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# Alliances between Civilians and Combatants in Civil Wars



Daniel Gómez Uribe

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**Daniel Gómez Uribe**

d.e.gomez.uribe@rug.nl

Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR) [aissr.uva.nl](http://aissr.uva.nl)  
Nieuwe Achtergracht 166 1018 WV Amsterdam The Netherlands

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UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM



AMSTERDAM INSTITUTE FOR  
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# Alliances between Civilians and Combatants in Civil Wars

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Faculteit der Maatschappij- en Gedragwetenschappen

A la memoria de Yara Yung,  
campesina invisible e invencible

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## LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

The making of this thesis contributed to two different publications. One single-authored book and a book chapter:

### **Book**

Gómez Uribe, D. (2018). *Los años del retorno: Violencia, desplazamiento forzado y organización campesina en la comunidad de El Toco en el Cesar*. Colombia: PAX Netherlands.

### **Book Chapter**

Gómez Uribe, D. (2021). Forced displacement: paramilitary violence against the campesinos of El Toco. In Bijl, Wels and van der Zeijden (Ed.). *On Civilian Harm: Examining the complex negative effects of violent conflict on the lives of civilians*. Utrecht: Pax Netherlands.

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## SUMMARY

The common picture of civilians in the middle of war zones is that of powerless and passive actors. In fact, civilians constitute the majority of casualties in the context of irregular civil wars. They are trapped in the middle of crossfire and are subjects of indiscriminate and selective violence when armed groups aim to control territories. However, in recent decades, scholars have stressed that even in the context of war, civilians have and exercise their capacity of reflection, innovativeness and choices, influencing the course of the war. Many civilians choose to abandon their homes and find new spaces where their life is not at risk. Others decide to resist the presence of combatants. Other groups choose to cooperate and in some instances live under combatants' systems of governance. Despite these important advances, there are expressions of the civilian-combatant relationship that remain underexplored. Existing work has paid little attention to instances where civilians and combatants establish a relationship of cooperation while each remaining autonomous. This dissertation addresses this gap and proposes alliance as the core concept to understanding agreements between autonomous civilian communities and armed groups for the exchange of material and strategic benefits. The overarching research question is: what type of alliances emerge between civilians and combatants in war zones and what explains variation?

This research documents, describes and explains alliances between civilians and combatants in irregular civil wars. I offer a descriptive typology of alliances that varies on two dimensions: the level of cooperation (low or high) and the duration (short or long). The combination of these two dimensions leads to three different types of alliances: *engagement*, when cooperation is high and during a long period; *opportunism*, when cooperation is high and the period is short; and *concession*, when the level of cooperation is low and the duration is long. In addition, this dissertation offers a theoretical framework to explain alliance variation. I argue that the type of territory (controlled or contested) and the civilian position (status quo or revisionist) shape the forms that alliances take, affecting how alliances' characteristics (cooperation and duration) vary.

To test the theory of alliances, I conducted extensive fieldwork in war zones in Colombia. I draw on original empirical material from three rural communities that lived in rebel and paramilitary territories to document the behaviours that constitute the different types of alliances; and the driving forces that explain alliance variation across time and space. Using three methods of data collection --- memory workshops, interviews and archival research --- I provide evidence for 1) when and where civilians and combatants establish alliances; 2) the different civilian positions in war zones that constitute them as status quo or revisionists; and 3) how civilians' status, in combination with whether armed groups control or contest territories, leads to different types of alliances.

In this thesis, I situate alliances between civilians and combatants in a historical perspective. I argue for an approach that moves beyond the focus only on the combatants' roles in war zones, and put forth a more nuanced story of civilians: their processes, organization and struggles that led them to occupy different statuses before, during and after wartime. I propose to include the emergence and configuration of civilian status in rural areas in Colombia to show how in the past—since colonial times, and during the period of civil war since the second half of the 20th century—the agency of civilians has not only been about choices during wartime. Rather, I show how civilians move between status quo and revisionist positions; shifts observed through the struggle of land tenure. The different status of rural civilians pre-exists and co-exists with the dynamics of the Colombian civil war.

This thesis documents the advent and boundaries of civilian status in the Cesar region of Colombia. I analyse the alliances established between the three communities and the insurgent FARC between 1985 and 1996. I identify collective manifestations of revisionist and status quo civilians through the emergence of three campesino communities. On the basis of the data collected in the three case studies, I show that the relationships between campesinos and combatants are mediated by campesino status; that is, the difference between those campesinos who are landless or have informal tenure and those who have formal land tenure. The presence of non-state armed groups and the dynamics of civil war presented opportunities and challenges for status quo and revisionist civilians in rural areas to maintain their land or to seek land tenure, respectively. While status quo communities established alliances of concession featuring low levels of cooperation, revisionist communities established alliances of engagement characterized by high levels of cooperation between campesinos and rebels. These two types of alliances were possible because the relationship between the communities and the insurgents took place in a controlled territory.

The three communities would later witness the arrival of paramilitary groups in Cesar. Between 1996 and 1997, the plains and high mountains of the region became the centre of contestation between the military, the paramilitary and the insurgent groups. In addition, during the same period, large-scale extraction of coal was booming in the region and multinational companies commenced export operations. I document the changes wrought by the paramilitary challenge in Cesar. Alliances between revisionist civilians led to the displacement and dispossession of the campesino communities and the repopulation of the territory with new inhabitants.

This thesis provides a theoretical and empirical basis of alliances between civilians and combatants in war zones based on empirical evidence collected in Colombia. I argue that the disputes over land tenure are linked to civilian status, and it is this status that shapes the civilians' interaction with combatants, and thus the nature of their alliances, during wartime. The cases studied in this manuscript revealed changes in land tenure and population driven by the establishment of alliances between civilians and combatants.

## SAMENVATTING

Het dominante beeld van burgers in oorlogsgebieden is dat van machteloze en passieve actoren. Burgers vormen de meerderheid van de slachtoffers in de context van burgeroorlogen. Zij zitten gevangen in het kruisvuur en zijn het slachtoffer van willekeurig en selectief geweld wanneer gewapende groepen gebieden trachten te controleren. In de afgelopen decennia hebben wetenschappers echter benadrukt dat zelfs in de context van oorlog burgers beschikken over en gebruik maken van hun vermogen tot reflectie, innovatie en het maken van keuzes, waardoor zij invloed uitoefenen op het verloop van de oorlog. Veel burgers kiezen ervoor hun huizen te verlaten en nieuwe plekken te zoeken waar hun leven niet in gevaar is. Anderen besluiten zich te verzetten tegen de aanwezigheid van strijders. Andere groepen kiezen voor samenwerking en leven in sommige gevallen onder het bestuur van een van de strijdende partijen. Ondanks deze belangrijke vorderingen zijn er uitingen van de relatie tussen burger en strijder die onderbelicht blijven. Bestaand werk heeft weinig aandacht besteed aan gevallen waarin burgers en strijders een samenwerkingsrelatie aangaan terwijl ieder autonoom blijft. Deze dissertatie gaat in op deze lacune en stelt alliantie voor als kernbegrip om overeenkomsten tussen autonome burgergemeenschappen en gewapende groepen voor de uitwisseling van materiële en strategische voordelen te begrijpen. De overkoepelende onderzoeksvraag is: welk type allianties ontstaan er tussen burgers en strijders in oorlogsgebieden en wat verklaart de variatie?

Dit onderzoek documenteert, beschrijft en verklaart allianties tussen burgers en strijders in irreguliere burgeroorlogen. Ik bied een typologie van allianties die kunnen variëren in twee dimensies: de mate van samenwerking (laag of hoog) en de duur (kort of lang). De combinatie van deze twee dimensies leidt tot drie verschillende types van allianties: *engagement*, wanneer de samenwerking hoog is en gedurende een lange periode; *opportunisme*, wanneer de samenwerking hoog is en de periode kort; en *concessie*, wanneer de mate van samenwerking laag is en de duur lang. Daarnaast biedt deze dissertatie een theoretisch kader om alliantievariatie te verklaren. Ik stel dat het type territorium (gecontroleerd of betwist) en de civiele positie (status quo of revisionistisch) vorm geven aan de vormen die allianties aannemen, en dat dit van invloed is op hoe de kenmerken van allianties (samenwerking en duur) variëren.

Om de theorie over allianties te testen, heb ik uitgebreid veldwerk verricht in oorlogsgebieden in Colombia. Ik put uit origineel empirisch materiaal van drie plattelandsgemeenschappen die leefden in rebellen- en paramilitaire gebieden om de gedragingen te documenteren die de verschillende soorten allianties vormen; en de drijvende krachten die alliantievariatie in tijd en ruimte verklaren. Aan de hand van drie onderzoeksmethoden - geheugenworkshops, interviews en archiefonderzoek - lever ik bewijs voor 1) wanneer en waar burgers en strijders allianties aangaan; 2) de verschillende burgerposities in oorlogsgebieden die hen tot status quo of tot revisionisten maken; en 3) hoe de status van burgers, in combinatie met het feit



of gewapende groepen territoria controleren of betwisten, tot verschillende soorten allianties leidt.

In deze dissertatie plaats ik allianties tussen burgers en strijders in een historisch perspectief. Ik pleit voor een benadering die verder gaat dan alleen de focus op de rol van strijders in oorlogsgebieden, en die een genuanceerder verhaal schetst van burgers: hun processen, organisatie en strijd die ertoe hebben geleid dat zij verschillende statussen hebben ingenomen voor, tijdens en na oorlogstijd. Ik stel voor om ook het ontstaan en de configuratie van de burgerlijke status in landelijke gebieden in Colombia te onderzoeken, om te laten zien hoe in het verleden - sinds de koloniale tijd, en tijdens de periode van burgeroorlog sinds de tweede helft van de 20e eeuw - de 'agency' van burgers niet alleen draaide om keuzes tijdens oorlogstijd. Ik laat zien hoe burgers bewegen tussen status quo en revisionistische posities, verschuivingen die worden waargenomen via de strijd om het landbezit. De verschillende status van de plattelandsbevolking bestaat zowel vóór als tijdens de dynamiek van de Colombiaanse burgeroorlog.

Deze dissertatie documenteert de opkomst en de grenzen van de burgerlijke status in de regio Cesar in Colombia. Ik analyseer de allianties tussen de drie gemeenschappen en de opstandige FARC tussen 1985 en 1996.. Ik identificeer collectieve manifestaties van revisionistische en status-quo burgers door het ontstaan van drie campesino gemeenschappen. Op basis van de gegevens die ik in de drie casestudies heb verzameld, laat ik zien dat de relaties tussen campesinos en strijders worden bemiddeld door de campesino-status; dat wil zeggen, het verschil tussen campesinos die geen land bezitten of een informeel pachtstelsel hebben en campesino die een formeel pachtstelsel hebben. De aanwezigheid van niet op staatsniveau opererende gewapende groeperingen en de dynamiek van de burgeroorlog boden kansen en uitdagingen voor respectievelijk status-quo en revisionistische burgers in plattelandsgebieden om hun land te behouden of om landbezit te zoeken. Terwijl de gemeenschappen van de status quo allianties van concessie sloten met een lage mate van samenwerking, sloten de gemeenschappen van de revisionisten allianties van engagement, gekenmerkt door een hoge mate van samenwerking tussen campesinos en rebellen. Deze twee types alianaties waren mogelijk, omdat het gebied door rebellen werd gecontroleerd.

De drie burgergemeenschappen kregen later te maken met paramilitaire groepen die Cesar binnentrokken. Tussen 1996 en 1997 werden de vlakten en het hooggebergte van de regio het centrum van de strijd tussen het leger, de paramilitairen en de opstandige groepen. In dezelfde periode nam de steenkoolwinning in de regio een hoge vlucht en begonnen multinationale ondernemingen met exportactiviteiten. Ik documenteer de veranderingen die de komst van de paramilitaire groepen in Cesar teweeg heeft gebracht. Allianties tussen revisionistische burgers leidden tot de verplaatsing en onteigening van de campesino gemeenschappen en de herbevolking van het gebied met nieuwe bewoners.

Deze dissertatie biedt een theoretische en empirische basis om allianties tussen burgers en strijders in oorlogsgebieden beter te begrijpen, gebaseerd op empirisch bewijsmateriaal verzameld in Colombia. Ik betoog dat de geschillen over grondbezit verband houden met de burgerlijke status, en het is deze status die vormgeeft aan de interactie tussen burgers en strijders, en dus aan de aard van hun bondgenootschappen, in oorlogstijd. De in dit manuscript bestudeerde gevallen lieten veranderingen zien in het grondbezit en de bevolking die werden aangedreven door de vorming van allianties tussen burgers en strijders.