, and democracy.[10] This implies that civilians are not inert, especially if their support or opposition may determine civil war outcomes. Their importance is also emphasized in some studies of civilian victimization, where armed groups may undermine rivals through mass violence against civilian populations, in effect winning wars by "draining the sea".[11]

Scholars acknowledge that civilians can sometimes be purposeful actors, even in the face of war. In a widely cited study, Kalyvas

shows that there is a logic in the seeming anarchy of violence.[12] For Kalyvas, where combatants lack territorial control, they possess limited information, relying on civilians who may then distort intelligence to suit their own purposes. Civilians may provide false denunciations for personal gain or to settle scores, an instance in which civilians are clearly actors, but perhaps not innocent. Various studies have also shown civilians to be sources of peace. Hancock and Mitchell's edited volume shows how civilians may organize, often with the aid of international or religious organizations, to declare their communities off-limits to armed groups, creating Zones of Peace.[13] Anthropological studies have shown how civilians navigate armed conflict to survive. For example, Utas describes not only how young women may strategically find boyfriends among soldiers to gain protection, but also how they may use their sense of 'victimcy' to simultaneously access humanitarian aid.[14]

An appreciation of the micro-dynamics and processes of civil wars has led scholars to lay out the strategic options available to civilians in war. Barter modifies Hirschman's classic schema for consumer strategies in markets, suggesting that civilians possess three broad options, exit (flight), voice (protest), and loyalty (support), as well as combinations of these three strategies.[15] Civilians may flee from violence, sometimes a choiceless decision, but typically involving choices such as when to go, how to go, where to go, what and who to bring, and when to return.[16] As Salehyan observes, conflict displacement and subsequent behavior should be seen as "conscious choices that actors make during frequently 'chaotic' conditions".[17] Civilians may also speak up to and against armed groups, providing critical feedback to soldiers or the media, sometimes protesting against violence.[18] In Colombia, Kaplan documents instances of "civilian self-protection", in which strong social organization enables anti-violent resistance.[19] In their special issue of the *Journal of Peacebuilding and Development*, Hallward, Masullo, and Mouly bring together various experts to analyze the potential and importance of civil resistance in armed conflict.[20] The contributors focus on forms of everyday, micro-level resistance to armed groups as well as more open forms of dissent, highlighting the importance of civilian agency in promoting peace in conflict areas. Finally, civilians may side with powerful or more ethical actors in war. Armed groups, especially rebels but also state forces, may rely on civilians for intelligence, shelter, provisions, supplies, legitimacy, and more, sometimes crafting affiliate organizations staffed by non-combatants.[21]

Religious figures have been especially important civilian groups in violent conflicts. Religious leaders typically speak to the ethics of a

given conflict, certifying it as more or less legitimate in the eyes of local audiences. Religion provides teachings, networks, infrastructure, and outreach, making religious leaders crucially important actors in war, persons motivated by higher ideals that enable them to take considerable risks.[22] Local religious leaders have special roles in promoting peace. Mitchell identifies Zones of Peace in religious concepts of individual and territorial inviolability, with sanctuary spaces benefiting from concepts of "sacred immunity".[23] Latin American peace zones were supported by the Catholic Church against state and rebel forces, while such zones in the southern Philippines were supported by both Islamic and Christian leaders. Religious leaders may make sermons or public pronouncements against war, protect persons from armed groups, criticize armed groups, pressure combatants for peace talks, and more. This said, religious actors are as likely to support armed groups. From providing various chaplains or blessing soldiers and their weapons, we often see religion supporting state or rebel forces. In Latin American conflicts, church leaders helped to promote peace, but others supported an abusive state order, while some mobilized through Liberation Theology to support rebellion.[24] From Islamic clerics supporting the Iranian revolution or terrorist violence, to conservative Buddhist sanghas supporting state-led anti-communist or anti-Islamic pogroms in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Thailand, religion may lend itself to violence as much as it promotes peace.[25]

Even in the most extreme cases of political violence, such as state-led genocide, there are ample cases in which civilians help others escape from imminent danger or death. Instances of civilians sheltering or aiding persons who are targeted due to their identity constitute acts of rescue.[26] Examples from World War II include Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg, who saved as many as 100,000 Jews from deportation while stationed in Budapest, or Japanese diplomat Chiune Sugihara, who provided some 4500 transit visas to Jews fleeing from the advancing Nazis in Lithuania.[27] Emblematic images of rescuers have been popularized in Hollywood cinema, such as German entrepreneur Oskar Schindler, whose 'list' saved an estimated 1000 Jews from deportation to Auschwitz, or Paul Rusesabagina, who managed Hotel des Mille Collines in Rwanda and provided shelter for more than 1200 Tutsis. These iconic images of rescuers paint a picture of almost superhuman 'heroes' extending their help against all odds to victims based on their altruism. To honor civilian acts, Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust Memorial Authority, commemorates the "Righteous among the Nations", recognizing the acts of non-Jews who took extraordinary

risks to help Jews during the Holocaust.

Not all acts of rescue are so visible, however. Less well-known are everyday gestures by ordinary civilians, simple acts that in aggregate help countless people. These take various shapes and forms, perhaps singular acts of assistance or repeated acts of bravery.[28] Many ordinary rescuers later recount their stories of why they did what they did, but often without pretension of doing anything special. In fact, many claim that their acts of rescue were ordinary, lacking the drama of heroic struggles that we tend to associate with images of rescuers.[29] Nechama Tec and Samuel P. Oliner, and Pearl M. Oliner provided pioneer studies on such everyday gestures and ordinary profiles of rescuers who helped other civilians in the context of the Holocaust.[30] Other research followed suit, in different temporal and geographic contexts, as in the 1915 Armenian genocide[31] or the 1994 Rwandan genocide.[32] As such, case and comparative studies on rescuers have sought explanations among rescuers' moral values or psychological traits. These studies suggest, however, acts of rescue should not be blindly romanticized, as there were also instances in which rescuers saved victims in exchange for material or social gains, sexual favors, or other ulterior motives.[33] For the untold number of civilians who helped others, no doubt as many helped attackers and put people at risk. On the other hand, the voluminous testimonies of rescuers reveal that there would be some common denominator in that, at the moment of rescuing, ordinary non-combatants rendered their help because they saw a sign of common humanity in the victims. Those rescuers were often the ones who were able to assert a strong sense of independence and individuality.[34]

To summarize, although civilians have long been overlooked factors in war and are often victims in need of protection, it remains the case that non-combatants are important, strategic actors in violent conflicts. Civilians may seek to escape combatants, support them, or resist them. They may rescue others, working to help victims in the face of horrific violence. Far from being anonymous, passive victims, civilians are agents whose decisions can improve their well-being and shape conflict trajectories. Saying this may bring some dangers. We must not overreach, since civilians may possess few significant choices and many actions fail. We must not romanticize civilian strategies either, since many are not pro-peace and may contribute to war. Nonetheless, civilians are important actors in war, whose hope and courage can have important consequences, as shown in the examples in the following section.

Navigating Hard Times: Illustrations

The following illustrations are drawn from the authors' respective work on armed conflict and political violence. Our research experiences seem complementary for exploring the scope of civilian strategy. One author's work built from primary fieldwork in three Southeast Asia separatist conflicts: Aceh (Indonesia), Patani (Thailand), and Mindanao (the Philippines).[35] Meanwhile, the other author focuses on genocide prevention in cases around the world.[36] Together, we hope to provide a range of contexts and strategies in an effort to make a case for the many forms of civilian agency and strategic action, as well as their limitations, demonstrating that civilians exhibit virtues of hope and courage even in hard times.

Flight

Countless civilians strategically utilize flight (exit) as a means to survive and even prosper in war. While we tend to see refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) as lacking choice, evident in the term 'forced displacement', the reality is often more complex. In Southeast Asia, those who fled secessionist conflicts varied in terms of when they left, for how long, where they went, and who left. Young men in this region were especially likely to flee, as they are more mobile and are pushed by social norms to leave in search of work, study, and adventure (known as *merantau*). Given that war not only threatens lives, but also devastates economies, young men in Aceh, Patani, and Mindanao left early and often as a means to escape violence and avoid being forced to enlist in either side — choosing not to fight — but also for work or education. Young men in Aceh fled to North Sumatra, Java, and Malaysia for safety and employment, just as young men in Patani went to central Thailand and northern Malaysia, while young Moros went to Malaysia or the Middle East. By fleeing the conflict early, young men found safety and employment, providing remittances that represented a lifeline for those at home. Funston estimates that between 200,000 and 300,000 Patani Malays take part in seasonal labor in Malaysia each year, driven by economic and security considerations.[37] For one villager, "many young people are harassed by the army and fear attacks, so leaving for Kelantan is safe, and there is more work there".[38] Having fled, this invited the important decisions of whether, when, and how to return, especially since state and rebel forces were suspicious of those who left.

While young men fled early and often, instances of 'anticipatory' displacement,[39] others were less likely to flee. Women, elders, village

chiefs, and religious leaders fled far less often and traveled shorter distances, and their displacement was short-term. Such groups were informed by social norms and power, as they were expected to remain in their villages, leaving only in emergencies. After enduring repeated battles, villages established systems to make evacuations easier, dividing jobs, creating checklists and meeting points, constructing shelters, and stocking provisions. Such proactive planning efforts demonstrate the importance of civilian agency, where non-combatants plan ahead to save lives. According to one village chief in Aceh, "After we had to leave our village a few times, we created a system to leave safer and faster, meeting at the mosque in [a nearby village] where we kept food, blankets, and water."[40] Evacuation centers were especially common in Mindanao: "We tried to get ready. Each member of the council was given a hamlet, making sure it was emptied, and had to store rice and water ahead of time. When trouble came, we went up the river into the hills. We returned when it was safer."[41]

Flight was an important wartime option for civilians, providing room for strategic choices. Sometimes, it was combined with other strategies. Flight mixed with voice when displacement provided reasons to protest. In Mindanao, repeated displacement at the hands of state and rebel attacks motivated desperate victims to protest, sometimes leading to the creation of peace zones. Canuday describes the mobilization of evacuees (*bakwit*), with 'Bakwit Power' protests featuring thousands of civilians occupying roads to demand peace. He cites one IDP turned activist; "We could have chosen not to flee, we could have brought out our weapons … we chose peace, so we evacuated."[42] Here, flight intersected with protest to make for powerful criticisms of violent groups. However, we also see instances of flight intersecting with support for armed groups. In the Maguindanao region of Mindanao, many villagers opted to live in rebel camps. When state forces attacked these camps and pushed rebels out, many civilians fled with the rebels into the hills rather than go to state-sponsored safe zones, an action that lent legitimacy to the rebel cause and enabled further support. Sometimes, flight provided a venue to join or support rebel groups. Young men who fled Aceh to Malaysia in an effort to avoid rebels found themselves facing hard times once abroad, harassed as illegal migrants by Malaysian authorities. Rebels established networks in Malaysia to help young migrants, a tactic they used to help their countrymen and gain supporters. Here, flight enabled new pathways for support, where the two strategies intersect.

Voice

Although we may see displacement as something thrust upon civilians rather than a choice, the examples cited show that flight provides strategic options for civilians. Instances of voice, where civilians resist armed groups, provide especially compelling examples of civilian strategy. Of course, it is dangerous for non-combatants to speak up. Civilians have many grievances, wishing to express themselves, but fear doing so. As a consequence, one important form of voice is what Scott refers to as 'everyday resistance', the micro-level, less visible 'weapons of the weak' such as slander, foot dragging, hoarding, misinformation, sabotage, and silence.[43] Such forms of resistance are ubiquitous in conflict areas. Villagers may quietly mock rebel or state leaders, question their religious credentials, or gossip about corruption. When armed groups demand that civilians provide support, everyday resistance helps to sour what was provided, with villagers offering low-quality food or vague information, or misrepresenting their assets. In Aceh, civilians were forced to serve in militias, night guard units to monitor rebel activity. Instead of refusing, many villagers would comply, but turn the posts into night-time hangouts, understood by the rebels as inactive. In Aceh, Patani, and Mindanao, villagers explained how they would pretend not to understand the national language, communicating with soldiers only in local languages as a means to frustrate them.

Along with everyday resistance, another form of voice can be understood as dialogue, micro-level negotiations and communications between civilians and armed groups. This might include conversations at checkpoints and coffee shops, places where people might communicate dissatisfaction to combatants. In Aceh, older women explained that they would tell state and rebel soldiers that they are asking too much of people and that the conflict is hurting them all. Armed groups even created positions through which civilians could communicate their concerns, an effort to manage complaints; rebels in Aceh, for example, created the *ulee sagoe*, often staffed by a student sympathetic to the rebels, to act as an ombudsperson. Dialogue also took place when armed groups entered villages, at which time chiefs would have to talk to the commanders. As diplomats, chiefs tried to cool down armed groups, inviting them to sit for tea, engage in small talk, and encourage soldiers to keep moving. The most dramatic instances of dialogue related to the defense of villagers fleeing armed groups. Here, village chiefs and religious leaders played important roles in providing legal defense, sanctuary, and other forms of protection. Islamic leaders frequently defended youths threatened by armed groups, especially when the

accused were former students. In Mindanao, Islamic leaders explained that it can be difficult to negotiate with Christian soldiers. Here, we see inspiring moments when Islamic leaders sought help from their Christian counterparts to advocate for civilians. For example, when one village was found to be supporting the rebels, Philippine army soldiers began abusing villagers in frustration. This led the local Islamic leader to work with a priest from a neighboring village to help: "I knew the Priest for a long time, and working together, it was possible to stand up to the army."[44] A high-level example of this sort of partnership is the Bishop-Ulama Conference (BUC), formed in 1996 to provide an interfaith forum and to promote peace in Mindanao.[45]

A third form of voice is defiance, the rare but important moments when unarmed forces openly criticize and defy combatants. Southeast Asian separatist conflicts saw civil society-organized rallies to promote peace talks, criticize human rights abuses, or conduct referenda for independence. These large rallies were only possible in moments of relative calm in the conflict, and often took place in regional capitals, far from the heart of the respective conflicts. In rural areas, some open protests were possible, either through collectivities (i.e., displaced villages) or as individuals. Openly defying armed groups brought considerable danger, but there were several instances in which elder men and women were able to voice criticism without facing the same repercussions as a young man might.

Especially inspiring instances of voice were found in Zones of Peace, especially in Mindanao but also in Aceh. Here, civil society leaders, the media, and religious groups worked with villagers to declare communities off-limits to armed groups. Tailored to individual villages, Zones of Peace varied immensely, with some being more religious, featuring written constitutions, signed by armed groups, and extending beyond anti-violence to develop social and criminal codes. Criticized by armed groups for tacitly supporting the other side or not addressing the causes of conflict, and often collapsing amidst intense fighting, Zones of Peace nonetheless provided security to villagers, with armed groups pressured into agreements based on their professed goal of supporting ordinary people. In one village that had endured years of violence, villagers reached out to local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to help create the Manarapan Darussalam (Manarapan Abode of Peace). Here, Islamic leaders recognized that framing their zone in terms of Islam might be provocative to Christian officials. Their strategic response was to ask Christian clergy to take a leading role: "We asked Priests and nuns to lead the negotiations and help draft our laws,

making our work safe and creating a system that could be understood by any religion."[46] The Manarapan Declaration proclaims the village to be a Zone of Peace, limiting troop movements and the possession of weapons, but also restricting alcohol and cigarettes, encouraging economic cooperation, and protecting local wildlife. The Declaration was then signed by village chiefs, religious leaders, civil society representatives, and representatives of the Philippine military, police, and two rebel groups.

Forms of wartime voice typically demand that civilians cooperate. Religious leaders play especially important roles, since they are often provided some degree of immunity from violent persecution and are part of larger organized systems. Their legitimacy to speak on moral issues and familiarity with their communities enable religious figures to raise their voice and amplify the concerns of others. This said, it is as likely for religious figures to express their moral claims through support strategies, working with armed groups to do what they feel is right and, in doing so, amplify violence.

Support

It is tempting to focus on civilians escaping or resisting violence, framing them as forces for peace against abusive rebel and state soldiers. Unfortunately, civilians frequently provide forms of support for armed groups, perhaps in an effort to survive, but also because they believe in a particular side. The fact that civilians provide support to armed groups was hinted at earlier, in the metaphor where they serve as the sea within which rebel groups may swim. Civilians may provide material provisions, information, money, or intelligence to armed groups. They may support recruitment, join affiliate organizations, attend rallies, or simply praise a particular side and add to its legitimacy. Understanding that civilians provide various forms of support for armed groups has important implications for peacekeeping, since civilians may be unarmed and thus deserving of protection, but may not be innocent, indirectly contributing to violence.

Support is sometimes difficult to provide for many young men, since armed groups may expect them to enlist. In Southeast Asian separatist conflicts, support was especially likely among those unable to, or at least not expected to, take up arms. This may include those too young or too old to fight. Often referred to as 'child soldiers',[47] many youths provide forms of support for armed groups, perhaps acting as lookouts or serving as couriers. Elders, especially veterans of previous wars, are also important supporters, carrying out recruitment and training. One

man in his 60s stated, "I am still a soldier … but now I serve as a GAM civilian. I provided some older rifles and trained young people how to use them."[48] Women also play important support roles, assisting in recruitment, propaganda, and supplies. Young women served state or rebel forces as nurses, cooks, spies, or tailors. In Aceh, many joined the *Inong Balee*, a women's brigade sometimes misrepresented by the rebels and journalists as soldiers. However, their role was to support rebel operations, and they did not take part in combat. According to Aspinall, "women were assigned support roles, such as provision of logistics, medical assistance, or hiding and smuggling male fighters. They did not assume leadership roles, and rarely participated in combat".[49] One member stated, "We only had basic training. When a soldier was wounded, they could not bring him here, we had to go to him. It was very dangerous."[50]

Although also featuring as voices for peace, religious leaders frequently provided support to state or rebel forces. In all three cases, Islamic leaders were initially uninterested in the conflicts, but as violence grew and they saw human rights abuses firsthand, they felt compelled to support a particular side. In Patani and Mindanao, Buddhist and Catholic figures were often pro-state, providing lodging, blessings, and public support for soldiers against Muslim rebels.[51] In Aceh, different *ulama* supported both state and rebel forces, with patterns of support largely predicted by zones of combatant control, although there was a tendency for modernist *ulama* to support the state, more rural, traditional *ulama* were pro-rebel.[52] The fact that *ulama* in state strongholds supported the state, while those in rebel strongholds supported the rebels, may suggest a degree of opportunism in supporting the stronger side. It may also be principled, since the weaker armed group in a given zone is more likely to commit abuses,[53] so that *ulama* appearing to side with power are actually acting on principle. One pro-rebel cleric, after seeing Indonesian soldiers kill his former students, went over to the rebels: "I had to do more than just teach; Islam is a religion of living justice."[54] In terms of specific forms of support, *ulama* might speak at public events for either side, provide lodging for combatants, collect funds through *zakat* drives, or help recruit. *Ulama* even presided over rebel courts and schools, providing some semblance of governance. Although Aceh's rebels hardly had any sort of Islamist agenda, with time they developed their own Islamic bureaucracy. In Patani and Mindanao, Islamic leaders have been especially pro-rebel, with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front partly led by Islamic teachers.

As we noted earlier, strategies are often mixed, with civilians

combining flight with voice or support. The remaining pairing is support and voice, a common strategy for religious leaders as well as civil society activists. By providing support and even joining organizations affiliated with armed groups, civilian groups were able to provide critiques from within state and rebel groups. In Aceh, Islamic leaders managed to shift the content of rebellion, pushing the formerly secular rebels toward religion. Similarly, as student activists aligned with rebel forces, they challenged rebel demands to create a Sultanate and attack settlers, promoting norms of democracy and human rights. Armed groups rarely take kindly to criticism, but it may be easier to do so from within, through support and voice.

Civilian Strategy in Genocide and Mass Atrocities

We have shown that, even in the midst of separatist conflicts, civilians have been able to act, strategizing and reacting to improve their well-being and do what they feel is right. This is not to romanticize or exaggerate, but instead to show that hope and courage remain even in civil wars. One might respond that Southeast Asian separatist conflicts are not as brutal as other wars. This would downplay the thousands of casualties in these conflicts, but it is true that, in all three cases (especially Aceh and Mindanao), rebel groups largely worked to serve their populations and provide some degree of governance. After all, separatists seek statehood, so work to appear capable and credible to various observers. By contrast, in highly asymmetrical political violence such as genocide, one-sided power dynamics limit the potential for agency. In such cases, the efficacy of civilians helping themselves or others is largely contingent on the presence of enabling factors or conducive environment. In other words, civilian agency alone does not determine whether one would engage in acts of rescue; altruism to help others is only a function of rescue behavior, subject to circumstantial conditions and many unpredictable forces at play. Nevertheless, we continue to see the interplay between agency and action, even amidst genocide.

During the genocide against Tutsis in 1994, for example, many prominent rescuers came from positions of authority that carried social respect and reverence by the population. In *Tribute to Courage*, the first systematic study of individual rescuers conducted by African Rights, church officials notably featured as moral agents "who risked their lives to save others".[55] The report recognized 17 rescuer profiles, the majority of whom were clergy, including one nun. It highlighted how church officials had both resources and influence to facilitate acts of rescue for

many Tutsis and even moderate Hutus fleeing from the *Interahamwe*, the Hutu militias carrying out mass killings.[56] At the other extreme were church officials who publicly incited or engaged in the killings, acting in concert with the *Interahamwe*. Some priests were compromised by their longtime political ties with the ruling Hutu power at the time. As one example, Athanase Seromba, a priest at a local parish in Kibuye prefecture, was found guilty of committing genocide by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) for his role in killing about 2000 Tutsis who sought refuge at his church but were trapped and bulldozed in the church compound.[57]

In the Armenian genocide, we see that altruistic morality alone does not determine acts of rescue. While there were cases of altruistic and self-sacrificing Turks who saved Armenians at the cost of their own lives, non-Armenian civilian acts of sheltering or aiding Armenians from deportation were highly contextual. When Turkish rulers began the Armenian deportations in 1915, Muslims and Christian minorities were prohibited from rendering help to Armenian families. Under such circumstances, and at a time when Armenians were collectively dehumanized, it is not surprising that few local Turks and Kurds risked saving Armenians. Bribery of Turkish officials and soldiers, or 'paid help' as Nechama Tec puts it, was a common strategy of survival. After the deportation marches began, Armenians were 'rescued' when young girls were abducted for marriage or children were kidnapped for labor. The boundary between altruistic humanitarian reasons and economic motives in rescuing victims who were fated to die was thus not well defined.[58] For Armenian survivors in such contexts, conversion to Islam was *sine qua non* for survival, raising the question of what was 'rescued' if forced conversion stripped away Armenian identity, including their names.[59]

As such, varied motives on the part of rescuers as well as circumstantial elements go into the dynamics of rescue. What appears to be essential in the 'success' of acts of rescue — if and when so materialized — is a combination of two things. One is the capacity of (would-be) rescuers' independent thinking, and the other is the presence of political space where such independent agency may drive action. Action is thus a result of both agency and opportunity. The contrast between two communes in Rwanda, Giti and Taba, is illustrative of this point.[60]

Located north of the capital, Giti was the only commune under government control that did not experience genocide in April 1994. Despite surrounding communes falling into genocidal frenzy, no killings

took place in Giti. The social and demographic attributes of Giti were not anomalous. It had strong political links to the ruling Hutu party, had average levels of education, and was about the same population size as others, including 20–30 percent Tutsis in the commune. Like others, the burgomaster (head of the commune) had even distributed firearms and increased nightly patrols prior to the genocide, in the name of a civil defense program. Two reasons were credited for the anomalous outcome. One was rather fortuitous. The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) rebel troops advancing toward Kigali arrived in the neighboring commune just in time to calm tensions boiling in Giti. The second reason was the fact that the moderate burgomaster, Edouard Sebushumba, resisted the interim government's pressure to carry out attacks at the local level. In the first days of the genocide, Sebushumba increased nightly patrols and, in case of delinquent actions such as stealing and eating Tutsi-owned cows, immediately imprisoned offenders. Working alongside his *conseillers* (local government officials), some of whom were Tutsis, he was able to maintain a modicum of civic order, buying time for RPF soldiers to arrive. By contrast, the commune of Taba, lying west of the capital, did not experience genocidal killings at first, and yet later fell to the hands of the *Interahamwe*. The burgomaster here was the infamous Jean-Paul Akayesu, the first person to be convicted of the crime of genocide and crimes against humanity by the ICTR. Less known, however, is the fact that Akayesu initially did what Sebushumba had done. For the first 10 days or so, Akayesu actively resisted genocidal violence and was successful in deterring the *Interahamwe*. But a sudden change ensued after he met with the interim government's prime minister. He calculated that his political future would depend on joining the killers, and the result is now widely known — widespread genocidal violence in Taba under his command.[61]

Left to their own devices in the dire circumstances, civilians may not always act with altruistic rescue behavior. The chances of rescue are conditional and contingent on the vicissitudes of the given circumstances. However, civilians are not monolithic. When reminded of the victims' human 'faces', they could act responsibly. Scott recounts how French Huguenot villagers, despite possessing their own histories of persecution, were reluctant to help Jews pursued by German occupiers.[62] For Scott, "what happened next is important ... for understanding the particularity ... of humanitarian action", because when pastors' wives brought villagers face to face with starving Jewish families, and Huguenots looked victims in the eyes, they finally felt compelled to help. Other studies show that when rescuers saw common

humanity in the victims, they became more responsible "for the welfare of others".[63] As Tec adds, rescuers were often nonconformists.[64] Civilian acts in rescuing other civilians thus entail the will to defy their own society, even if those acts are deemed illegal and prohibited.

Conclusions

This article has shown that, even in the face of mass violence, civilians are strategic actors. Perhaps also frightened victims, but they are neither powerless nor inert. This is not to romanticize civilian action or exaggerate their power. To be sure, civilians are not always able to act in war or genocide; they may fail, or may contribute indirectly to violence by supporting armed groups. But many civilians do act, working to save themselves and others through a variety of strategies, with or without the 'right' conditions. Their actions may be carried out for reasons of survival or personal gain, but also for genuinely altruistic ethics — the latter often rooted in religious conviction and/or a defense of human dignity. Even in hard times, many civilians have been able to demonstrate hope and courage, bravely navigating bloody currents.

Understanding civilians as actors rather than solely victims has several important implications. It helps us to better understand civil wars and political violence through perspectives of civilian social norms and pathways, rather than broad institutional or political opportunity lenses. This leads us to better understand displaced persons or silent resisters in wartime contexts, paying closer attention to their complex calculations for survival and capacities for perseverance. It also helps us see why civilians may have real reasons for supporting armed groups, such as gaining security or employment, even if such support calls their innocence into question. A lens of civilian agency also helps us recognize the many forms of civilian resistance, including selfless acts of rescue in the face of rampant dehumanization. Knowing this may make for better long-term peacebuilding, inviting initiatives to nurture spaces and celebrate persons who stand against violence. A key question is how we might engender such new and expanded spaces, strategically and structurally, for civilian resistance to thrive. All told, civilians facing war and genocide need help, but recognizing how they are capable, under certain conditions, of helping themselves and each other suggests that they should be approached as agents in peacebuilding.

Notes

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