

How Local Institutions Emerge from Civil War

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ABSTRACT: Civil wars are typically understood as destructive, leaving poor economic performance, damaged physical infrastructure, and reduced human capital in their wake. But civil wars are also constructive, producing new local institutions that can persist into the postwar period. In this paper, I use qualitative evidence from Guatemala to demonstrate that even the most devastating conflicts can spawn durable local institutions. Specifically, I focus on the civil patrols, which were government-sponsored local militias during the Guatemalan civil war. Although the Peace Accords of 1996 required the civil patrols to demobilize, I show that more nearly 20 years later, they are still patrolling, functioning as security patrols in their communities today. After considering alternative explanations, I use historical documents and rich, ethnographic evidence to draw causal links between the wartime civil patrols and the present-day security patrols. These findings begin to fill a gaping hole in the literature on the civil wars, which—until now—has largely ignored the local institutional consequences of conflict.

The study of civil wars is riven with intractable debates. When, where, and why are civil wars most likely (e.g. Fearon and Laitin 2003, Collier and Hoeffler 2004)? What role do natural resources play in shaping conflict (e.g., Collier and Hoeffler 1998, Ross 2004a, b, Lujala 2010)? Why are some rebel groups more violent than others (e.g., Humphreys and Weinstein 2006, Weinstein 2007, Wood 2010)? Yet even in this divisive field, most political scientists, economists, and policy scholars share one common conclusion: civil wars are socially destructive. “Many [scholars] fear that the devastation wrought by violent conflict destroys social capital,” write Fearon, Humphreys, and Weinstein (2009, 287), drawing on the influential work of Collier et al (2003). Indeed, “the breakdown of social order” has traditionally been presented as defining characteristic of civil wars (Collier 1999, 169).

At first glance, this consensus seems entirely reasonable. In addition to claiming millions of lives—over 80% of whom are civilians (Cairns 1997, 17)—civil wars retard economic growth (Collier and Hoeffler 1998, Collier et al. 2003, Kang

and Meernik 2005, Gates et al. 2012), provoke public health crises (Ghobarah, Huth, and Russett 2003), increase the likelihood of future conflict (Derouen and Bercovetich 2008), and leave in their wake generations of children deprived of proper nutrition (Akresh et al. 2012) and schooling (Blattman and Annan 2010, Shemyakina 2011). Put succinctly, civil wars are “development in reverse” (Collier et al. 2003, 32).

But civil wars are not *exclusively* destructive. Individuals who live through civil wars also emerge with new skills, identities (Balcells 2012), and social networks (Wood 2008, Parkinson 2013), as well as a greater sense of personal agency (Wood 2003). A related literature also finds that victims of violence and survivors of civil wars may be especially civic-minded and politically engaged (Blattman 2009, Voors et al. 2012, Shewfelt 2009, Bellows and Miguel 2009).¹ When we ignore this constructive dimension of civil wars, we overlook half the picture of life in post-conflict societies.

In this paper, I focus on just one dimension of civil wars’ constructive potential: local institutions. Specifically, I argue that durable local institutions can emerge from civil war. For those who work on interstate war, it would seem obvious to say that war reshapes and creates institutions, both domestically (Tilly 1985) and internationally (e.g., Ikenberry 2000). But surprisingly, very little has been written about how *civil wars* affect institutions. Indeed, after an extensive survey of the literature, Blattman and Miguel (2010) conclude that “the social and institutional legacies of conflict are arguably the most important but least understood of all [civil]

¹ These effects also extend off the battlefield. On the impact of crime victimization, see Bateson (2012) and Rojo Mendoza (2015).

war impacts” (2010, 42, see also Wood 2008). Blattman and Miguel (2010) go on to hypothesize that civil wars may affect state institutions (2010, 43); the US civil war, for example, spurred the creation of a system of pensions for Union soldiers (Skocpol 1992), and legal institutions have been reformed and reconstituted following civil wars in Africa (Aron 2003).

Local and informal institutions, however, have garnered less attention. “Pre-existing local institutions, structures, and traditions are usually ignored in failing states” (Gizelis and Kosek 2005, 367), and in post-conflict settings as well. Despite the exhortations of Wood (2008), Bellows and Miguel (2006) remains the only empirical study of how conflict affects local institutions. Using survey data from Sierra Leone, Bellows and Miguel (2006) find that wartime violence did *not* destroy local institutions, and by contrast, may have even increased some types of political and community engagement. As the authors themselves acknowledge, these results are “suggestive” but “preliminary” (398): the study demonstrates a correlation, rather than well-identified causal relationship (396), with no speculation about causal mechanisms.

This paper, by contrast, delves deeply into the historical, social, and personal experiences that allow new local institutions to be created during civil wars—and to persist for decades after conflict has ended. I focus on the Guatemalan civil war, which raged from 1960-1996. At the height of the war, in the early 1980s, the government created local civilian militias, called civil patrols. The civil patrols sometimes accompanied the military on raids, but their core function was to patrol their towns: night after night, small units of men walked the footpaths and streets of

their towns and villages. They searched for potential guerrillas, checked the identity documents of passers-by, and interrogated and sometimes killed suspicious individuals. Some patrols also punished local enemies, or carried out personal vendettas. Americas Watch called the patrol chiefs “little dictators, endowed with the power of life and death” (1991, 31) and the civil patrols participated in an estimated 18 percent of the war’s human rights abuses (Comisión Para el Esclarecimiento Histórico 2004, 51).

The Peace Accords of 1996 required the demobilization of the civil patrols. But twenty years later, Guatemalans are still patrolling. As night falls across Guatemala, small teams of men gather in alleyways and courtyards, storefronts and church vestibules. Huddling in small pools of light, they review their plans and check their equipment. Then they head out on their rounds, melting back into the darkness. These self-styled security patrols comb their towns and villages for criminals, walking moonlit streets and footpaths, interrogating passers-by, checking identity documents, and responding to reports of crimes. They detain and interrogate alleged criminals and other suspicious individuals, who are sometimes punished, tortured, or even lynched. Guatemala’s present-day security patrols are eerily reminiscent of the wartime civil patrols, from which, I argue, they are direct descendants.

After providing a more thorough introduction to the Guatemalan case, I use historical and ethnographic evidence to draw causal links between the civil patrols, and the present-day security patrols. Had the civil patrols not existed decades earlier, today the security patrols would not exist in the form that they do, and they

would not enjoy such influence in their communities. This argument draws on some historical documents—declassified US government cables, newspaper reports, and old ethnographies and dissertations based on fieldwork conducted in Guatemala before the civil war—as well as an original survey of community leaders across Guatemala. The core of the argument, however, is based on interpersonal, qualitative fieldwork conducted in 2009-2010. I conducted participant-observation research and interviews in three rural municipalities, as well as some elite interviews in Guatemala City. Here, I primarily use evidence from Joyabaj, a majority indigenous (K'iche') municipality in the department of El Quiché. During the Guatemalan civil war, Joyabaj was the site of genocidal violence. Today, Joyabaj has a large, powerful security patrol called the Guardians of the Neighborhood (*Los Guardianes del Vecindario*).

The close focus on a single municipality presents trade-offs. On the one hand, rich data about this single case allows me to develop a detailed understanding of the evolution and operations of Joyabaj's security patrol. Careful ethnographic research is often the best—and sometimes only—way to study processes that are local, informal, and poorly documented (e.g., Parkinson 2013); indeed, the basic information presented here simply would not exist without deep immersion in a single place. But on the other hand, such an approach limits my argument's scope and generalizability. To mitigate these shortcomings, I incorporate comparative evidence from across Guatemala where possible. In the conclusion, I also argue that theoretical implications of my argument should have wide-reaching relevance, shedding light on post-conflict dynamics in many other settings around the world.

The Case & The Puzzle

The Guatemalan civil war began in 1960, when young leftist military officers rose up against their conservative commanders. Their attempt to capture key military bases failed, but throughout the 1960s, they continued to launch small-scale guerrilla attacks in Eastern Guatemala. Inexperience, a lack of planning, weak ties to the population, and a strong local government intelligence network meant that by the late 1960s, the rebels had been quashed and the survivors dispersed (REMHI: Recovery of Historical Memory Project 1999, 190-205).

Defeated but undeterred, the few remaining rebel leaders redoubled their organizing efforts and forged new ties with leftist organizations, labor unions, university students, and indigenous rights activists. By the mid-1970s, they were working with a new generation of radicals to instigate an urban insurgency in Guatemala City. At the same time, armed guerrillas moved into the heavily indigenous Western highlands. There, they established strong relationships with local communities. Recruits from all over the country flocked to the mountains to join the guerrillas. The war intensified throughout the late 1970s and in the early 1980s. In 1982 alone, an estimated 75,000 people were killed (Schirmer 1998, 44) – primarily civilians in the Western Highlands, where the military was waging a scorched earth campaign of indiscriminate violence. The government formed the first civil patrols in 1981, and by 1982 military commanders had instituted the patrols across the entire conflict zone.

If we are interested in making the case that local institutions can emerge from civil wars, then Guatemala is a hard case, for two reasons. First, the war was

incredibly destructive – precisely the last setting most scholars would expect to see new local institutions forming. Controlling for population, the Guatemalan civil war was bloodiest conflict in the Americas since the Mexican Revolution, and the war’s cultural toll rivaled the Spanish Conquest centuries earlier (Manz 1988, 12). In addition to carrying out a genocide against its own people, the Guatemalan government specifically sought to destroy traditional institutions, social networks, and leadership structures in Highland communities. Some residents of rural areas, particularly in the Ixil Triangle in northern Quiché, were forcibly resettled into model villages, or *polos de desarrollo* (Stoll 1993). Even for those whose communities remained nominally intact, moving about—or between—towns required proper paperwork, which the military sometimes refused to issue (Manz 1988). Members of peasants’ rights groups and cooperatives were systematically persecuted and targeted for assassination (Davis 1988, 22-23, Carmack 1988, 44), and festivals, schools, and especially the Catholic church were strictly supervised by the military. In hard-hit towns like Nebaj and Joyabaj, the military physically occupied the Catholic churches (Stoll 1993, Remijnse 2002), and across the Western Highlands, “the most sacred places and artifacts—the churches, the bells, the saints—were used by the army as tools of repression” (Montejo 1999, 160). After the government killed three of its priests, the Catholic Church formally shut down in the most war-torn department, El Quiché (Carmack 1988, 45, Lada 2003).

Second, the civil patrols were imposed by the Guatemalan government. Theoretically, during a civil war, local institutions may emerge or evolve in at least two different ways: through innovation or imposition. As war disrupts state services

and undermines existing institutions, individuals and communities use their agency to craft new institutions, or to alter existing ones. This is innovation: bottom-up institution-building by dint of necessity, with a dash of creativity. In Mozambique, for example, Nordstrom (1997) saw people “forge themselves and their worlds in new and vital ways” (198):

Average civilians on the frontlines set up remarkable resources. These actions were self-generated: they depended on no established social institutions or political infrastructures. People established services to find lost and kidnapped family members, find homes for orphans, and care for the wounded and maimed. They instituted healing ceremonies, and even classes in primary schools, for the war-traumatized. They organized informal food exchange programs, markets, and resource centers. They set up dispute resolution committees and informal mechanisms to take care of the dislocated and impoverished. They initiated communication networks to inform people about attacks, troop movements, political developments, and safe zones. They created a warzone society with functioning institutions (Nordstrom 1997, 206).

Similar dynamics also occurred in Guatemala, primarily in refugee camps in Mexico (Manz 1988, Montejo 1999) and in the *comunidades de población en resistencia* (CPRs) (Stoll 1993) – not in the towns and villages, where the military and the civil patrols maintained tight control over daily life. Innovative institutions arise out of local initiative and solve functional problems, often in normatively positive ways, so we should not be surprised to see them persist into the post-war period.

The second pathway to institution-building is *imposition*. During a civil war, outside groups may impose new institutions on communities. Armed groups, the government, or even foreign powers create new institutions and compel combatants and/or local residents to participate. The LTTE of Sri Lanka, the FMLN in El Salvador, and the RUF in Sierra Leone all created their own court systems, for example (Sivakumaran 2009). In Mozambique, RENAMO’s feared *majuba* was a

civilian force that “policed the population, sometimes brutally, and reaped the rewards of increased access to the spoils of war and the potential for upward social mobility” (Nordstrom 1997, 55). Imposed institutions many enhance, or perhaps commonly, violate local residents’ human rights. As Moe reminds us, institutions are “often *not* cooperative or beneficial for many of the people affected by them. They involve the exercise of power” (2005, 218).

Guatemala’s civil patrols clearly formed through imposition. The Guatemalan government always sought to portray the civil patrols as voluntary, autonomous groups: a spontaneous expression of the population’s loyalty to the government.² But this was pure fiction. Contemporary testimonies (e.g., Montejo 1987), both major truth commission reports (REMHI: Recovery of Historical Memory Project 1999, Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico 1999), NGO reports (Americas Watch and Physicians for Human Rights 1991, Jay 1993), secondary sources (Manz 1988, Stoll 1993, Schirmer 1998, Garrard-Burnett 2010, Remijnse 2002), and present-day interviews all confirm that in conflict zones, the military required men, from teenagers to men in their mid-sixties, to patrol. Participation was obligatory, on pain of death. Yet even as the patrollers were reluctant fighters, they tortured and executed their own neighbors (Green 1999, 31). By the end of the war, the civil patrols were widely reviled, both by local civilians, and by many of the patrollers themselves. The civil patrols were externally imposed and repressive – just the sort of institution that should be least likely to continue operating voluntarily after a

² The civil patrols formal names reflected this effort. The government initially called them *patrullas de autodefensa civil* (civil self-defense patrols, abbreviated PACs), and later *comités voluntarios de defensa civil* (voluntary civil defense committees, abbreviated CVDCs).

conflict has ended. This paper therefore aims to demonstrate that even in the least probable circumstances, civil wars can produce and perpetuate new local institutions.

From the Civil Patrols to Security Patrols?

Even in the waning years of the Guatemalan civil war, the civil patrols remained an important local institution. Up to 700,000 men were still enrolled in the patrols in 1987.³ But by the late 1980s, some groups patrolled less frequently, and others began to disband. The Peace Accords of 1996 required all remaining patrols to cease operations. Nonetheless, de facto the patrols remained “an alternative power structure in the countryside” (Amnesty International 2002, 7). The former civil patrollers used their organizational heft to intervene in local and national politics, most frequently seeking compensation for their wartime service. Their activism often includes confrontational, high-risk collective action, such as blockading major national highways, occupying government buildings, looting, and intimidating their opponents (Sáenz de Tejada 2004).

Simultaneously, security patrols began to operate across Guatemala, presumably in response to Guatemala’s dramatic postwar crime wave. Divided into small units, these groups patrol the streets and footpaths at night, and they stop pedestrians and check their documents. In most instances, the pedestrians produce their documents and proceed without incident—though there is no law in Guatemala requiring individuals to carry identification. When passers-by refuse to comply with the patrollers’ requests or misunderstandings ensue, however, the

³ “Voluntary Civil Defense Committees (CVDC) in Guatemala,” Confidential Cable, Aug. 20, 1987. DNSA #GU01123.

results can be disastrous. For example, on March 17, 2012 a family was walking through Ciudad Quetzal, San Juan Sacatepéquez, Guatemala at about 10 pm. “We just heard them shouting, ‘Stop there!’” one of the family members recounted. “And one of them shot in the air. But then next to him, there was another one who shot at us.” One person was killed and another injured. The newspaper reported that the shots were fired by a group that “calls themselves the Patrollers, which, apparently, is dedicated to providing security in the areas.” After the incident, more than 200 patrollers gathered, preventing the authorities from reaching the victims (González 2012).

Besides patrolling, these groups also regulate local behavior. In some towns, they have made their own laws that are completely out of synch with national laws and the Guatemalan constitution. Curfews are especially common, as in Santiago Atitlán, Sololá, where young men are sometimes beaten for selling tacos too late at night.⁴ The situation is even more extreme in San Miguel Acatán, Huehuetenango, a Highland town where the local security council has defined and banned 84 offenses, including being on the street after 9 pm; the wearing of earrings, tattoos, or long hair by men; divorce; playing basketball at night; criticizing any other person; and witchcraft (Orantes 2006). Extralegal policing groups physically punish alleged wrongdoers, often in public. Throwing drunks or other wrongdoers in public fountains or washing-pools seems to be an especially common punishment, as described in Huehuetenango by Castillo (2007). Security patrols also participate in lynchings (Godoy 2006, Weston 2008), such as the 2009 lynching of a federal police

⁴ Interview with Mario Polanco, director of the Grupo de Apoyo Mutuo (GAM). Guatemala City, 1 March 2010.

officer in San Juan Cotzal, El Quiché (Figueroa 2009b).

The practices of the security patrols are reminiscent of the wartime civil patrols, and experts and local residents often draw connections between the two groups. For example, Iduvina Hernández, the head of a civil society group called Seguridad Democrática (SEDEM), told me that the the present-day security committees have

really allowed a resurgence of what had been, in their time, the civil patrols. ... They detain people, they capture people, they have committed acts of torture, they have committed extrajudicial executions, they are armed without permission, they carry weapons, and they have begun to form illegal groups and clandestine security services.⁵

Similarly, when the residents of Zacualpa, El Quiché (which is right next to Joyabaj) began forming security committees in the late 1990s, some neighbors worried openly that these new security groups could be a continuation of the abusive civil patrols from the civil war (López 2000). Mario Polanco, the director of the Grupo Mutuo de Apoyo (GAM, a human rights organization), understands why one might draw these types of connections. “The vigilance that (the patrols) engage in, it is the same as what the PACs did, the *patrullas de autodefensa civil*,” he says.

To the extent that historical and sub-national data exists, it is consistent with the notion that the present-day security patrols grew out of the wartime civil patrols. Remarkably, a 1987 cable from the US Embassy in Guatemala City captured the beginning of the civil patrols’ transformation into security patrols. “Recently,” the Embassy wrote, “some communities have begun to rethink the CVDC’s [civil

⁵ Interview, Guatemala City, 3 March 2010.

patrols] because of the rising crime rate. Some have been reinstated as a type of 'neighborhood watch' operation."⁶

Today, security patrols concentrate in the Western Highlands, the region of Guatemala that was the epicenter of the civil war in the early 1980s. There is no official data on the existence or distribution of security patrols, but one respected NGO has information suggesting they exist in Quetzaltenango, Huehuetenango, San Marcos, Quiché, Sololá, Totonicapán, the Petén, Guatemala, Sacatepéquez, and Chimaltenango⁷--all of which are departments in the Western Highlands, with the exception of the Petén. Consistent with this general perception, between 2000 and 2012, Guatemala's leading newspaper, *Prensa Libre*, published articles on 20 security patrols, 17 of which were located in the Western Highlands, or the immediately adjacent Pacific Slope.⁸

To gather more systematic data on the existence of security patrols, and other related practices, in 2009 I conducted an original survey. Enumerators traveled to a randomly selected sample of rural municipalities. In each municipality, they interviewed three key community leaders about municipal-level security practices and institutions. The survey included questions about the presence of security committees and security patrols. I also asked, specifically, whether ex-civil patrollers were patrolling today. The results indicate that security committees exist

⁶ "Voluntary Civil Defense Committees (CVDC) in Guatemala," Confidential Cable, Aug. 20, 1987, Paragraph 19. DNSA #GU01123.

⁷ Interview with Iduvina Hernández, Guatemala City, 3 March 2010.

⁸ This is certainly an undercount of the true number of security patrols in the country, because patrols are not considered newsworthy unless they have recently done something especially spectacular. That said, I have no reason to believe that *Prensa Libre* would be biased in favor of reporting on patrols in the Western Highlands, as opposed to other regions. If anything, the Western Highlands has traditionally been the most inaccessible and marginalized region of the country, so any bias should mitigate against thorough reporting there.

in an estimated 55 percent of Guatemala’s municipalities, and these groups are actively patrolling in approximately 44 percent of the municipalities.⁹ In a majority of municipalities with security patrols, respondents specifically said that ex-civil patrollers are patrolling today. These institutions all appear to be clustered in the Western Highlands—which is consistent with the claim that the security patrols grew out of the civil patrols, but not dispositive evidence. In the following sections, I strengthen this argument by first considering alternative explanations, and then using a case study of the security patrol in Joyabaj to evaluate whether these groups actually have concrete ties to the civil patrols of the civil war era.

Alternative Explanations

Sub-national patterns in Guatemala suggest a correlation between the wartime civil patrols and the present-day security patrols. But did the security patrols really emerge from the civil patrols? What other theories could account for their existence? Below, I address three of the most plausible alternative explanations for security patrolling in Guatemala today: state absence, continuity over time, and indigenous culture.

State Absence

The absence of the state, or a lack of effective state-provided policing, is often cited as a cause of vigilantism. “When the state fails to supply basic security and protection of property,” Mehlum, Moene, and Torvik (2002) write, “violent entrepreneurs not only seize the opportunity of plundering, but some also enter the

⁹ All national estimates have a 95% confidence interval of +/- 7.2 percentage points. The sampling frame excluded the Guatemala City metro area and the department of the Petén, for security reasons. The municipality of Ayutla, San Marcos was included in the sample, but interviews could not be completed there due to immediate threats to the enumerator’s safety.

protection business and provide some protection against plunderers” (448). Could state absence explain the distribution of present-day security patrolling in Guatemala? One could imagine a scenario in which the state withdraws from the war-affected Highlands, and consequently, people in that region turn to security patrols. There are, however, several problems with this scenario. Policing is indeed abysmal in Guatemala, but the police are uniformly ineffective and distrusted, across the entire country. As part of a broader research project, I also conducted fieldwork in Eastern Guatemala – a region that was unaffected by the most severe phase of the civil war, and where there are virtually no security patrols today. Local residents there despise the police just as much as the residents of Joyabaj, accusing them of failing to respond to calls, driving drunk through town, and even raping local girls. Yet this distrust has not prompted them to organize a security patrol, or engage in any other collective action for protection.

The state absence argument is also implausible because, put simply, the state is not absent from the settings where security patrols operate. To be sure, the police are ineffective and distrusted. But even in municipal town centers in the Western Highlands today, other state authorities are typically present, including mayors, prosecutors, judges, teachers, and employees of other government agencies. Rather than occurring in the absence of the state, security patrols interact frequently with the state. Mayors sometimes go patrolling or give money or supplies to the patrollers, as in Joyabaj and other municipalities. The security patrols in San Miguel Acatán and San Juan Cotzal are both led by those town’s mayors, for example.

Finally, to the extent that a correlation could exist between state absence and security patrolling, it would be because the security patrols *caused* the state's absence – not the reverse. When security patrols suspect the police of crimes, or are simply fed up with their corruption, they often expel the police from town – as occurred in Joyabaj in 2009, during my fieldwork (Figueroa 2009a). Security committees expel the police by physically attacking them, breaking into the local sub-station of the National Civil Police. They damage police property, burn police vehicles, and sometimes injure or even lynch federal police officers. And most commonly, they face no consequences: no investigations, no prosecutions. To the contrary, the police typically withdraw from the affected municipality, sometimes not returning for years. Consequently, dozens of federal police stations sit abandoned across the Western Highlands. But this state absence is a result of security patrol activity, not its cause.

Continuity over Time

Perhaps security patrols exist in the Western Highlands because that region has always been predisposed toward collective, non-state means of providing security, even before the civil war. Careful scrutiny of the historical record suggests this is not likely. As Carey (2008, 2013) masterfully demonstrates, the state was remarkably present in municipal town centers in pre-war Guatemala, including in the Western Highlands. Even monolingual indigenous-language speaking women routinely took their interpersonal disputes (for example, charges of slander or marketplace chicanery) to the formal court system, and they respected the courts' decisions (usually small fines, or very short jail sentences).

To further investigate the nature of policing and local security in pre-war Guatemala, I undertook a systematic review of 65 anthropology dissertations based on in-depth fieldwork in rural Guatemala before 1978.¹⁰ Anthropologists have long been fascinated by Guatemala, and their dissertations are a goldmine of information: they contain mountains of first-hand observations from the field,¹¹ all recorded before the researcher—or anyone, for that matter—knew the scope of the civil war that was about to engulf Guatemala, or had any inkling of the security problems the country would face today. The dissertations provide detailed inventories of the institutions, government offices, clubs, and organizations in each municipality, often describing jails and local courts in great detail. They also catalogue the types of offenses in each community, and local conflict-resolution systems in extensive detail. In fact, several dissertations record *precisely* the kinds of crimes that would trigger vigilantism in Guatemala today, in the exact same municipalities where security patrolling and lynchings now occur. But before the civil war, these offenses were addressed with fines, or jail sentences. Even in San Miguel Acatán, Huehuetenango—the municipality where 84 offenses can spark physical punishment today—offenses like drunkenness were punished with jail time in the 1950s, not beatings (Grollig 1959, 118). Similarly, Panajachel, Sololá has been the

¹⁰ Working with a research assistant, I searched electronic databases to create a bibliography of anthropology dissertations filed at US universities that could be based on fieldwork in rural Guatemala before 1978. Then, we ordered the dissertations, and my research assistant culled those that were not actually based on sustained, first-person field research in a single location (or, in a few cases, a small number of closely related sites). In the end, we were left with 65 dissertations that met the selection criteria, and which we were able to access through our library system, other libraries in the area, or inter-library loan.

¹¹ I chose to review dissertations, rather than published books, precisely because dissertations typically contain so many tedious details that are cut from book manuscripts. Also, many dissertations are never published as books, so reviewing dissertations provided information about local history in a broader range of municipalities.

site of dramatic public lynchings in recent years, and the town has a powerful security patrol. Yet in the 1960s, local residents steered away from crime due to “Protestantism and the presence of police and courts pledged to enforce national laws”—not the threat of vigilantism (Hinshaw 1966, 83). It is always difficult to prove a negative, but having scoured literally every available source, I am unable to find any hint of security patrolling, lynching, or any other form of organized, collective vigilantism in the Western Highlands before the civil war. Of course civilians sometimes played a role in local security, but they work in concert with the state, not in opposition to it. One elderly interviewee explains how things worked in pre-war Joyabaj:

When someone did something wrong in the rural areas, for example if he broke into and stole from a house, or if he stole a tool, or if he injured someone else with a machete or something like that, then what the vice-mayor did was ask for help, tie him up, and bring him to the town center. But calmly. They brought them here, and then the police would take the person prisoner. And the courts heard the case. Calmly. But now people do things on their own. And before you never saw that; it never happened.

Indigenous Culture

Indigenous communities are often understood as cohesive, with advantages in collective action and the provision of security (Kaplan 2012). and the media often describes lynchings in Guatemala as “*justicia maya*,” or Mayan justice. So one could argue that indigenous culture is *causing* individuals to form security patrols today. This is an alternative explanation that must be taken seriously, because security patrolling is most common in the majority-indigenous Western Highlands.¹²

¹² Precisely because of their large indigenous population, the Western Highlands were also the region targeted for the most extreme government-perpetrated violence in the 1980s, and the Western Highlands were the epicenter of civil patrol activity.

Yet despite this correlation, there are significant logical, historical, and cultural problems with the indigenous culture argument. First, indigenous communities in Guatemala are not the bucolic mountaintop villages that we might imagine. Even before the civil war, they were riven with religious conflict (Brintnall 1979), and long-running, cross-generational fights over scarce land (Stoll 1999). Second, micro-foundational evidence is not consistent with the indigenous culture argument. Even majority-indigenous communities in Guatemala have historically included a small *ladino* (non-indigenous) elite of landowners, schoolteachers, and government employees. In Joyabaj, all the top leaders of the town's security patrol are *ladino*, and *ladinos* and indigenous men are evenly represented in the rank-and-file members. How could indigenous culture possibly be responsible for these *ladinos'* behavior? Third, the behavior the security patrols today is not compatible with traditional indigenous justice systems. The security patrols routinely engage in violent vigilantism, beating, interrogating, torturing, banishing, and sometimes even lynching suspected criminals or deviants. Traditional indigenous justice systems in Guatemala, on the other hand, emphasize restitution, not retribution (Sieder 2011a, b). Critically, there is absolutely no history of capital punishment in pre-war indigenous communities—except those executions ordered and carried by the *ladino* state, most notably the famous public shootings of alleged criminals under Gen. Jorge Ubico in the 1930s.¹³ Rather than replicating or extending from indigenous traditions, security patrolling actually represents a rejection of indigenous practices.

¹³ I base this claim on the review of prewar ethnographies, described above; the historical literature on indigenous Guatemala (e.g., Grandin 2000), and interviews with elderly residents of Joyabaj.

Causal Links in Joyabaj

Having addressed the most important alternative explanations for security patrolling in Guatemala today, I use a careful case study of one patrol's trajectory to draw causal links between the wartime civil patrols and the present-day security patrols. Working within the case of Joyabaj, El Quiché, I probe the interview data to determine what role, if any, the institutional legacy of the civil patrol plays at key turning points in the founding of Joyabaj's security patrol, and in their daily operations. I also pay attention to the ways that the interviewees themselves connect ideas and topics, which reveals that many of them spontaneously associate the wartime civil patrol with the current security patrol, and vice versa. Below, I first introduce the *Guardianes del Vecindario*, and then I identify three links between the civil patrol and the *Guardianes*: tactics; organization and leadership, and language.

Los Guardianes del Vecindario

Joyabaj, El Quiché is the town center of a rural municipality that was the site of numerous massacres and acts of genocide during the civil war. When the war ended, the municipality's residents felt calmer and secure, like they "could breathe fresh air again."¹⁴ But then violence returned to Joyabaj, in the form of common crime and lynchings. Local residents perceived an increase in muggings, robberies on buses, and thefts of remittance money, and they grew increasingly concerned about the

¹⁴ Unless otherwise specified, all quotations in this section come from interviews with the residents of Joyabaj, conducted in October and November 2009.

maras (youth gangs) who were terrorizing Guatemala City. Rule of law seemed to evaporate, and residents believed—and still believe—that gang members could come to Joyabaj and start killing people for no reason, just to steal their cell phones and perhaps Q50 (US\$6) in cash.

The residents of Joyabaj mounted a muscular response to this new threat. As Diego remembers, “the violence came back again. But now it is a different type of violence. Now they are thieves, gang members. ... So after that the population got organized. Because this is an organized town.” By the mid-2000s, a security patrol called *Los Guardianes del Vecindario* (The Guardians of the Neighborhood) was operating openly in Joyabaj.

The patrol’s top leaders are not indigenous, but both indigenous and non-indigenous members are found at the middle and lower ranks. Women, boys under the age of 18, and men above the age of 60 are banned from participating. The wealthier people in town tend to be the most active in the Guardianes. All the leaders of the Guardianes are prominent members of other institutions as well, such as development committees, schools, and churches. As Octavio, a local law enforcement official explains, “These are people from town who are quite well-educated. They are not peasants. They are not indigenous.” Consistent with these impressions, the Guardianes think of themselves as important and upstanding members of the community.

The Guardianes del Vecindario number between 200 and 1000, depending on who you ask. I personally have seen as many as 250-300 Guardianes gather for meetings. Adherents to the higher number claim there are more than 200

Guardianes in each of Joyabaj's four neighborhoods. Within each neighborhood, the Guardianes are organized into small units of ten to twenty men. The groups alternate patrolling duty, so that each participant has time to rest. Some of the most enthusiastic Guardianes go out once a week, while others patrol as infrequently as once a month. Though the organization is extremely decentralized, the small groups from the different neighborhood groups are all in contact, and they cooperate with each other when larger numbers of men are needed for a complex task. Both when they are on duty and when they are at home, the Guardianes are in constant communication thanks to their cell phones and radios. Abel, a leader of the Guardianes, explains how they coordinate their activities:

Let's say that someone does something to you, and people tell me about it. Immediately I call here and there and we gather everyone and we meet and everyone comes. That's how it is. We are united, right.

The Guardianes del Vecindario engage in a wide variety of illegal activities—including carrying unlicensed firearms, illegal detentions, assaults, torture, kidnappings, and possibly extrajudicial executions—but they are not a clandestine group. In fact, they go to great lengths to publicize their existence and their work. They invite the national media to press conferences, they make announcements on local radio stations, and they record and then broadcast their meetings, parties, and violent actions on local television. They drive around blasting messages from loudspeakers mounted on vehicles, saying, "we invite you to join us as we patrol to protect the town from gang members, from criminals." In 2009-2010, they also had large signs posted all over town proclaiming, "Los Guardianes del Vecindario: Town Organized Against Crime." The background of the sign read, "We are alert 24 hours a

day because we love our town.” In its center, the sign featured an illustration of a gang member behind bars.¹⁵

The core functions of the Guardianes include patrolling the streets of Joyabaj at night and responding to calls for help. Seeking to “establish order so that there isn’t any crime,” the Guardianes patrol on foot and in private vehicles. Each small group sets its own schedule, but they usually patrol from 9 pm until midnight or 1 am or 2 am, sometimes staying out as late as 4 am. The Guardianes have a large stockpile of firearms, and they often carry pistols, shotguns, and rifles while patrolling. About 75 percent of the Guardianes have their own personal firearms, and some neighbors, local business owners, and allegedly the mayor have given them rifles and money to buy additional guns. According to the police officers assigned to Joyabaj, most of the Guardianes’ guns are unregistered.

While patrolling, the Guardianes monitor pedestrian and vehicular traffic in Joyabaj. Ángela, a young indigenous woman living in the town center, explains that if you want to go out at night,

You would have to carry your *carnet* (student ID), for example, or better yet your *cédula* (national ID card). ... If you have an emergency or something, you can go out, but always with a good reason. Because like I said, many young people who drive around in their cars, even men, who go out late, like at 11 (pm) or 12 (am), they (the patrollers) detain them and ask them where they are going. So that’s when you have to identify yourself.

Carlos agrees that the Guardianes interview people on the street and ask them for their “papers,” especially if they are unknown or from out of town. If the person doesn’t have “good answers” about where they are going, “they become a suspicious

¹⁵ On a recent (May 2015) return visit to Joyabaj, I observed that these signs had been taken down. However, I confirmed that the Guardianes still exist.

person.” When a vehicle enters town at night, the Guardianes stop it and ask where the driver is coming from, where he or she is going, and why. Some local residents say that the Guardianes also search the cars they stop, though the leaders of the Guardianes adamantly deny this.

There is no official uniform of the Guardianes del Vecindario, though some Guardianes like to wear black so they blend into the night. Controversially, the Guardianes sometimes wear ski masks on their rounds. One patroller told me that the Guardianes wear the masks so that “if someone beats someone else, they won’t know who it was.”

Stories of abuse by the Guardianes are rampant. According to townspeople and members of the Guardianes, they regularly detain and beat suspected criminals. The townspeople know that if they do not behave correctly, the Guardianes will teach them a lesson. For example, after they caught a young boy stealing, they beat him over his family’s objections. “People are afraid to do anything bad now that the patrol is here,” a local resident said, “because they know they will be caught. And if they fall into [the Guardianes’] hands, they’ll beat them.” Especially when the Guardianes were first founded,

they were very violent, right. They would grab whoever was breaking the rules and normally they would give them a good beating. That is, by assaulting them they wanted to straighten them out.

In the past, they also physically abused drunks, throwing them into the communal water tanks as punishment.

The Guardianes’ repertoire of violence extends beyond beatings to include whipping, torture, and kidnapping. In at least a few cases, the Guardianes have held

suspects overnight and interrogated them, attempting to make them give up the names of their accomplices. When the Guardianes catch people who are not from Joyabaj, or sometimes when a local resident is a repeat offender, they kidnap and banish them. As one leader of the Guardianes explains, “we throw them in a truck at 3 am and we go and leave them somewhere and say, ‘Get out of here and we never want to see you here again.’”

Some *joyabatecos* believe that the Guardianes kill suspected criminals, and some of the Guardianes’ leaders admit to planning lynchings. When one of the Guardianes’ neighborhood units finds out that a crime has been committed, “we call everyone and we decide if we’ll burn [the criminals] or what, if they’ll be allowed to live or not.” Speaking about a specific criminal recently detained by this small group, the group leader said:

if he makes another mistake, we won’t hand him over to the police again. No, now that we gave him the opportunity and he didn’t shape up, we’ll have to burn him. That’s how this works. Because if not, there will never be order here.

Tactics

There are solid, tangible connections between the structure and behavior of the wartime civil patrol and the Guardianes del Vecindario. With its small, semi-autonomous patrolling units, its territorial organization based in specific micro-neighborhoods, and its rotational schedule of late-night patrolling shifts, the Guardianes del Vecindario looks nearly identical to the old civil patrol. The Guardianes even use the civil patrol’s old system of numerical codes to encrypt their radio communications, calling each other by numbers instead of their names.

These tactical overlaps are no coincidence. Most of the current leaders of the

Guardianes del Vecindario served in the military or the civil patrol during the civil war. The ex-patrollers have practical knowledge about how to patrol and how to punish wrongdoers, which they transmit to the new generation during training sessions. Older men who served in the wartime civil patrol teach the younger men the communication codes they used in the war, and they get out their guns, set up targets, and teach the new Guardianes how to shoot. As Rigoberto explains, “the younger men are learning from the older ones, how things are done.” Benigno remembers that when he attended training sessions for Guardianes del Vecindario, ex-civil patrollers “would always seize the floor, talking about military strategies.” The ex-patrollers “have experience,” says Rony, another Guardián. “They know how to use guns, how to form groups to control areas.” Even elderly ex-civil patrollers and ex-soldiers who are too old to patrol collaborate with the Guardianes del Vecindario, advising the group on strategy and sending their sons out to patrol.

The Guardianes’ specific behaviors also have their origins in the civil war. For example, the Guardianes are obsessed with checking identity documents and preventing strangers from entering the town at night. Today, local residents know that if they go out at night, they have to carry their identity documents with them. Furthermore, they must have a “good reason” so that the Guardianes “do not do anything to you, because they can arrest you and everything.” Anyone on the street after dark is liable to be asked for documents. As Pedro, a Guardián, explains,

If a car is still out at night, we ask, we talk to them to see what they are doing at that time. Motorcycles too, or any person who is out at nighttime, we talk to them and ask for their documents, identification, to see if they are from here or another place. The patrol requires that.

Local residents are well aware of this requirement. According to Isabel (m),

Anyone who comes along, they (the patrol) ask them, “where are you going?” Or if they have any doubts, they write down (the information), and they ask, “what’s your name?” And if the person has documents, the person is good.

This is a direct corollary to the civil war, when the civil patrols had to “make sure there were no unknown people on the street.”- Identity documents were vitally important during the war. As Alberto recalls,

it was prudent to stay at home and not go out because they would ask you for papers everywhere. And sometimes you weren’t carrying your papers. Or if you were carrying your papers, maybe it would end up that you’d be on a list, right. That happened to many people. Many, many had to stay there, because they appeared on a list. And then they never came back.

Karla’s husband, for example, was disappeared because of a problem with his papers. “If you didn’t carry your cédula exactly right and you didn’t have exactly the right papers, they could grab you off the roads,” Karla remembers. “Yes, that’s what happened to him.”

Leadership and Organization

The second continuity between the wartime civil patrol and the Guardianes del Vecindario is leadership: the very same individuals who were in the civil patrol are today at the helm of the Guardianes. “It’s the same ones, yes, the same ones,” says Juventino. As Silencio explains, the people who are leaders of the Guardianes “are mostly people who were the chiefs, they are still in there.” Jacobo concurs, “some who participated back then are still there, right. There are people who participated (in the civil patrol) and liked it, so they are there (in the Guardianes).”

The former civil patrollers are busy men in their fifties or beyond, but they have strong personal incentives to participate in the Guardianes del Vecindario. By resurrecting the patrol, they have an opportunity to regain the status and influence

they enjoyed during the civil war. The patrollers “handled everything in that time. They were the ones who decided everything here,” says Juventino, “in conjunction with the military, right.” Today, Guardianes del Vecindario serves as a vehicle for its members “to maintain their position in society.” The leaders enjoy the order, ritual, and fanfare associated with being patrollers. The ex-chiefs like to “run around, all full of themselves;” strutting with their pistols helps them “to find their egos.” Some residents of Joyabaj think these men have joined the Guardianes del Vecindario because “they want to control the town.” “These people who are in charge of the group, they have political interests,” asserts Juan. “In, let’s say, the next elections they want to be mayor, or they want to occupy elected offices. Yes, there are interests, personal interests behind all of this.”¹⁶

The latent organizational structure of the civil patrols also facilitates security patrolling in Joyabaj today. During the civil war, most men patrolled with small, neighborhood-based units of eight to twelve men. Week after week, year after year, they walked the streets of their towns at night with the same companions. Strong bonds formed amongst the patrollers. Patrolling made people “more united,” Silencio argues,

because we walked around in groups. We walked in circles in groups, one group up there, one group over there. ... So I am friends with the people who were with me. ... I am friends with them still.

Given the patrols’ local nature and the enduring social ties amongst patrollers, the networks created by the civil patrols remain intact. Today, most former civil patrollers in Joyabaj can list off the names of everyone else in their small group from

¹⁶ One of the heads of the Guardianes del Vecindario did in fact run for mayor in a subsequent election, although he lost the election.

memory, and they have frequent contact with their former patrol-mates. These networks enhance communication among former patrollers and facilitate security patrolling.

The link between the leadership of the civil patrol and the Guardianes was most obvious when the latter was founded. At this critical juncture, the Guardianes emerged as an extralegal security patrol, rather than a peaceful neighborhood watch group, precisely because of the legacy of the civil patrol. The Guardianes del Vecindario formed in approximately 2007, when two specific incidents in town made them realize that they had to take drastic action to protect themselves. In the first, hired assassins (*"sicarios"*) from Eastern Guatemala killed a popular resident of Joyabaj in front of his house at 7 am, in cold blood and in plain view. In the second incident, which occurred around the same time, an elderly widow was robbed and beaten.

Following these crimes, a young Evangelical pastor decided to organize a neighborhood watch. The original idea was simple: neighbors would exchange phone numbers and advise each other of suspicious behavior. Around sixty people attended the first meeting, which was just for the residents of the "La Colonia" neighborhood. There was a great deal of interest, so in cooperation with the mayor the pastor scheduled a second, larger meeting for the entire town. The group considered and rejected several options for providing security in town, including hiring private guards and requesting more police officers.

Then, a cadre of older men hijacked the meeting. Citing their experience as civil patrollers during the civil war, and reminding the townspeople of how

effectively the civil patrol kept the guerrillas away during the war, they proposed that instead of merely exchanging phone numbers, active patrolling was necessary to prevent criminals from coming to Joyabaj. A majority of the audience agreed that they “had to defend themselves and protect their territory” by patrolling, and the ex-civil patrollers seized control of the nascent organization. As the pastor remembers,

some people came [to the meeting] who had been leaders in the time of the guerrilla. ... Now [the problem] is not the guerrilla but rather *maras*, gangs, I think they call them in the United States. ... So there were people at that meeting who were prepared to carry out the work of patrolling. So then, given that in the time of the guerrilla I was very young, I didn’t know how to do that work. So then I ceded my place as president so that someone else who had more experience could occupy that post and better direct what we were going to do.

Thus the Guardianes del Vecindario were born.

Language and Perceptions

Alejandro, one of the leaders of the Guardianes, vehemently dislikes the fact that local residents call both the Guardianes and the wartime civil patrol “the patrol.” “They call us patrollers,” he says,

but we are not patrollers. We are Guardianes. We are the Guardianes del Vecindario. Before, in the time of the guerrilla we were called patrollers. This was in the time of the violence, in the time when the country was at war. But not now. Now peace has been signed. This is known worldwide. So we call ourselves the Guardianes del Vecindario.

But despite his impassioned efforts, Alejandro has not been able to dissuade his neighbors from calling the Guardianes “patrollers,”- probably because there are such clear parallels between the two groups. Links between the wartime civil patrol and the Guardianes del Vecindario are considered obvious and are universally acknowledged in Joyabaj, to the extent that local residents use the exact same terms to refer to the two organizations. “People have arrived at the point of saying they are

patrollers,” Fernanda explains. “But they gave themselves another name, given that before they were called patrollers. The civil patrols were the patrollers. But not now. Now they have another name.” Michelle agrees. “Here there are some patrollers,” she says, “but now they are Guardianes del Vecindario.”

Both the townspeople and the Guardianes themselves view the Guardianes del Vecindario as a clear continuation of the wartime civil patrol. Conceptual lines between the two groups blur easily; in their interviews, many subjects moved fluidly from discussing the wartime civil patrol to the today’s patrol, and vice versa.¹⁷ Asked about her husband’s involvement in the wartime civil patrol, Luisa began talking about the present-day security patrol. This is not uncommon. When asked to describe the activities of the Guardianes del Vecindario, most townspeople—and even members of the Guardianes—immediately refer back to the wartime civil patrol, without any prodding or suggestion that the two groups might be related. - For example, nearly all the Guardianes I interviewed brought up the fact that in contrast to the wartime civil patrol, participation in the Guardianes del Vecindario is voluntary. Similarly, many subjects describe the activities of the Guardianes by saying that the men in town are “still patrolling,” or that the patrol “still exists,” in clear reference to the wartime civil patrol.

Indeed, local residents perceive such strong connections between the wartime civil patrol and the Guardianes del Vecindario that my interviews sometimes

¹⁷ This occurs in other municipalities too. For example, one man in San Francisco Zapotitlán, Suchitepéquez told Álvarez Castañeda (2006) that he used to fear “thieves, because a like a month ago they were breaking in and stealing things, but then a PAC [civil patrol] was organized and they caught the thieves” (103). He is clearly using the term “PAC” to refer to a security patrol that exists today.

became confusing, as subjects interspersed stories about “the patrol from before” and “the patrol from today.” This is clearly illustrated in an interview with Emilio, a member of the Guardianes and a former civil patroller. We were proceeding chronologically, discussing the civil war, when we had the follow exchange:

Regina: So then when did the patrols stop operating here?

Emilio: Ahhh Ummmm

Regina: More or less how long did you participate in your patrol here?

Emilio: With the patrollers?

Regina: Yes.

Emilio: We are still patrolling. We are still patrolling. We continue to patrol.

Regina: Oh, yes. And what is it that you are doing now?

Emilio: We take care of the area. We catch bad people who hang around here, people who go around shooting their guns, people who are up to no good, we catch them and investigate what they are doing. That’s right.

Regina: Are you doing this with the same people who were in your patrol before, or with different people?

Emilio: No, the same people. ... We have organized the team again.

Something similar occurred when Julián was explaining when he joined the Guardianes del Vecindario.

Julián: We would have meetings every weekend in the municipal meeting hall. We would have meetings to see what problems there were in the neighborhoods. There were meetings, you know.

Regina: And when was this group organized?

Julián: Ah, I think it was when the armed conflict began.

Regina: Yes, but that was before, when you were younger.

Julián: From there, the idea was born. From there, the idea was born. And given that crime had increased, there was no other way to be able to defend ourselves from the criminals, only with this type of organization that came from the past. That’s where the idea was born, yes.

Regina: Uh-huh. But I am asking, when did this new group here form? That is, how many years ago did you have your first meetings? When did you start patrolling again because of the crime?

Julián: Well, I think that, like I’m telling you, it’s that we haven’t--it’s a custom that was never erased. It’s a custom that began many years ago.

Conclusion

Sub-national patterns and detailed, micro-level evidence, and the historical record are all consistent with the notion that Guatemala's wartime civil patrols have evolved into the security patrols that operate in the country today. This is a provocative challenge to the existing literature on civil wars. Contrary to the dominant view that civil wars are socially destructive, my findings suggest that even the most destructive civil wars can create durable new local institutions.

Generalizing beyond Guatemala, we similar processes should be most likely where there is sustained institution-building during a civil war, and the resulting institutions are locally-based and socially-embedded institutions. These would be groups that, like the civil patrols, operate in their home communities and overlap with pre-existing social networks, for example—the Sandinista Defense Committees (CDS) that existed in Nicaragua during that country's civil war, and which today have been resurrected and transformed into Citizens' Power Committees (CPC), which are charged with monitoring their neighborhoods (Gertsch Romero 2010).

I do not claim that new local institutions will result from every civil war. But it is important to be attentive to the possibility, because theory so strongly shapes both research agendas and policy decisions: theory determines where we look, and what we register as significant and pay attention to. In the aftermath of the Guatemalan civil war, for example, international policy-makers thought they knew which actors to be concerned about: the rebels. So despite the fact that the rebels had been effectively defeated years ago, they established elaborate demobilization camps for the former URNG fighters. One such camp in the department of El Quiché

even featured festive soccer games. Yet as the UN workers sped through the adjoining town in their Jeeps, they completely failed to notice that the town's civil patrol was still active, and ex-patrollers continued to terrorize their neighbors, even though the war was over (Foxen 2007, 10, 93). In order to prevent such oversights in the future, it is important to think creatively about the full range of local institutions—formal or informal—that may exist in a post-conflict setting. This is especially urgent because despite the story of Guatemala's civil patrols demonstrates that there can be a dark side to the institutions that emerge from civil wars, adds a cautionary note to the growing literature on social cohesion, collective action, and prosocial behavior in the wake of war. Civil wars may generate important local institutions, but not always to normatively desirable ends.

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