

***Rebel Politics: A Political Sociology of Armed Struggle in Myanmar's Borderlands.* By David Brenner. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. Softcover: 146pp.**

David Brenner's book on the Karen National Union (KNU) and Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) in Myanmar examines a key puzzle for stakeholders and political observers of the long-running civil war: why, despite knowing full well the Myanmar armed forces' (*Tatmadaw*) strategy of divide-and-rule, do insurgent groups continue to fragment when solidarity should improve their bargaining position? Is this the historical contingency of events, choices and individual rebel leaders' personalities, or an inevitable hallmark of insurgency?

Brenner's work is a welcome addition to the literature on insurgency in Myanmar and a reminder of the importance of historicizing insurgencies. Based on ten months of fieldwork and participant observation (supporting the KNU educational arm and conducting courses for KIO officers), he incorporates the voices of leaders, teachers, officials and lay people. Interestingly, he uses the term "rebel" rather than "insurgency" to highlight the groups' distinctive political demands, and to avoid the latter's association with violent military actions in political usage in Myanmar. The two groups constitute an apt comparative case-study since they are widely perceived to be more Westernized, Christianized and better connected through a regional and international diaspora. The comparison is also built around the KIO's return to conflict with the *Tatmadaw* in 2011, just a year before the KNU signed a ceasefire in 2012.

Rebel Politics seeks to balance economistic and political economy approaches with an analysis of internal politics as social figurations (p. 104), treating rebellion as a social process rather than adopting unitary actor assumptions (p. 6). Brenner argues primarily that internal struggles over leaders' authority and legitimacy drove the divergent strategic choices of their leadership. He posits a "rebel habitus", or how "rebellion has become a way of life" (p. 38) in Kachinland and Karen areas. His relational framework examines rebellion as a social process and network embedded in its political and economic context, drawing on Norbert Elias' notion of figuration and interdependencies between actors, and Pierre Bourdieu's notions of habitus, with diverse actors strategizing within their given constraints (pp. 14–24). He develops an analysis of rebel authority based on support, coercion and legitimacy, with different dynamics between leaders, grassroots

communities and the rank-and-file of the rebel organization. Brenner notes a dual struggle for rebel leaders—against the state, and against other rival internal factions (p. 20)—which requires two related processes to build legitimacy: reciprocal exchange relations with their grassroots, and building recognition and affiliation from within their rebel organization.

The structure of the book is straightforward. It starts with the theoretical framework, a brief social and economic history of the borderlands before covering the KNU and KIO in the third and fourth chapters.

In Chapter Three, Brenner argues that the existence of factions within the KNU paradoxically enables Karen grassroots to continue supporting the organization despite disappointment with its leadership, identifying with an internal opposition they see as less authoritarian and corrupt, rather than becoming disillusioned with the entire institution. He demonstrates the plurality of interests and the tension between decentralized revenue structures and the highly centralized political leadership, with KNU units in the south and central areas more disengaged from grassroots communities. Ultimately, “identifying with the group’s internal opposition” allowed the “grassroots to maintain positive social identity from continued affiliation with the KNU” (p. 73), thereby retaining support for the KNU.

Chapter Four focuses on the KIO and indirectly addresses another major preoccupation of political observers: what will happen when a second generation of leaders takes over? Brenner describes how an older generation of KIO leaders, widely viewed as corrupt and co-opted by the Myanmar state, were replaced by a newer generation which revived armed resistance and rebuilt legitimacy through alliances with church institutions. However, this remobilization of ethno-nationalist sentiment makes peace negotiations with the *Tatmadaw* more difficult. Brenner concludes by outlining four stages of rebellion—partial co-optation, fragmentation, internal contention and renewed resistance—and argues that group fragmentation as a counterinsurgency strategy may backfire.

Brenner’s intriguing analysis provides two directions for future elaboration. The bulk of his presented evidence comes from interviews with a wide array of key Karen and Kachin personnel. While the selection of these perspectives is presumably corroborated by “deep hanging out” with the movements (p. 25), the reader wonders what everyday interactions between leaders and communities look like. What do the events and interactions that he witnessed during his fieldwork, especially moments where recognition or authority fail,

tell us about the “rebel habitus”? For instance, Brenner makes a claim that “elite interaction with the grassroots can build authority within non-state armed groups even when elites continue to profit while the masses remain impoverished” based on a brief account of KIO leader Gun Maw’s speech to parents of KIA soldiers, and a journalist’s description of him as a “good gangster” (p. 88), but could make this case more compelling with moments of interaction and reflection by laypeople and leaders. Such depictions are especially important if Brenner is trying to demonstrate a grassroots affiliation that is “a prereflexive, routinized practice flowing from the rebel habitus” (p. 105).

Second, while acknowledging the challenges of cease-fire politics, the overall narrative analysis focuses mainly on internal authority relations, seeing them as “largely driven by politico-economic changes in both borderlands” (p. 99). This could be bolstered by turning to the performative dimensions of rebellion, how contention and resistance within are presented and performed to both internal and external audiences, rather than simply a result of strategic and personal calculations. Different internal stances are not merely consequences of factionalism or authority relations with grassroots, but create a useful ambiguity—an armed group simultaneously hostile and conciliatory. Tying together internal politics with careful analysis of how these are represented to different audiences might offer useful insights into their external relations.

A next step in studying the social process of rebellion in Myanmar’s long-running civil war would be to map relationships and networks across ethnic armed groups, including their links with the Myanmar state and military. A Burmese affiliate of an armed group once exhorted me (and academics more generally) to write a history of the political culture and relations between the different rebel organizations and the *Tatmadaw*, providing a contextual backdrop for the peace process. I hesitated, noting that this would be a mammoth task taking at least a decade. “Don’t worry, we will still be fighting at that time”, came his reply. Brenner’s book is a welcome step towards this possibility.

ANDREW ONG is Postdoctoral Fellow at the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore. Postal address: 10 Kent Ridge Crescent, #07-01 AS8, Singapore 119260; email: ariowha@nus.edu.sg.