

Recruitment and conflict dynamics in the salvadoran civil war



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The two main actors in the Salvadoran civil war were the Salvadoran government/army and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) (Allison). The recruitment strategies for the FMLN varied throughout the civil war, but it placed an emphasis on recruiting women and children (Miller). As for combat tactics, the FMLN's shifted over time while having some consistent elements. The military strategies, on the other hand, only slightly changed (Allison).

The FMLN was formed when five existing groups joined forces. All of these groups had specific goals and grievances, but the main motivation for the FMLN was to overthrow the Salvadoran government ("Farabundo Martí"). The rebel group was also supported by Nicaragua, Cuba, and the Soviet Union. However, Nicaragua and Cuba provided the most direct support to the FMLN, in the form of arms and funding at the start of the conflict (Allison; "Communist Interference").

While the FMLN did recruit landowners with grievances against the government, men were not the only members in the FMLN (Wood). Women were also recruited to join the insurgent group, and ultimately composed about 30 percent. The roles of women varied greatly, which made them a valuable asset to the rebels. However, they would mostly be in "traditional" roles, such as cooks or medics. As the war progressed, sexual violence against women by the military worsened. Thus, a big recruitment strategy for the FMLN was to offer protection against rape. This proved to be successful because there was mutual respect among members that

continued throughout the conflict. Because women were treated relatively well, the FMLN used them to recruit new members, especially young men (Sprenkels).

Child soldiers played a huge role in the Salvadoran civil war. Over 20 percent of the FMLN was children, thus the recruitment of these young soldiers was important. In order to mobilize the youth, persuasion emphasized the benefits of joining, such as immediate protection from military abductions. Additionally, child soldiers already involved with the FMLN encouraged others to join. In terms of motivations and initial endowments, these children were protected and provided food and shelter for serving the FMLN. They were educated and formed strong social bonds because of similar experiences. These methods likely worked well in terms of recruitment, as 91.7 percent of surveyed FMLN youth soldiers said they joined voluntarily. The FMLN stopped using forced recruitment early in the war, likely to encourage people to join its cause voluntarily and to continue receiving external assistance (Miller).

According to Weinstein (2006), initial endowments and recruitment play a large role in the ultimate use of violence by a rebel group. In the case of the FMLN, it took the activist approach in recruiting and its endowments were mostly social. It attracted members who shared similar ideologies about the government, but also made promises regarding safety and appealed to those with similar experiences. While some of the offered endowments were economic, such as offering food and shelter, most members cared more about the long-term benefits, especially reform (Sprenkels; Miller). While

Weinstein would argue that the FMLN received external support and <https://assignbuster.com/recruitment-and-conflict-dynamics-in-the-salvadoran-civil-war/>

therefore would commit more violent acts, this was not the case as more than 85 percent of serious violent acts were committed by the government (Weinstein; Wood). The FMLN had a strong core group that was able to maintain order and use force selectively for the majority of the war (Álvarez). Therefore, while the FMLN is an exception to parts of Weinstein's argument, it supports the main idea that social endowments and an activist strategy lead to less violence (Weinstein).

In order to fully understand the strategies of combat of the FMLN, it is important to understand that the ultimate goal of the FMLN was government reform, likely communist-based (Becker). The initial and most consistent approach that the FMLN took was occupying the countryside and its rough terrain, then using it as a base for mobilizing during various times and to gain support from the landowners and civilians in those regions (Wood). Besides this, the FMLN was extremely flexible in terms of operation. Five groups composed the FMLN, so there were diverse strategies that could be used depending on the situation. Therefore, the combat tactics were a blend of direct military action, the prolonged war idea, and organizing the people for political action. Over the course of the war, certain tactics were prioritized more than others but ultimately this flexibility worked well (Spencer et al.). Though the FMLN did kidnap and kill Salvadoran elites, there were few civilian casualties from its actions early in the war (Tawney; "Mass Atrocity"). However, this drastically changed toward the end of the war. In the late 80s, the insurgents used more aggressive military tactics, including using mines and bombings, which killed more civilians (Betancur). The insurgents also infiltrated San Salvador and urban areas to attack political

elites, in what is considered the “ Final Offensive.” These attacks involved automatic weapons and bombs (Gruson). The “ Final Offensive,” resulted in some of the highest civilian casualties by the FMLN, a huge deviation from its initial low rates (“ Mass Atrocity”).

The clear goal of the Salvadoran government was to eliminate the insurgent group, and it became a priority over the lives of the civilians early on (Ucko). It is important to note that the United States government, wanting to prevent the spread of communism, provided “ direct military aid” early in the war that was used for training and supplying weapons to the Salvadoran military. Thus, the army was well-funded (McKinney). As mentioned, the FMLN was known to inhabit the Salvadoran countryside (Wood). What came with this were interactions with the people of these area. The army did not want the insurgents to be assisted by the civilians or gain supporters, so in the first years of the war it began “ killing by zone.” This meant that people living in these rural areas would be “[made] an example of.” In the military’s eyes, this would eliminate supporters and intimidate people to not join the rebel cause. If the government knew civilians would not back them, there was little point to keep them alive. One of the most egregious examples was the El Mozote massacre, in which the Salvadoran military brutally killed hundreds of civilians living in an area thought to be controlled by FMLN (Danner). This hostility towards civilians in the rural regions continued throughout the war due to proximity to the guerillas (“ Mass Atrocity”). The strategies of the government and military did not change much over time, as this tactic was used for a significant portion of the war. However, the levels of violence did fluctuate (Wood).

The tactics used by the Salvadoran military in the rural regions directly relate with the “draining the sea” idea presented by Valentino et al. This concept means that if the insurgents rely on guerrilla strategies, then the state will likely kill a significant number of civilians (Valentino et al.). Thus, in this case, the government assumed that the FMLN had many rural supporters and engaged in mass killing to “drain the sea.” While the theory directly applies to the state engaging in mass killings of civilians, it also can be used to compare the tactics used by the insurgent group (Valentino et al.). The FMLN did not rely on this tactic at all. It had a low rate of civilian casualties throughout the early war years (“Mass Atrocity”). However, when the civilian deaths rose in the later years, it was due to indiscriminate FMLN attacks. The FMLN was eager to build popular support, which is why for years it did not target civilians in masses (Betancur).

In conclusion, the recruitment strategies used by the FMLN were efficient and allowed for minimal violence against civilians or each other. As for combat tactics, the government used a “drain the sea” and extremely violent approach while the FMLN had varying strategies throughout the war, but consistently targeted government officials and representatives of the state.

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