

The Political Dynamics of Insurgency: The Importance of Government Legitimacy

by

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Class of 2012

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. **PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.**

1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 22-03-2012			2. REPORT TYPE Strategy Research Project		3. DATES COVERED (From - To)	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Political Dynamics of Insurgency: The Importance of Government Legitimacy					5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
					5b. GRANT NUMBER	
					5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) Lieutenant Colonel Robert D. Sagraves					5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
					5e. TASK NUMBER	
					5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Professor Karen Aguilar Department of National Security and Strategy					8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army War College 122 Forbes Avenue Carlisle, PA 17013					10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
					11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Distribution A: Approved for public release distribution is unlimited						
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES						
14. ABSTRACT This paper examines the sociopolitical connection between the government and the population and how the relative strength of this link, derived from the public's perception of their government's legitimacy, may determine the success or failure of an insurgency. To analyze the government-population link, three aspects of legitimate and effective governance are examined: the government's ability to provide adequate security; the ability of the government to support and enforce the rule of law; and the ability of the government to provide basic services. The study methodology utilizes a case study-based approach, looking at the Huk Rebellion in the Philippines (1946-1954). Three main points can be derived from this study: first, that the actual center of gravity in counterinsurgency is not the population per se, but is instead the population's link with their government; second, that counterinsurgency strategies should be modeled on a legitimacy-centric approach rather than on a population-centric approach; and finally, that in COIN, a well-conceived and executed political strategy is essential for success.						
15. SUBJECT TERMS Counterinsurgency, Huk Rebellion, Fragile States, Governance, Philippines, EDCOR, Magsaysay, Lansdale, JUSMAG						
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON	
a. REPORT UNCLASSIFIED	b. ABSTRACT UNCLASSIFIED	c. THIS PAGE UNCLASSIFIED			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (include area code)	
			UNLIMITED	36		

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

**THE POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF INSURGENCY:
THE IMPORTANCE OF GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY**

by

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ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Lieutenant Colonel Robert D. Sagraves

TITLE: The Political Dynamics of Insurgency: The Importance of Government Legitimacy

FORMAT: Strategy Research Project

DATE: 22 March 2012 WORD COUNT: 7610 PAGES: 38

KEY TERMS: Counterinsurgency, Huk Rebellion, Fragile States, Governance, Philippines, EDCOR, Magsaysay, Lansdale, JUSMAG

CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

This paper examines the sociopolitical connection between the government and the population and how the relative strength of this link, derived from the public's perception of their government's legitimacy, may determine the success or failure of an insurgency. To analyze the government-population link, three aspects of legitimate and effective governance are examined: the government's ability to provide adequate security; the ability of the government to support and enforce the rule of law; and the ability of the government to provide basic services. The study methodology utilizes a case study-based approach, looking at the Huk Rebellion in the Philippines (1946-1954). Three main points can be derived from this study: first, that the actual center of gravity in counterinsurgency is not the population per se, but is instead the population's link with their government; second, that counterinsurgency strategies should be modeled on a *legitimacy-centric* approach rather than on a *population-centric* approach; and finally, that in COIN, a well-conceived and executed political strategy is essential for success.

THE POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF INSURGENCY:
THE IMPORTANCE OF GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY

When a country is being subverted it is not being outfought; it is being out-administered.¹

—Bernard Fall

This paper seeks to add to the current insurgency discussion by examining the political dynamics between the government, insurgent forces, and the affected population. To facilitate this examination, the paper analyzes the Huk rebellion in the Philippines (1946-1954) with a specific focus on how the relative strength or weakness of the government-population relationship shaped the progress of the Huk insurgency and its effect on determining the final outcome. The study will seek to measure the qualitative strength of the link between the government and the population by evaluating the Philippine government's ability to administer three central aspects of effective and legitimate governance – population security, the rule of law, and essential services. The underlying premise of this study is to suggest that population-centric approaches to counterinsurgency (COIN) are only partially correct, and that it is the *link between the government and the population* – in other words, the population's perception of their government's legitimacy – which is in fact the true center of gravity for counterinsurgency efforts.²

Competing Definitions of Insurgency

Insurgency is a complex and dynamic phenomenon, so it is not surprising that “insurgency” as a term has a number of competing definitions. Insurgency expert Bard O'Neill defines insurgency as:

a struggle between a nonruling group and the ruling authorities in which the nonruling group consciously uses *political resources* (e.g.,

organizational expertise, propaganda, and demonstrations) and *violence* to destroy, reformulate, or sustain the basis of legitimacy of one or more aspects of politics.³

For comparison, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) defines insurgency as “the organized use of subversion and violence by a group or movement that seeks to overthrow or force change of a governing authority,” characterizing it as an “internal threat that uses subversion and violence to reach political ends.”⁴ Closely associated with this description of insurgency is the DoD’s related concept of “irregular warfare,” for which insurgency is considered a subset. The DoD defines irregular warfare as “a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population.”⁵

The U.S. Department of State (DoS) offers yet another definition of insurgency. As part of the U.S. government’s Interagency Counterinsurgency Initiative, the DoS led the drafting of a “whole of government” counterinsurgency guide. This guide describes insurgency as “the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region,” with the main goal of establishing “a competitive system of control over the population, making it impossible for the government to administer its territory and people.”⁶ The guide further states that insurgent movements aim to “weaken government control and legitimacy while increasing insurgent control and influence.”⁷

The Common Theme of Legitimacy in Insurgency

Although there are multiple definitions for insurgency, the underlying concept of *government legitimacy* stands out as a common theme. Indeed, among the three definitions just outlined, all point to the struggle over legitimacy as the central feature of insurgency, with O’Neill concluding that “insurgency is essentially a political-legitimacy

crisis of some kind.”⁸ But what is meant by legitimacy? For O’Neill, legitimacy describes “whether existing aspects of politics are considered moral or immoral – right or wrong – by the population.”⁹ This explanation of legitimacy is echoed by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in its *Fragile States Strategy*, which states that legitimacy “refers to the perception by important segments of society that the government is exercising state power in ways that are reasonably fair and in the interests of the nation as a whole.”¹⁰

Given the fundamental importance of legitimacy in insurgency, it is important to determine the general attributes that characterize a “legitimate” government. This will help facilitate the analysis of the insurgent-counterinsurgent political dynamic in the following case study of the Huk Rebellion. The *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* suggests that four traits can be used to measure the legitimacy of a state:

- The degree to which it honors and upholds human rights and fundamental freedoms;
- The degree to which it responds to the opinions of its citizens;
- Whether it exercises effective sovereignty;
- The degree to which it provides reasonable limits on the power of government over individual rights.¹¹

For comparison, USAID’s *Fragile States Strategy* contends that the legitimacy and effectiveness of a government derives from public perceptions of governance in the security, political, economic, and social domains.¹² This framework is summarized in Figure 1 below.

	Effectiveness	Legitimacy
Security	Military and police services that secure borders and limit crime	Military and police services that are provided reasonably, equitably, and without major violation of human rights
Political	Political institutions and processes that adequately ensure response to citizen needs	Political processes, norms, and leaders that are acceptable to the citizenry
Economic	Economic and financial institutions and infrastructure that support economic growth (including jobs), adapt to economic change, and manage natural resources	Economic institutions, financial services, and income-generating opportunities that are widely accessible and reasonably transparent, particularly related to access to and governance of natural resources
Social	Provision of basic services that generally meet demand, including that of vulnerable and minority groups, is assured	Tolerance of diverse customs, cultures, and beliefs

Figure 1. USAID’s Governance Effectiveness-Legitimacy Framework¹³

In a manner similar to the government legitimacy concepts of the State Department and USAID, the U.S. military’s counterinsurgency doctrine closely associates political legitimacy with the ability to provide good governance, stating that:

Governance is the state’s ability to serve the citizens through the rules, processes, and behavior by which interests are articulated, resources are managed, and power is exercised in a society. A state’s ability to provide effective governance rests on its capability and capacity to establish rules and procedures for political decision making, strengthen public sector management and administrative institutions and practices, provide public services in an effective and transparent manner, and provide civil administration that supports lawful private activity and enterprise.¹⁴

In view of these alternative conceptions of government legitimacy, this study proposes that the primary sources of legitimacy can be synthesized into a basic framework that encompasses a government’s ability and capacity to provide three aspects of effective governance: (1) population security; (2) enforcement of and adherence to justice and the rule of law; and (3) the provision of essential services for its citizens. This three-part framework will be applied to the following case study of the Huk Rebellion in the Philippines in order to analyze the political legitimacy dynamic between the government, the insurgents, and the population.

The Origin of the Huks

The Huk Rebellion in the Philippines was a communist insurgency that ran from 1946 to 1954, in which Huk rebels sought the overthrow of the democratic Philippine government. The Huk movement traces its origins to the late 1920s and the formation of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP).¹⁵ The stated goals of the CPP were:

(1) to overthrow American imperialism in the Philippines, (2) to lead the movement for complete and immediate independence, (3) to foster Communism under the authority of the masses, (4) to fight against exploitation of the masses, (5) to overthrow capitalism, [and] (6) to promote the dictatorship of the proletariat as the instrument for attaining other stated goals.¹⁶

The CPP was initially a completely legal organization and held meetings without government interference.¹⁷ After instigating a series of labor strikes in the early 1930s, however, the CPP was outlawed and went underground.¹⁸ Undeterred, the CPP continued promoting its Marxist ideology, promising “land for the landless; work for the jobless; equality among men.”¹⁹ The CPP decried the “obsolete agrarian system,” which they saw as the primary cause of misery among the Filipino population.²⁰ The CPP found a receptive audience among the masses and had supporters numbering in the thousands.²¹

The Japanese invasion of the Philippines in 1942 and the subsequent establishment of a widely unpopular puppet government in Manila provided the catalyst for the CPP and other communist factions in the Philippines to develop into a much more militant, well-organized, and widespread movement. Portraying themselves as freedom fighters and with the willing support of large segments of the rural peasantry, the communist leaders formally organized the People’s Anti-Japanese Army, also known as “Hukbo ng Bayan Laban Sa Hapon” in the Filipino Tagalog language, the

acronym for which is “Hukbalahap” or “Huk” in shortened form.²² The Huks initially armed themselves with abandoned weapons left behind by retreating Filipino and American troops, but soon received smuggled arms and supplies directly from the United States. Support was also provided by China, which sent military forces to aid the Huks in their fight against the Japanese.²³ By 1943, the Huks had as many as ten thousand men under arms.²⁴ The Huks, concentrated on the main island of Luzon, were successful in killing many Japanese soldiers and in tying down enemy units by leading them on fruitless pursuits through the country’s many swamps and forests. The Huks also targeted fellow Filipinos who collaborated with the Japanese, many of whom were wealthy landlords who wished to preserve their social and economic status.²⁵

The CPP and the Huks capitalized on the occupation to extend communist control over the countryside. At the village level, the Huks established the Barrio United Defense Corps (BUDC), with each local unit headed by a communist cell or committee. Although the stated purpose of the BUDC was to defend the barrio against Japanese troops and protect it from criminal activity, the BUDC was in fact a shadow local government which “organized supply and intelligence...in support of Huk military operations, ferreted out collaborators and dissidents, exacted contributions, disseminated propaganda, conducted group indoctrination, [and] regulated disputes.”²⁶ Extensive use of intimidation, propaganda, and indoctrination enabled the Huks to gain control over widespread portions of central Luzon, resulting in the seizure of most of the large estates and the establishment of a regional government powerful enough to collect taxes and administer its own laws.²⁷ Through various “carrot and stick” tactics, cooperative villages were accorded real benefits by Huk administration, while villages

that remained loyal to the puppet government in Manila were subjected to increased pressure in the form of kidnappings, interrogations, and torture. The peasantry was not monolithic in its views towards the Huks: although a significant majority of the peasant class sympathized with the Huk cause, some remained loyal to the central government. Consequently, the legitimacy of the Huks as a political force was as much due to the peasantry's unconditional support as it was to coercion and intimidation enforced by the barrel of a gun.²⁸

Regardless, the Japanese occupation was of inestimable benefit to the CPP in pursuing its long-standing goal of establishing communism "under the authority of the masses" in the Philippines. The war gave the CPP political leadership the opportunity to institute discipline among the Huk guerilla forces, to arm them with American weapons, and to develop and hone their skills at guerilla warfare: in short, the war gave "teeth" to the communist guerillas.²⁹ Indeed, by 1945 when American forces liberated Manila, the Huks claimed to have fought in 1,200 military engagements against the Japanese and puppet government forces. The Japanese occupation also allowed the CPP and the Huks to gain valuable experience and skill in exercising their new-found power in "operating civil administration in large areas, administering justice, collecting taxes, conducting schools and other public services, [and] maintaining...law and order."³⁰ Aided greatly by the ideological tutelage of the CPP, the Huks emerged from the occupation not only as a formidable fighting force, but also as a legitimate peasant party with deep roots in the countryside. In an overwhelmingly agrarian society such as the Philippines, this became the primary source of the Huk's political power.

Despite the Huk's Marxist ideology and their adoption of violent coercive means to impose their communist beliefs upon government loyalists, the majority of Filipinos regarded the Huks as patriots during the occupation, "the one group that had kept alive the spark of freedom and harried the enemy until the Americans returned."³¹ In contrast to the favorable sentiment among the population, the Philippine government and U.S. forces viewed the communist Huks with suspicion. Following the defeat of Japanese occupation forces, the U.S. Army complicated reconciliation efforts with the Huks by refusing to grant them any legal status or to pay them for their wartime services.³² When confronted with American demands to demobilize and turn in their weapons, many Huks instead dispersed and continued their recruiting efforts.³³ Making matters worse, U.S. and Philippine government forces jailed several members of the Huk leadership in an attempt to suppress the perceived threat from the guerillas; the Huks realized that they were now being hunted as outlaws.³⁴ In the end, the government's failure to properly demobilize and reintegrate the Huks into Philippine society set the conditions for the Huk's subsequent rebellion against the government. Such was the environment that the newly-liberated and fledgling Republic of the Philippines had to contend with immediately following World War II.

The Huk Rebellion Ignites

With the signing of the Treaty of Manila in 1946, the Philippines gained independence from the United States. The post-war administration of Philippine President Manuel Roxas, who had served in the pro-Japanese puppet government during the occupation, went to work immediately to address the many problems facing the war-ravaged nation, especially security.³⁵ Roxas' focus on security was largely driven by the desire of the wealthy Luzon landowners to return to their rural estates.

Many landowners had sought refuge in Manila during the occupation, but now were intent on reclaiming their lands and resuming their positions of authority. When the absentee landlords demanded back rent from the peasants, they soon realized they faced a well-organized peasant resistance movement, largely due to the efforts of the Huks during the occupation. The Roxas administration actively cooperated with the landowners in an effort to reassert the landowner's pre-occupation rights and to break up the peasant resistance, with the Philippine Constabulary taking an extremely heavy handed approach against the peasantry.³⁶ Unsurprisingly, peasant support for the Huks grew even greater.

Roxas' crackdown on peasant rebellion in the countryside quickly led to open hostilities between government forces and the Huks in May 1946.³⁷ The Philippine government sought to eliminate the Huk menace through force of arms, but it soon found itself ill-equipped for such a task. The Philippine Constabulary, unable to make measurable headway against the seasoned Huk fighters, soon resorted to "shelling barrios suspected of harboring guerillas [and] using gestapo [*sic*] tactics to extract information from villagers" which "intensified the already widespread unpopularity of the [Roxas] regime."³⁸ The government's overreaction to the Huk threat eroded the legitimacy of the Roxas administration and served as a catalyst for increased support among the population for the Huk cause.

Following the collapse of a three-month cease-fire in the summer of 1946, fighting intensified between government and Huk forces. Throughout 1947, the Huks gained confidence as they seized ever more control over the countryside. For its part, the Philippine Constabulary continued its use of indiscriminate tactics, "inflicting more

hardship by far on the unhappy villagers than on the Huks.”³⁹ To escape the violence and repression brought on by government forces in their clumsy pursuit of the Huks, many Filipinos abandoned their villages in order to find safety in Manila or other urban areas that were relatively free of violence.⁴⁰ The indiscriminate tactics of government forces continued to fuel peasant support for the Huks.⁴¹ Among the most notorious government practices were so-called “open area” firing operations, whereby troops were directed to shoot at anything that moved within certain zones, as well as the establishment of road checkpoints that enabled corrupt soldiers to extort “protection” money from hapless peasants at will.⁴²

In an attempt to dull Huk anti-government propaganda and to lessen the movement’s appeal among the rural peasantry, Roxas did initiate some reform programs, namely, the establishment of an Agrarian Commission and the signing of a crop-sharing law to provide a more equitable economic arrangement between tenants and their landlords. These modest reforms, however, were not enough to mollify the peasantry, let alone the Huk leadership, which insisted on nothing short of complete amnesty and political representation in the Philippine Congress. Roxas vehemently opposed the conditions demanded by the Huks, which cemented the political impasse between the two sides and prolonged the fighting.⁴³

In 1948, despite widespread pressure from the public and from a number of prominent officials within the Philippine government to offer amnesty to the Huks as an inducement to lay down their arms, Roxas instead escalated the conflict by outlawing the Huks and their affiliated political arm, the National Peasants Union (PKM).⁴⁴ However, Roxas died of a sudden heart attack and was succeeded by his vice

president, Elpidio Quirino, who reversed Roxas' "mailed-fist" policy and opened negotiations with Luis Taruc, the charismatic leader of the Huks.⁴⁵ Unlike his predecessor, Quirino initially opted for a policy of leniency for those rebels who willingly surrendered and renounced violence, offering them amnesty.⁴⁶ The amnesty negotiations broke down, however, and the fighting resumed.⁴⁷

The 1949 Philippine general election was a defining moment for the Huk cause. Quirino, seeking his first full term as president, was widely unpopular, and his administration was noted for its "favoritism, corruption, inefficiency, and abuses of power."⁴⁸ As Anthony Joes states, "serious social ills went unheeded by...[an] administration out of touch with the common people and rife with corruption. Officials high and low exploited the peasantry in a variety of ways."⁴⁹ The rural population's dissatisfaction with the government's inability to enact land reforms was seized upon by Huk activists as proof of official complacency.⁵⁰

The election was marred by widespread government-sponsored fraud and ballot-stuffing to ensure the reelection of Quirino and Liberal Party congressional candidates.⁵¹

One U.S. observer reflected that:

It was a government of the privileged few, not of the people...The townspeople had gone to the polls in 1949 and voted for representatives who could change all this. What had happened? Nothing. They had been cheated. The election had been rigged, bringing the corrupt to power.⁵²

The rigged election, widely evident to the vast majority of Filipinos, provided a significant boost for the Huks and swelled the ranks of its supporters among the peasantry.⁵³ Because the government had so blatantly subverted the electoral process, growing numbers of Filipinos concluded that the path to peaceful change had been shut, and that support for the Huk cause was their only recourse. Indeed, by 1950, the

Huks were able to muster upwards of 20,000 fighters and began launching raids near the outskirts of Manila.⁵⁴ Looking on with concern at the worsening situation in the Philippines, the U.S. government observed that the “fraud, violence, and intimidation” of the 1949 presidential election had “seriously undermined public confidence in the Philippine administration and weakened President Quirino’s control over his Congress,” and concluded that “if the present situation continues the country can rapidly be reduced to chaos, opening the way for the eventual victory of the Communist-led and dominated Huks.”⁵⁵

It was at this point that the U.S. government began to take serious notice of the burgeoning Huk insurgency in its former commonwealth.⁵⁶ In the wake of Mao Tse-Tung’s recent victory over the Chinese Nationalists in 1949 and not wanting to “lose” another Asian nation to communist forces, the U.S. government became increasingly alarmed about the deteriorating situation in the Philippines.⁵⁷ Especially important was the fact that the U.S. maintained two large military bases there – Clark Air Base and the naval base at Subic Bay – which were of vital strategic importance for containing Soviet expansion and influence in the Pacific.⁵⁸ The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff concluded that the Philippines could be the key to Soviet control of the western Pacific, and that “Soviet domination of these islands would, in all probability, be followed by the rapid disintegration of the entire structure of anti-Communist defenses in Southeast Asia... including Japan.”⁵⁹ Fearing that “Soviet domination over [the Philippines] would endanger the United States military position in the Western Pacific and the Far East,” the Joint Chiefs of Staff warned President Truman that the situation in the Philippines could not be viewed merely as a “local problem.”⁶⁰ Truman heeded their advice and

directed the U.S. military and the State Department to initiate aid and support programs to assist the Philippine government.⁶¹

Sensing the dire predicament of his government and under new pressure from the U.S. to deal with the Huk threat, Quirino appointed Ramon Magsaysay, a former guerilla who fought against the Japanese during the occupation, as the new secretary of defense and charged him with defeating the Huk rebellion.⁶²

Turning the Tide Against the Huks

Magsaysay set about immediately to reverse the Huk's momentum and gain the upper hand. Magsaysay had the assistance of Edward Lansdale, a U.S. Air Force officer detailed to the Philippines to advise the government in its fight against the Huks.⁶³ Also important was the significant military aid provided by way of the Joint United States Military Assistance Group (JUSMAG) in Manila, which, by 1953, would oversee the provisioning of over \$115 million in U.S. military equipment and training for the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).⁶⁴

On the security front, Magsaysay's first step was to shift responsibility for the anti-Huk campaign from the ineffectual, despised, and under-strength Philippine Constabulary to the AFP, in conjunction with a sizeable increase in the AFP's size.⁶⁵ Along with this important shift in responsibilities, Magsaysay developed a three-pronged military strategy:

First, soldiers were indoctrinated to act as government ambassadors to the...population, interacting with the peasantry, establishing a government presence, [and] demonstrating government credibility and legitimacy...Second, the government forces endeavored to isolate the Huks from the rural population [in order to] gain popular support by protecting the population from terrorism and extortion, and [reducing] the Huk's ability to proselytize and spread propaganda....Third, the AFP had to kill and capture Huks.⁶⁶

To implement this strategy, Magsaysay took aggressive steps to ensure AFP commanders obeyed his instructions for renewed vigor in the fight against the Huks and for concerted efforts to improve civil-military relations, which had eroded precipitously under the heavy-handedness of the Philippine Constabulary. He conducted frequent unannounced inspections of military units, relieving on the spot those officers and men who were deemed incompetent, lazy, or corrupt, or that had mistreated civilians.⁶⁷ He was also quick to reward soldiers who demonstrated “solid integrity and effectiveness on the battlefield.”⁶⁸ Word of Magsaysay’s surprise inspections spread quickly throughout the AFP, with “troops in the field...behaving as though the secretary of national defense might show up...at any moment to praise or chastise them for what they were doing.”⁶⁹ Lansdale, who often accompanied Magsaysay into the field, observed that “the inspections and Magsaysay’s rapid corrective actions had a considerable impact on the armed forces...Magsaysay carried out a housecleaning of the military establishment, ridding it of unjust favoritism and of slovenly and corrupt practices.”⁷⁰

Magsaysay’s military reforms slowly took hold, and by mid-1950, the Huks began to feel increased pressure from the AFP.⁷¹ With the help of considerable U.S. military aid provided through JUSMAG, Magsaysay expanded the AFP from ten to twenty battalion combat teams (BCTs) with a total strength of 22,500 men; fully half of the BCTs were responsible for Luzon, the locus of the Huk insurgency.⁷² To pressure the top echelons of the Huk organization, Magsaysay established large rewards for the capture or killing of Huk leaders, resulting in six regional commanders and eleven field commanders being captured or killed.⁷³ Additionally, the arrest of key CPP Politburo

members in Manila in October 1950 dealt a serious blow to the Huks, effectively eliminating their urban apparatus and cutting them off from their political supporters and their political wing in Manila.⁷⁴ By the end of 1951, the AFP had forced the Huks into remote parts of the countryside, where they were cut off from contact with the population and were unable to obtain sufficient food.⁷⁵

The Political Effort

Preserving the AFP's hard-won security gains against the Huks hinged on the success of equally important and parallel efforts in the political sphere. One of the main elements of the political strategy was to gain the support of the citizenry through "measures designed to convince the population that the government sought to promote their economic lot and well-being," and thus help reduce grass-roots support for the Huks.⁷⁶ The Philippine government grudgingly agreed with the U.S. assessment that major socioeconomic reforms were needed to address the plight of the rural peasant class.⁷⁷ Consequently, the U.S. provided over \$77 million in non-military aid for various programs designed to develop infrastructure, spur rural development, boost agricultural production, and reform government institutions. With significant U.S. prompting, the Philippine government passed legislation to enact many of these reforms but did a very poor job in later translating these policies into actionable programs. Seeing that the Quirino administration and the Philippine Congress were largely ineffective in implementing needed economic and rural development reforms, Magsaysay used the one means at his disposal, the AFP, to undertake reform efforts himself.⁷⁸

Thus decided, Magsaysay initiated several programs to demonstrate a "willingness on the part of the government to rectify legitimate grievances which the Huks had been able to exploit" and thus draw the citizenry away from the Huks and

toward the government's side.⁷⁹ Four of the most notable and effective programs initiated by Magsaysay were the AFP's civic action program, the assignment of AFP lawyers to assist peasants in land cases against wealthy landlords, the establishment of a citizen's telegram "hotline" to Magsaysay, and the Economic Development Corps program.

The civic action program employed the AFP in public works projects to improve infrastructure and roads, provide access to potable water, and other similar undertakings. The AFP's civic action projects were highly visible, and Magsaysay ensured they received maximum publicity to "strengthen their psychological impact on both the citizenry and the...Huks."⁸⁰ To build up the government's image and challenge the Huk's anti-government narrative, Magsaysay oversaw the distribution of over thirteen million leaflets and held over six thousand public information meetings over the course of two years, reaching an estimated 1.5 million citizens.⁸¹ The civic action program presented the public with clear evidence of the government's ability to penetrate into contested areas of the countryside to provide essential services.

Magsaysay started another program in which AFP Judge Advocate lawyers were directed to provide free legal representation to poor farmers involved in land cases against wealthy landlords in provincial courts. Prior to this, it was commonplace to find a farmer with a legitimate claim "with his hat in his hand before a judge trying to get justice for a claim, never understanding what lawyers were saying, and losing his rights in the process."⁸² With trained army lawyers providing free legal counsel, plaintiff farmers were now able to face the courts on equal footing with the wealthy landowners. Thus empowered by the legal fairness that was their due, many farmers actually

prevailed in court cases against their landlords.⁸³ The success of the Judge Advocate lawyer program helped reestablish the public's confidence in the Philippine judicial system and showed the government's commitment to the rule of law.

The third program initiated by Magsaysay was the establishment of a "citizen's hotline." For a small fee (less than five U.S. cents), any citizen could go to their local post office and send a one-page telegram directly to Secretary Magsaysay's office. Magsaysay encouraged the public to wire him about "both good and bad things they saw government troops doing" as well as information on the Huks.⁸⁴ Magsaysay ordered prompt action on those telegrams that were verified as truthful. Word spread quickly as the public realized that their messages were being read and acted upon. Soon, with over one hundred telegrams arriving daily, what started as a "trickle of telegrams became a flood."⁸⁵

The fourth major initiative of Magsaysay was the creation of a Huk rehabilitation and reintegration program. Called the Economic Development Corps (EDCOR), this program centered on vocational and educational training for captured Huks followed by resettlement on land in the public domain (obtained by Magsaysay) that was suitable for homesteading. As an additional incentive, successful Huk homesteaders would eventually be granted legal title to their land. Only those captured Huks who had not been indicted or convicted by a civil court were eligible. Moreover, to deter resettled Huks from again taking up arms, EDCOR settlements were populated with recently retired military personnel and farmers who were loyal to the government: in each EDCOR colony, one-third of the population would be Huks, one-third would be loyal farmers, and one-third would be ex-soldiers.⁸⁶

The EDCOR settlements were generally successful, with former Huks satisfied with their new circumstances. Word spread quickly, and the EDCOR program proved to be a powerful attraction for the Huks and their sympathizers. The benefits of the resettlement program were popularized through government use of films, radio programs, and propaganda. Although no more than two hundred Huk families were eventually to participate in the program, EDCOR's popularity dealt a huge psychological blow to the morale and motivation of the Huk rank-and-file.⁸⁷ Among the Huks who surrendered to the government, many cited EDCOR as the primary reason.⁸⁸ Put simply, EDCOR's reintegration and settlement program was a potent counter to the Huk rallying cry of "land for the landless," undercutting the Huk's primary rationale for rebellion.

The second element of the political strategy centered on the promotion of free and fair elections. In light of the blatant electoral fraud that had corrupted the 1949 general election, honest elections were essential in order to repair the public's trust and faith in their government. With the 1951 congressional elections approaching, Quirino was under U.S. diplomatic pressure to allow free elections.⁸⁹ Additionally, aided by the encouragement and tutelage of American advisors, various Filipino civic groups and community organizations banded together to form a watchdog organization to monitor the upcoming elections.⁹⁰ Dubbed the National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL), this group quickly spread, with chapters appearing across the Philippines. NAMFREL members were trained to prevent, detect, and report incidents of election fraud. Efforts were also undertaken to educate the populace on the importance of free and fair elections and on proper voting procedures.⁹¹

Knowing that the Quirino administration would try to subvert the electoral process as it had in 1949 to guarantee the election of its preferred candidates, Magsaysay quietly ordered the AFP to assist the Philippine Commission on Elections to ensure honest balloting. On election day, Magsaysay deployed soldiers and ROTC cadets to polling places throughout the Philippines to prevent voter intimidation and to ensure a clean vote count. NAMFREL poll watchers were also on hand to ensure voting integrity. Additionally, foreign newspaper correspondents covered the election to provide independent eyewitness accounts of the voting.⁹²

In stark contrast to the “dirty election of 1949,” the 1951 elections were “a model of orderliness and probity.”⁹³ Out of approximately 5.5 million registered voters, about 4 million cast ballots. Voters overwhelmingly rejected Quirino-backed Liberal Party candidates, with the opposition Nacionalista Party winning every senate seat up for election. Citizens gave credit to the army, which had “given their government back to them. Their votes counted for something. Suddenly it became a government of, by, and for the people.”⁹⁴

The success of the 1951 elections dealt a severe blow to the Huk insurgency “by demonstrating that there was a realistic alternative to violence for the adjustment of grievances.”⁹⁵ The fairness of the elections bolstered the legitimacy of the Philippine government and seized the political initiative away the Huks. Many Huks surrendered or quietly slipped back into civilian life. Those who continued the fight were pursued by the AFP and pushed into isolation in ever more remote areas of the Philippines.⁹⁶

The final blow to the Huk rebellion was the 1953 presidential election in which Magsaysay, running on the Nacionalista Party ticket, overwhelmingly defeated Quirino

to become the new Philippine president. As in 1951, the 1953 elections were conducted fairly, with critical election day support again provided by the AFP and NAMFREL. For its part, the U.S. government put significant pressure on Quirino and undertook several behind-the-scenes efforts to ensure a fair election.⁹⁷

As president, Magsaysay was in a position to finally end the Huk threat. AFP units were urged on to round up the few remaining Huk holdouts. Moreover, the appeal of the EDCOR reintegration program led more and more Huks to surrender to the government or to simply lay down their arms and walk away from their units. Owing to a combination of persistent military pressure, the loss of peasant support, and internal dissension within the Huk leadership, the rebellion faded away.⁹⁸

Discussion: Applying the Government Legitimacy Framework

As can be seen, the defeat of the Huks was not due to military force alone. In fact, prior to Magsaysay's military reforms, the indiscriminate use of military force actually intensified the rebellion. Efforts in the political sphere proved just as critical, even decisive, in quelling the insurgency. The eventual effectiveness of the military effort was only made possible when it was coupled to an overarching political strategy to defeat the Huks. The three-part legitimacy framework proposed at the beginning of this paper – consisting of population security, enforcement of and adherence to the rule of law, and the provision of essential services – is now applied in order to more closely consider the political dynamic of the Huk rebellion.

The first aspect of the government legitimacy framework, security, is widely acknowledged as one of the primary functions of government, with prominent political scientist Kenneth Waltz asserting that “at a minimum, government exists to provide security to persons and their property.”⁹⁹ Counterinsurgency expert David Galula

agrees, proposing that one of the primary prerequisites for a successful insurgency is weakness of the counterinsurgent's police and security forces.¹⁰⁰ Security measures generally take effect faster than most political and economic efforts, and they are normally quite visible. Strengthening internal security can reduce the immediate threat to the government, demonstrate to the population the government's competence and effectiveness, and provide a secure environment for political and economic reforms to take hold.¹⁰¹ However, ineffectual or abusive security efforts can produce the opposite effect, generating sympathy and recruits for the insurgents. To this end, counterinsurgency expert Anthony Joes cautions that counterinsurgent forces must practice rectitude – that is, they must act in accordance with the law and eschew indiscriminate behavior towards civilians. Joes aptly states that “the entrance of government forces into a district or village should not resemble the descent of a plague of locusts.”¹⁰²

The Philippine government's initial security efforts to contain and defeat the Huk threat were both ineffectual and counterproductive. The Philippine Constabulary, lacking discipline and employing poor battlefield tactics, were no match against the seasoned Huk guerillas. Furthermore, the indiscriminate use of military force and widespread mistreatment of civilians by the Philippine Constabulary exacerbated the rural citizenry's antipathy towards the government. This drove increasing numbers of the population away from the government and towards the Huk cause. Magsaysay's military reforms, his emphasis on accountability and the proper treatment of civilians, and his personal leadership transformed the government's security forces into an effective and respected fighting force. By late 1951, the government had reestablished

security throughout most of the countryside. Consequently, the population's allegiance began to swing towards the government and away from the Huks.

The second aspect of the legitimacy framework is the government's enforcement of and adherence to the rule of law. As a political concept, "the rule of law" can be traced to the ancient Greeks and Romans, to Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke and Montesquieu, and to American Revolution era activists such as Thomas Paine. A modern definition of the rule of law has been put forth by the United Nations:

The "rule of law"...refers to a principle of governance in which all persons, institutions and entities...including the State itself, are accountable to laws that are publicly promulgated, equally enforced and independently adjudicated, and which are consistent with international human rights norms and standards. It requires...measures to ensure adherence to the principles of supremacy of law, equality before the law, accountability to the law, fairness in the application of the law, separation of powers, participation in decision-making, legal certainty, avoidance of arbitrariness and procedural and legal transparency.¹⁰³

The Roxas and Quirino administrations fell far short of this ideal. Both administrations were characterized by rampant political corruption and cronyism in favor of wealthy land owners at the expense of the rural peasantry. Under Quirino, the democratic process was thoroughly undermined during the fraudulent 1949 election to ensure Quirino remained in office and that the Liberal Party maintained its hold on congress. The government's failure to act in accordance with the Philippine constitution and to follow the rule of law severely damaged the government's credibility and legitimacy. Seeing this, the average peasant's political allegiance swung markedly toward the Huks, who seemed to offer the only prospect for meaningful change. Thus for the politically disenfranchised rural peasantry, the Huk demand for peasant rights and their call for "land for the landless" proved to be a powerful draw.

Magsaysay made measurable strides in restoring the public's faith in their government's ability to ensure equitable justice and to enforce and obey the rule of law. Two key initiatives were the assignment of AFP lawyers to provide free legal counsel to poor farmers and the establishment of the citizen's hotline to report abuses by the military. But the most important achievement of Magsaysay was in ensuring the integrity of the electoral process for the 1951 congressional elections. The fairness of the election clearly demonstrated to the public that the law could be made to work in the Philippines, and it severely undercut the Huk's anti-government narrative. The cleanliness of the subsequent 1953 general election further reinforced the public's favorable opinion regarding the government's ability to abide by the law.

The third and final aspect of the legitimacy framework is the government's ability to provide basic services to its citizens. According to the U.S. State Department:

The local delivery of administrative services is traditionally far more important than central government in a distant capital. Local government entities which are perceived as illegitimate, corrupt, oppressive, or non-inclusive will provide fertile ground for an insurgency to develop and operate, but are the lowest level through which the national government can deliver security and other public services. The perceived capacity of local government to provide for the population is critical to national government legitimacy.¹⁰⁴

The Huks took advantage of the Japanese occupation to establish and extend their civil administration apparatus throughout the countryside. When the government attempted to reassert its control following World War II, the Huks were well-entrenched among the rural peasantry. Complicating matters, neither Roxas nor Quirino were successful in enacting meaningful economic or social reforms. However, the government made significant headway in providing basic services following the launch

of the military's widely publicized civic action program and the success of the EDCOR reintegration initiative.

Having examined the Huk insurgency through the lens of the three-part legitimacy framework, it is evident that as the Philippine government improved its capacity in providing effective governance, public opinion towards the government grew increasingly more favorable. Particularly after the success of the 1951 election, the strength and influence of the Huk insurgency waned as the struggle over legitimacy tipped decisively in favor of the government. Based on the evidence, one could reasonably conclude that the public's rising perception of their government's legitimacy proved to be the decisive factor in defeating the Huks.

Implications: the "So What?"

For counterinsurgency practitioners and strategists, three main points may be gleaned from this study. First, analysis of the Huk rebellion suggests that COIN strategies that focus strictly on the population as the center of gravity (COG) are only partially correct. While it is certainly true that the population is a central actor in insurgency, this applies only insofar as the population is a source of legitimacy for either the insurgents or the government. This suggests that the true center of gravity in insurgency is actually *the link between the government and the population* – in other words, the population's perception of their government's legitimacy.

This stands in contrast with much of the contemporary wisdom regarding counterinsurgency, which generally holds that the population is the center of gravity.¹⁰⁵ In challenging this thinking, it is instructive to recall what Clausewitz – the originator of the concept – had to say regarding the "center of gravity":

One must keep the dominant characteristics of both belligerents in mind. Out of these characteristics, a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all our energies should be directed.¹⁰⁶

In a subsequent passage that is generally overlooked, Clausewitz elaborated further by identifying specific centers of gravity depending on the type of conflict:

In countries subject to domestic strife, the center of gravity is generally the capital. In small countries that rely on large ones, it is usually the army of their protector. Among alliances, it lies in the community of interest, and *in popular uprisings it is the personalities of the leaders and public opinion* [emphasis added].¹⁰⁷

Clausewitz concluded that in the case of popular uprisings – what we would today refer to as an insurgency, rebellion, or revolt – the COG is public opinion. This is analogous to the premise suggested in this study: what matters in insurgency is not the population per se, but rather the population’s opinion of their government’s legitimacy and effectiveness.

This leads to the second point: counterinsurgency strategies should be modeled on a *legitimacy-centric* approach rather than on a *population-centric* approach. The counterinsurgent does not provide security for the population for security’s sake, nor does the counterinsurgent expand public access to clean water simply because there is a scarcity. Efforts to improve security, ensure justice, and provide essential services must be recognized not as an end in and of themselves, but rather as the means of establishing and reinforcing the public’s favorable perception of their government’s legitimacy while simultaneously countering the anti-government narrative of the insurgent.¹⁰⁸ Philippine efforts to provide more effective governance, championed largely by Magsaysay, bolstered the public’s perception of their government’s

legitimacy. This won back the allegiance of the population and led to the eventual demise of the Huk insurgency.

For the U.S., the political legitimacy dynamic is a key aspect of COIN that must not be overlooked. When U.S. policymakers decide to intervene to assist another government threatened by insurgency, U.S. COIN support must be tailored so as to not undermine the legitimacy of the indigenous government. This view is espoused by the U.S. State Department, which concludes that “effective COIN...requires that the major effort is (and is seen by the local population to be) led by the indigenous government.”¹⁰⁹ In a similar vein, the State Department also cautions that “counter-intuitively for some planners, it is often the case that the less intrusive and more indirect the approach selected, the more likely it is to succeed.”¹¹⁰ Unfortunately, this runs counter to America’s strategic culture and way of war, with its characteristic impatience, “know-it-all” attitude, and “can-do” ethos.¹¹¹ As a rule, it is generally preferable to allow the indigenous government to do “good enough” in carrying out incremental reforms on its own to address its governance shortcomings, as opposed to the U.S. hastily stepping in with the “100 percent solution” and doing the job for them. The U.S.’ low-key approach in supporting the Philippine government during the Huk Rebellion is a good example: the discreet advisory support provided by Lansdale and the military aid funneled through JUSMAG went largely unnoticed by the average Filipino. What was visible to the population were the government’s efforts to better its capacity and capability to provide good governance.

The third and final point is that this study provides further support for the generally accepted argument that in COIN, political efforts are just as important, if not

more so, than military efforts. COIN expert Anthony Joes argues that “insurgency is quintessentially a *political* phenomenon, and that therefore any effective response to it must be primarily political as well.”¹¹² The State Department affirms this view, stating that “in general, a COIN strategy is only as good as the political plan at its heart.”¹¹³

In countering the Huk insurgency, Magsaysay knew full well that military force could only contain the Huk threat; it could not eradicate it. The underlying grievances of the population, which provided the essential fuel for the insurgency, could not be addressed by military force alone. Thus, he implemented a complimentary political strategy – ultimately successful – to improve governance and draw the people to the government’s side. Regarding the primacy of the political element in defeating the Huks, Lansdale’s biographer writes that:

Lansdale realized that this defeat of the Huks had come about as much or more from political weapons as from military strength. Their [Huk] slogans, recruiting, and organizing of the population had all been countered by government actions and, as a result of the [1951] election, that government was now in the process of reforming itself. If the Philippine government had been true to its own rules in earlier days, if it had been truly interested in the welfare of its own citizens, no group would have tried to overthrow it.¹¹⁴

Conclusion

This study has sought to analyze the political dynamics of insurgency by examining the Philippine government’s response to the Huk Rebellion. The defeat of the Huk insurgency was largely attributable to the Philippine government’s successful reform efforts to improve its ability to provide population security, enforce the rule of law, and administer essential services. These reform efforts led the population to increasingly believe in the legitimacy of the government and abandon their support for the Huks. In the end, the public’s growing belief in their government’s legitimacy

strengthened their allegiance to the state and was the deciding factor in defeating the Huk insurgency.

Three main points can be derived from this examination of the Huk Rebellion. First, this study suggests that the actual COG in COIN is not the population per se, but is instead the population's link with their government, which in turn is derived from their belief in their government's legitimacy. Second, this study implies that counterinsurgency strategies should be modeled on a *legitimacy-centric* approach rather than on a *population-centric* approach. Finally, the case of the Huk Rebellion provides further support for the generally accepted view that in COIN, a well-conceived and executed political strategy is essential for success.

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