

# Can't Tear Us Apart: Explaining Factional Struggles in Armed Groups

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## Abstract

Why do rebel groups succumb to factional struggles, internal coups, and organizational splits? These outcomes are puzzling, as infighting weakens rebels, who already face daunting odds against a militarily stronger state. Existing explanations focus on exogenous factors that disrupt rebel organizations' internal processes. Yet rebel groups fragment even in the absence of external shocks. In this paper I present an endogenous theory of rebel factional struggles, in which leadership disputes result from a shifting *balance of loyalties* within a rebel organization. In my model, rival rebel leaders cultivate the loyalty of two types of networks, recruitment networks and operational networks, which in turn serve as power bases to initiate leadership struggles, launch coups, or split organizations. I test my theory with a case study of Nicaragua's *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN), which splintered into three factions in 1975–1976. Drawing on an original network dataset of FSLN field commanders, I trace how the organization's network structure changed over time, spurring disputes between rising and incumbent rebel leaders over their subordinates' loyalties. The theory predicts the identity of disputants, and the timing and outcomes of the leadership disputes that tore the FSLN apart.

# 1 Introduction

The last century of world history would look unrecognizable absent the factional struggles within its epochal rebel and revolutionary organizations. The Bolsheviks splintered from the Menshevik faction of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party, and later limited membership in the Comintern to parties “preferably formed by a split” (Fitzpatrick 1984). Mao Zedong and Fidel Castro only overcame rivals for rebel leadership after years of internal struggle (Kampen 2000; Sweig 2004, 10). More recently, successive splinters from al-Qaeda produced Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State (Lister 2016). Scholars have shown that rebel infighting leads to more violent and intractable conflicts (Cunningham, Bakke, and Seymour 2012, 69; Pearlman 2009, 80; Stedman 1997), and undermines rebel movement success (Krause 2014). However, we know relatively little about the causes, dynamics, and outcomes of disputes within rebel organizations. Proposed explanations hold that disputes occur when exogenous factors, such as lootable resources (Weinstein 2007), external support (Tamm 2016), and state violence (Seymour, Bakke, and Cunningham 2015, 5; Christia 2012; Lawrence 2010, 99; McLaughlin and Pearlman 2012, 14–23; Price 2012; Staniland 2014), disrupt rebel organizations’ internal processes. Yet externally-focused accounts only partially delineate internal rebel processes, and cannot explain why rebel organizations unravel even in the absence of outside shocks. Extant literature may show which factors aggravate intra-group rivalries, but “does not itself explain the origins of intra-group rivalries” (Tamm 2016, 10). Theorizing the dynamics of internal factional struggles may be key to unlocking rationales behind seemingly irrational rebel behaviors including infighting, spoiling, and terrorism—a point to which I return in the conclusion.

In this paper I present an *endogenous* theory of rebel factional struggle, in which leadership disputes result from a shifting *balance of loyalties* within a rebel organization.<sup>1</sup> In this model, rival rebel leaders cultivate the loyalty of two types of networks: recruitment networks and operational networks. These networks serve as power bases for individual rebel leaders by structuring the loyalties of subordinate fighters. The composition of both types of networks change over time, as rebel organizations simultaneously face attrition and pursue expansion. New influxes of recruits or new operational networks thus alter the distribution of power between rebel leaders, sometimes elevating new leaders and weakening incumbents. This in turn enables would-be challengers to struggle with the existing rebel leadership for control of the group. Leadership disputes, once begun, may end in internal coups or organizational splits (Tamm 2016, 3).

I test my theory using network analysis and by process-tracing a series of four interrelated leadership disputes that tore apart Nicaragua’s *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (FSLN) from 1971 to 1976. Drawing on evidence from an original network dataset constructed during fieldwork, I show how three new

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<sup>1</sup>I define a leadership dispute as a credible attempt to revise the formal distribution of power within a rebel group.

leaders cultivated recruitment and operational networks to mount challenges against the FSLN’s incumbent leadership. When a challenger’s power base was larger, he overthrew the incumbent leader in an internal coup. When the rivals’ power bases were more evenly matched, they split the FSLN into three independent organizations: first the FSLN-*Proletaria*, later the FSLN-*Guerra Popular Prolongada* and the FSLN-*Insurreccional*. I show how my theory accurately predicts the timing and outcome of disputes, and the identities of disputants.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, I describe the balance of loyalties mechanism step by step. At every step I describe the types of data I sought and the qualitative and quantitative tests I employed to establish evidence of a causal link (Beach and Pedersen 2016; Bennett 2010; Bennett and Checkel 2015). Second, I introduce the case, providing important context for empirical analysis, and two interrelated concepts, *power* and *cantera* (or “quarry,” the FSLN’s term for recruitment network), that define the conduct of rebel leadership disputes. Following this, I summarize the results of my investigation into the FSLN’s four leadership disputes, showing how each arose between an incumbent leader and a challenger supported by a *cantera* or operational network. I then process trace each of the leadership disputes. Finally, I discuss the inherent unpredictability of individual decision-making under low-information conditions, which curtails the predictive power of my theory, as well as the implications and generalizability of the balance of loyalties mechanism.

## 2 Describing the balance of loyalties mechanism

This section introduces the *balance of loyalties mechanism*: the incorporation of new recruitment networks or formation of new operational networks alters the internal balance of power between leaders of a rebel group, sowing leadership disputes and as a result, internal coups and organizational splits. When a rebel group cultivates a new recruitment network (*cantera*), it often recruits new cadres with leadership potential. These potential leaders may build a power base by gaining the loyalties of other fighters from the same recruitment or operational networks under his command. When a new leader’s power base is as strong as, or stronger than, that of older leaders, he is likely to initiate a leadership dispute. (Alternately, older leaders may preemptively strike in a foresighted effort to preserve their dominance). The result of the leadership dispute should follow the logic laid out by Tamm (2016): if a new leader has a significantly larger power base than older leaders, he is likely to win the leadership dispute, taking over the rebel group in an *internal coup*.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, if his power base is relatively equal to that of older leaders, neither side has the

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<sup>2</sup>I use masculine pronouns throughout although the FSLN had many important female commanders, because none were protagonists in the leadership disputes: “Looking back,” said Gioconda Belli, “I don’t think we women fought for power the way the men did” (Randall 1994, 176). See also interview 21, Managua, October 2016.

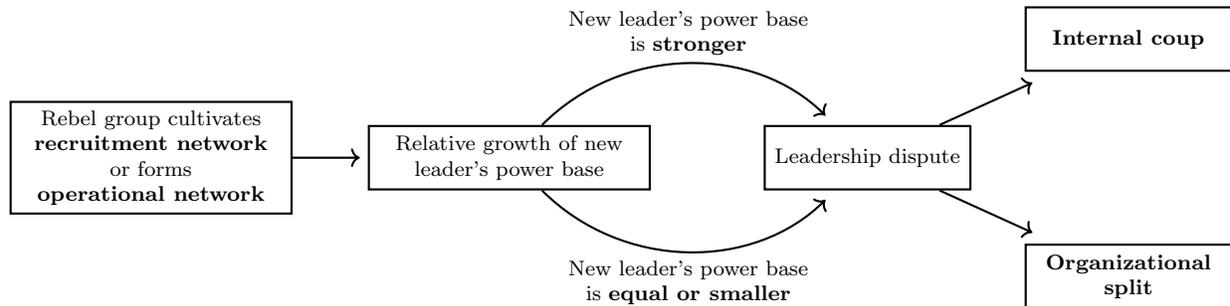


Figure 1: Diagram of the balance of loyalties mechanism

strength to win, and the rebel group is likely to *split* into two splinter groups, each following a different set of leaders.

Figure 1 breaks this mechanism into four discrete steps: 1) a rebel group cultivates a new recruitment network or forms a new operational network, 2) a new leader’s power base, built on the new recruitment network or operational network, grows relative to that of older leaders, 3) the shifting balance of power provokes a leadership dispute, which 4) results in an *internal coup* if the new leader is stronger, or an *organizational split* if the incumbent leader is equal or stronger. In the following section, I describe each of these steps in more detail. For each of the causal mechanism’s steps, I identify its observable implications, the specific data I collected, and the analytical tests I employed to demonstrate evidence of causality (Beach and Pedersen 2016).

### Rebel group cultivates recruitment network or forms operational network

FSLN members referred to their most prolific sources of recruits as “*canteras*,” which they considered constitutive building blocks of the rebel organization.<sup>3</sup> Intuitively, recruitment is an existential issue for rebel groups: rebels must replenish their ranks due to attrition, and ultimately they look to recruit sufficient manpower to defeat or exact concessions from the government, or, minimally, survive. Rebel groups would ideally like to recruit high-quality fighters who demonstrate both discipline and commitment to their cause, yet finding and gathering information about potential recruits can be costly (Weinstein 2007, 102). Thus, rebel organizations organize new recruitment networks or cultivate existing ones, such as radical student, labor, and religious associations; youth groups; social-patriotic organizations; and clan or ethnic networks (Petersen 2001, 48–51). These *canteras* provide rebels with a concentration of potential recruits and a heuristic to assess their quality, because members of these networks have high-quality information on other members’ commitment to anti-regime political activities. Individual rebel commanders who gain the loyalty

<sup>3</sup>FSLN members also referred to recruitment networks as “*semilleros*,” or seedbeds, or as *organizaciones intermedias*. Guerrilla practitioners inventing a specialized terminology equivalent to our theoretical constructs should reassure us of their validity.

of *canteras* may use them as a power base.

To identify FSLN *canteras*, I sought evidence that the FSLN observed organized anti-regime political activity and forged durable recruitment relationships with dissident networks. If four or more FSLN recruits were members of the same dissident network prior to joining, I consider it a *cantera*.<sup>4</sup> I collected data on *cantera* recruitment through field interviews with dissident network leaders and combatant memoirs.

Alternately, some commanders may win the loyalty of fighters in the *operational network* under their command. I define an operational network as a unit of fighters jointly participating in military operations and the relations between them. Military operations may produce camaraderie among participants because fighters must train together, which improves inter-group communication and cohesion (King 2006), and because operations may last for a significant amount of time, during which fighters may develop strong personal bonds. As Shils and Janowitz (1948, 285) write in their classic article, “when isolated from civilian primary groups, the individual soldier comes to depend more and more on his military primary group. His spontaneous loyalties are to its immediate members whom he sees daily and with whom he develops a high degree of intimacy.” Though operational networks may be central to organizational dynamics in other rebel groups, I was only able to identify one FSLN operational network (the Juan José Quezada (JJQ) command) that also functioned as a leader’s power base.

### **New leader’s power base grows relative to incumbent’s**

New *canteras* and operational networks cause leadership disputes because of two interrelated dynamics. First, they elevate new rebel leaders. New cadres with leadership potential may win loyalty as a result of their previous leadership roles, military preparedness or accomplishments, role in recruitment, access to arms or wealth, or personal charisma.<sup>5</sup> Whatever the reason for their prominence, leaders organizing or emerging from newly incorporated *canteras* are likely to possess strong, personal ties to and social traits in common with other recruits from their *cantera*. In the event of a leadership dispute with a , *cantera* leaders may expect personal loyalty from those other recruits. Fighters recruited through their *cantera* constitute the key military resources in each *cantera* leader’s power base, or relative share of the organization’s military resources (Tamm 2016, 3). I frequently refer to a *cantera* leader’s power base as his *de facto* power, as distinct from his formal power indicated by rank within the rebel hierarchy. Second, because dissidents continue to join *canteras* and through them, the rebel group, a new rebel leader’s power base may grow over time. As with two states locked in an arms race, any upsurge in recruits from newly incorporated *canteras* weakens the relative power of older rebel leaders. New recruits may have markedly different characteristics

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<sup>4</sup>I set four as the minimum threshold because the largest family unit to join the FSLN (the Ortigas) had three members.

<sup>5</sup>*Cantera* leaders need not be recruited through their *canteras*. Rather, they may be older cadres who have been promoted to a key recruitment or command position over recruits from a *cantera*.

and identities from older cadres, and their loyalty to the existing leadership of the group may be weak. Meanwhile, the number of loyal partisans of older leaders may diminish due to attrition and desertion, or from the promotion of loyalists to leadership positions, where they may become rivals.

To demonstrate how a newly incorporated *cantera* (or operational network) increases a new leader power base, I must observe the process described above: the emergence of a new leader with a *cantera*'s loyalty, and the flow of new recruits from that *cantera* into the rebel group. To identify *cantera* leaders, I sought commanders who had a central role in a) the *cantera*'s recruitment and training, and/or b) operational command of the recruits from a *cantera*. But not every commander who meets one or both of these criteria was a *cantera* leader. Thus, I sought data (usually interview evidence) evincing recruits' respect and loyalty for a specific commander. In practice, there was little ambiguity in the historical record regarding the identities of *cantera* leaders at any given time.

Having identified *cantera* leaders, how can we operationalize and measure their *power base*? The operationalization must be sensitive to the way in which leaders actually draw on *canteras* in leadership disputes. A simple count of recruits from each *cantera*, for example, is not an adequate operationalization because leadership disputes are not solely determined by which leader has a larger *cantera*. While "strong ties" with loyal fighters are a rebel leader's core military resource, leadership disputes do not simply pit the disputants' *canteras* against each other: a leadership dispute necessarily involves the entire rebel organization. Disputants therefore seek to construct the largest *coalition* possible.

For this reason, I operationalize each leader's power base as the Eigenvector centrality of their *cantera* within the rebel network.<sup>6</sup> Eigenvector centrality is a commonly used metric in mathematical social network analysis that measures the relative influence of a specific node in a network, returning higher scores (on a scale of 0 to 1) for nodes that are themselves connected to influential nodes. This captures two important dynamics a simple count of *cantera* members would not. First, it will return a higher score for a rebel leader whose *cantera* includes many influential lieutenants. Second, it captures "weak ties" between *cantera* members and other fighters across distinct portions of a rebel organization's network, which may be drawn on to help build larger coalitions (Granovetter 1973).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Defined in mathematical terms, "the [Eigenvector] centrality  $x_i$  of vertex  $i$  is proportional to the sum of the centralities of  $i$ 's neighbors:  $x_i = \kappa_1^{-1} \sum_j A_{ij}x_j$ " (Newman 2015, 170).

<sup>7</sup>I do not report Eigenvector centrality of individual leaders, because (as I note above) their ability to command the allegiance of individual *canteras* derives from their individual leadership qualities rather their network centrality alone. What matters for calculating the relative power of individual leaders in this analysis, then, is the network centrality of the *canteras* that are loyal to them.

## Shifting balance of power provokes leadership dispute

Why does the relative change in older and newer leaders' power bases cause a leadership dispute? In such a case, an older leader occupies a position of formal power at the top of the rebel hierarchy, while the newer leader possesses a larger power base—that is, they possess more strong ties and affinity with rank-and-file rebel members on whose loyalty they can count. In these circumstances, where a rebel leader's formal power within the rebel hierarchy does not reflect their *de facto* power, the newer leader may be frustrated by “blocked promotions” (Staniland 2014, 42), and seek to revise the distribution of formal power through a leadership dispute.<sup>8</sup> While a new leader strongly embedded in a growing *cantera* may seek to capture a higher share of formal power by initiating a leadership struggle, the incumbent leader also possesses incentives to preemptively cut down overly powerful subordinates. Rebel leadership disputes are structured like the bargaining model of conflict, in which a rising power cannot credibly commit to continued obedience in the future (Fearon 1995). The bargaining problem is especially acute in a rebel leadership dispute as loyalty, the currency of power in the dispute, is private information known only to individual rebel fighters. Network ties and affinity may serve as a useful heuristic, but both old and new leaders are ultimately uncertain of their own—and their rival's—power base in case of conflict. Uncertainty may complicate arriving at mutually satisfactory bargaining outcome (for example, granting responsibility over a rebel battalion), or cause grave miscalculations (for example, waiting too long to swat down a rising rival leader).

I sought two types of evidence to demonstrate that the changing balance of loyalties caused a given leadership dispute. First, sequencing: because a rising leader is unlikely to accept a lower rank for long, a leadership dispute should occur shortly after a significant change in the balance of power.<sup>9</sup> Second, and crucially, the *identity* of the disputant must match the prediction of the mechanism outlined above: at least one disputant challenging the established rebel leadership should be the leader of a “rising” *cantera* or operational network.<sup>10</sup> At any given time, there were no more than two commanders fitting the above description (that is, the leader of a rising *cantera* or operational network) in the FSLN. Thus, we would be unlikely to observe such leaders consistently involved in leadership disputes were there not a relationship between leading a “rising” network and participating in a leadership dispute.

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<sup>8</sup>Similarly, Seymour (2014, 103) shows how rivalries stemming from “struggles for leadership and promotions in armed groups” motivate rebel side-switching in fragmented civil wars.

<sup>9</sup>I expect the direct trigger of or pretense for a leadership dispute to be unsystematic: a difference over strategy, a personal insult, a dirty look at a meeting.

<sup>10</sup>Leadership challenges typically involve coalitions of commanders on both sides. I argue that *at least* one of the challenging leaders must be a *cantera* leader; otherwise the challenging coalition lacks the necessary power base with which to mount a challenge.

## Leadership dispute produces coup or splinter

Once a leadership dispute begins, what determines its resolution? Tamm (2016, 3) sketches the logic of rebel leadership disputes:

A leader's command authority is generally based on an *imbalanced* distribution of power in his favor. If this imbalance gets radically inverted in favor of a rival, the latter is likely to be able to stage a successful coup, thus replacing the existing leader without necessarily undermining the group's structural integrity. By contrast, the shift from an imbalance to a *more balanced* distribution of power increases the likelihood of a split. The rival becomes strong enough to actively challenge the leader but remains too weak to replace him.<sup>11</sup>

I expect this logic to hold for leadership disputes within the FSLN. Once the gloves come off, the outcome of the dispute is likely to be determined by *de facto* power, measured in the Eigenvector centrality of a loyal *cantera* or operational network, rather than formal power within the rebel hierarchy. Loyalty and influence, not funds or arms (as per Tamm), are the key determinants: by drawing on a more influential stock of loyal cadres, a new leader with a dominant power base will likely cobble together an overwhelming coup coalition. Where the power bases of an old leader and a new leader are evenly matched, the new leader can count on loyal cadres to follow him into a splinter group.

This step has a key observable implication: each disputant should employ his power, formal or *de facto*, against the other. First, leaders with greater formal power—that is, older leaders who face a challenge—should attempt to draw on their formal power to ward off challenges. Specifically, they should attempt to apply mechanisms of *internal discipline*. Small-scale disputes and issues of internal discipline are common in rebel groups, and the leadership draws on a repertoire of punishments for dealing with cadre indiscipline. These punishments range from internal sanctions to reassignment, reduction in rank, expulsion, and execution. I expect that challenged leaders attempt to deploy these punishments during a leadership dispute.

Second, challengers with greater *de facto* power should attempt to mobilize their power base in response to the incumbent's use of internal discipline. Thus, I sought evidence that *cantera* leaders cultivated the loyalty of cadres over the course of the dispute. The extent of a challenger's power base should determine whether they are successful at overcoming internal discipline. I expect that a challenger without a significant power base will *suffer punishment*, that a challenger with a comparable power base will be able to *fight back* against punishment (by negotiating or by splintering with loyal fighters), and that a challenger with a significantly

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<sup>11</sup>Tamm explains the changing balance of power by pointing to external support, but this independent variable can only *change* a rebel leader's power base—it cannot constitute that power base. In short, a rebel leader may receive more funding or weapons from an external power, but the leader presumably uses these resources to *alter the distribution of loyalty in his favor*.

greater power base can *ignore* attempts at punishment. In the latter case, the challenger may expel the incumbent or simply remove his formal powers as a *fait accompli*: an internal coup.

The above account raises the question of the *precise* timing of disputes. Why do some disputes begin early, when the incumbent retains an advantage or at least parity, and others late, when the challenger has gained the advantage? Unfortunately, it is difficult to predict *ex ante* the precise timing of a leadership dispute, as it is contingent upon the decision-making of individual incumbents and challengers. This, in turn, is subject to uncertainty (over one’s rival’s intentions and power, over the extent of one’s own power, and of potential future changes in the distribution of power), of miscalculation, of mismatches between a leader’s personal incentives and those of the rebel group as a whole, and of learning, which accumulates over successive leadership disputes. I return to this problem at the end of the paper, where I discuss how these factors affected the precise timing of the FSLN’s three leadership disputes.

### Alternate explanations

Alongside network centrality, I consider three alternative explanations for rebel organizational splits and internal coups taken from the literature: *state violence*, whether via asymmetric battlefield losses (Christia 2012, 44–45) or leadership decapitation (Staniland 2014, 46–47);<sup>12</sup> unbalanced *external support* (Tamm 2016); and *strategic differences*—the explanation commonly proffered by historiography on the FSLN (Hellmund 2013; Hodges 1986; Monroy García 1997; Zimmermann 2000). I report operationalizations and data used for process tracing these explanations in the methodological appendix. Following Zaks (2017), I do not necessarily regard these explanations as competing; rather, I sought evidence that they are “coincident” (independent of one another) or “congruent” (that they jointly produced the outcome).<sup>13</sup> I show that in some instances the alternative explanations served as short-term “triggers” of leadership disputes predicted by the shifting balance of power between rebel leaders.

## 3 Data collection and dataset construction

To gather the “diverse and relevant evidence” necessary for process tracing (Bennett and Checkel 2015, 27), I conducted elite interviews and built an original network dataset of commanders (*comandantes*) and political leaders (*dirigentes*) in the FSLN and its splinter groups (henceforth the FSLN Commander Dataset). I conducted 31 interviews, primarily with former FSLN commanders. I sought out commanders from each of

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<sup>12</sup>Staniland applies this mechanism to rebel groups, following a large literature debating the effects of targeting leaders of terrorist organizations (Johnston 2012, 51–52; Jordan 2014, 14–23; Price 2012), criminal organizations (Calderón et al. 2015; Phillips 2015), and anti-colonial movements (Lawrence 2010).

<sup>13</sup>For example, McLaughlin and Pearlman (2012) argue that state repression and an unsatisfactory internal distribution of power together produce infighting within ethnic and nationalist movements.

the three factions. My interviews were free-ranging but followed a common pattern: I asked each informant about their pathway to mobilization, their experiences upon joining, and their attitudes to FSLN goals and ideological positions. Then I asked informants to narrate their experiences of the 1975-1976 split, along with their understanding of its causes. I report in the Methodological Appendix detailed information about my informants, my interview techniques, sampling frame, saturation levels, and how I negotiated retrospective and presentation biases while interpreting interview evidence (Mosley 2013).

I use the FSLN Commander Dataset to calculate the centrality of the FSLN's constituent *canteras* and operational networks, which determines when rebel organizations succumb to leadership disputes and organizational splits. I generated the data to construct the dataset during three months of archival research at the *Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica* (IHNCA) in Nicaragua. Typically, rebel group internal structures are opaque to researchers: to prevent infiltration by regime agents and damage when collaborators defect, guerrilla warfare requires compartmentalization of information about chains of command. Nor can clandestine rebel networks be easily reconstructed after conflict. As the modal rebel group fails to take power and surviving combatants may face state retaliation during the post-war period, former rebels often lack the resources or motivation to divulge wartime command structures in detail. As a result, conflict researchers have largely relied on interviews with combatants, selected via non-representative snowball sampling, to gather partial data on rebel networks. In the Nicaraguan cases, however, the Sandinista government compiled meticulous historical records after the FSLN's victorious revolutionary campaign. Drawing on those information sources, my dataset can depict the internal structure of each insurgent group at greater levels of detail than most conflict studies.

I employed dozens of primary and secondary sources to construct the Commander Dataset, including a large collection of biographies of FSLN commanders compiled to provide reading material for a 1980 literacy campaign, 27 memoirs of former combatants, almost all of whom were commanders or political leaders across all three factions, and 12 collections of combatant interviews. The network dataset contains 144 FSLN commanders, an extraordinary level of granularity for a rebel movement that, for most of its existence, comprised fewer than 100 members (both commanders and rank-and-file militants). In 1977, a year after the factional dispute, Humberto Ortega reports that the FSLN had "a little more than a hundred" combatants (Ortega Saavedra 2004, 315); my network dataset contains 90 individuals in 1977, indicating substantial coverage.

I coded the date each commander joined the FSLN, the date they ceased activity (usually through being killed in action), their factional membership in 1976, and at least one network connection immediately prior to joining the FSLN (a dissident network for most, otherwise a personal connection to an FSLN member, a university, or a high school). Commanders were excluded from the dataset when this information was

unavailable, which occurred primarily for obscure or short-time members whose impact on the outcomes of interest were minimal. Exclusion of relatively marginal commanders should not bias the findings for or against any hypothesis. Because the data are longitudinal, they paint a picture of the FSLN’s social composition for every year between 1961 and 1977. I discuss dataset construction in more detail in the Methodological Appendix.

## 4 Case overview

The FSLN fragmented not during adversity, but shortly after its greatest operational success to date. On December 27<sup>th</sup>, 1974, after thirteen years of armed struggle, the FSLN struck a spectacular blow against the Somoza dynasty that had governed Nicaragua for nearly four decades. A command of thirteen urban guerrillas stormed a Christmas party hosted at the home of José María “Chema” Castillo, the minister of agriculture in Anastasio Somoza Debayle’s government. The FSLN captured a large number of high-ranking members of the regime, including relatives of the president. In exchange for freeing the hostages, the guerrillas demanded one million dollars, the publication of a revolutionary manifesto, freedom for eight captured FSLN members, and an escort to the “Las Mercedes” airport, where they would fly to Cuba (Wheelock 1979, 53). All these demands were met. On the way to the airport, masses of ordinary Nicaraguans followed the caravan, demonstrating their support for the revolutionaries. Observing the popular reaction, young Managua-based rebel leaders envisioned new possibilities for toppling the Somoza dictatorship by bringing the masses into the fight.<sup>14</sup>

Yet despite the spectacular success of the operation, the FSLN’s rapid growth, and the increasing unsteadiness of the regime, the FSLN itself fractured. By mid-1976, less than two years after the operation, the FSLN had fragmented into three bickering factions, called *tendencias* or tendencies. One faction, the *Guerra Popular Prolongada* (FSLN-GPP), or Prolonged People’s War, favored a *foco* strategy of building guerrilla columns in Nicaragua’s northern mountains. The second, *Proletaria* or Proletarian tendency (FSLN-TP) favored mobilizing urban workers and rural campesinos. The third, *Tercerista* or *Insurreccional* tendency (FSLN-TI), sought to spark a mass popular uprising. For three years until their formal reunification in 1979, the factions’ leadership closed their structures to one other and competed with propaganda and in attempts to outbid one another. The FSLN’s splintering, coming at a moment of political opportunity, instead proved costly. Security conditions deteriorated as each faction hastily rebuilt internal structures to replace those lost to rival factions. In November 1976, Carlos Fonseca, the FSLN’s long-time leader and now a top commander of the FSLN-GPP, was killed by the National Guard (IES 1985). At almost the same time, FSLN-TI leader

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<sup>14</sup>Interview 30, Managua, January 2017.

Eduardo Contreras and FSLN-TP leader Roberto Huembes were captured and killed in separate incidents (Zimmermann 2000, 203). In October 1977, the FSLN-GPP leader Pedro Aráuz was caught unaware and killed by a National Guard patrol responding to a nearby FSLN-TI operation.<sup>15</sup>

This sequence of events raises a puzzle: why would a rebel organization splinter in such a costly manner despite enjoying military success and popular support? The balance of loyalties mechanism allows us to solve this puzzle. It was precisely rising popular support, and the resulting waves of new recruits, that made rebellious collective action more challenging. Rising levels of civilian discontent in Nicaragua, caused by the 1967 Roosevelt Avenue massacre and the 1972 Managua earthquake, mobilized new dissident networks: radical student groups and revolutionary Christians. These networks (now properly *canteras* channeling new recruits to the FSLN) dramatically transformed the FSLN's internal composition, displacing the networks upon which the organization was originally built and bringing to the fore new leaders with independent power bases. These new leaders struggled with declining incumbents to move up the rebel hierarchy. Where new leaders built a dominant power base, they overthrew older leaders in internal coups. Where the FSLN's constituent *canteras* and operational networks divided their loyalties between old and new leaders, the conflicts sundered the rebel group, engendering organizational splits.

I further develop two key concepts below, power and *cantera*, before turning to an analysis of three interrelated leadership disputes in the FSLN between 1971 and 1976. I first present interview and documentary evidence that the leadership disputes fundamentally revolved around struggles for power on the part of individual leaders. Second, I discuss how *canteras* structure fighter loyalty, the most important source of *de facto* power within rebel groups.

## Leadership disputes: a struggle for power

While almost all extant historiography on the FSLN reports that the factional dispute was caused by disagreements over ideology and strategy (Hellmund 2013; Hodges 1986; Monroy García 1997; Zimmermann 2000), my interviewees were equally unanimous that the factional dispute was, at heart, a struggle for power. The factional dispute resulted from “disputes between leaders that had the fundamental nature of power, of desire for power;”<sup>16</sup> it was caused by “human pettiness... and I don't know, I don't discard either the ambition for power, right?... So then, I think those two things are the seed of the conflict. That afterwards came to acquire a clear ideological differentiation, or rather strategic.”<sup>17</sup> It had “a very strong doctrinal foundation, there's no doubt, but it didn't present itself like that, right? One. Two, it seems to me that it presented itself at the same time as a struggle for power... They wanted to take the leadership from Carlos

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<sup>15</sup>Interview 9, Managua, October 2015. See also interview with Glauco Robelo in Baltodano (2010b).

<sup>16</sup>Interview 16, Laguna de Apoyo, June 2016.

<sup>17</sup>Interview 17, Managua, June 2017.

Fonseca.”<sup>18</sup> Another commander, close to the main protagonists, told me that “everybody wanted to be in command. Even in the most thuggish bands there’s always a fight for command, even though being in command implies they’ll shoot you with four machine guns. But that’s what it is to be human, that’s the human condition: ambition, the theory of ambition.”<sup>19</sup> Carlos Fonseca, the FSLN’s visionary co-founder, also recognized this. “It happens,” he wrote in a 1976 polemic dripping with biting understatement, “that certain compañeros give the appearance of being ambitious” (Fonseca Amador 1976, 13).<sup>20</sup>

There had long been space for strategic disagreements and discussion within the FSLN, but there could only be one overall commander. Meanwhile, this struggle for power was necessarily between individuals who became leaders by virtue of the loyalty of the FSLN’s *canteras* or operational networks. Possession of an independent power base was the necessary—and indeed, in the Nicaraguan case, sufficient—condition for each leader’s attempt to wrangle power. *Canteras* structured loyalty, and therefore the contesting leaders’ power, even though most rank-and-file FSLN members had little desire to take part in the power struggles tearing their revolutionary organization apart.

### **Canteras and loyalty: the currency of power**

Individual rank-and-file rebels who join a rebel organization from a specific *cantera*, or recruitment network, tend to remain loyal to other rebel fighters and rebel leaders from the same *cantera*. In theory, individual rebels may find their loyalties divided in several directions. They may be loyal to a leader who can provide selective incentives (Berman 2009), the quotidian ties of friends, family, and romantic interests (Parkinson 2013), the individual(s) that recruited them, operational ties, generational ties such as shared training or experiences, ideological commitments, and individuals from the same *cantera*. In practice, these different possible sources of loyalty tend to overlap and reinforce each other. Friends and family follow each other into the same dissident networks and recruit each other into armed groups (Humphreys and Weinstein 2008), while dissidents who join together are likely to train together, fight together, and share a pre-existing ideological formation. One commander, who gave up his high ranking in the FSLN to defect to the FSLN-TP, Jaime Wheelock’s splinter faction, explained why he was willing to do so: “We’re comrades [*compañeros*] and friends for many years. Jaime and I entered the *Frente* together, together in the same year, doing the same thing... and in the same place in León. With the same people. We came from the same high school, we came from the same university, we lived in the same house, we lived in the same neighborhood in Managua, so we knew each other from forever, right?”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Interview 26, Managua, December 2016.

<sup>19</sup>Interview 21, Managua, October 2016.

<sup>20</sup>Fonseca was referring to Eduardo Contreras and Humberto Ortega with this statement.

<sup>21</sup>Interview 26, Managua, December 2016.

Even in integrated combat units, FSLN recruits often continued to identify, or be identified by others, with their original *cantera*. One FSLN guerrilla who joined from the Christian movement told me that when she was initially placed in a mixed cell of Christians and Marxists, some Marxists remained distrustful—even disparaging—of the Christians.<sup>22</sup> Clandestine tasks were divided between militants from different *canteras*—“community organizing” for the Christians and “clandestine propaganda” for the Marxists. Later she was transferred to a fully Christian cell. Reflecting on how rank-and-file militants were later *sorted* into different splinter factions, she told me that “the links or the construction of the tendencies [factions] came about by who your friend was, who had recruited you, who you knew, who you were with at the moment. It wasn’t by your ideology, it was by personal alignments.” Each of these elements, in turn, were largely a function of the *cantera* from which individuals had joined the FSLN. In this manner, *canteras* structured rebel subgroup loyalties over the course of a conflict: they determined which rank-and-file militants “followed” which leaders, even for militants who lacked personal loyalty to a leader or that leader’s ideology.

In moments of uncertainty, as occur during leadership struggles, another mechanism helps bind members of the same *cantera* together. Leadership struggles cause formal lines of communications to break down as links between the loyalists of different leaders come apart. Given that rebel groups are illicit organizations, the resulting environment is likely to be information-poor: rank-and-file cadres may receive only a partial account of the causes of division and the composition of different factions, and may even be uncertain of how to contact their immediate superiors. When formal lines of communication break down, they may be replaced by informal lines built on pre-existing social ties (Parkinson 2013). These ties are densest among members of the same *cantera*. Therefore, *canteras* are especially likely to structure individual choice during leadership disputes.

## 5 Tracing the mechanism through four leadership disputes

In this section I present an overview of the findings from my analysis of four successive leadership disputes in the FSLN from 1971 to 1976 (Table 1 briefly summarizes contending leaders and their respective power bases). I present two types of evidence connecting rebel recruitment and operational networks to leadership disputes: a comparison of *theoretical predictions* with observed outcomes, and *process-tracing evidence*. The results offer strong support for my theory. Predictions about the *timing* of disputes, the *identities* of disputants, and the *outcomes* of disputes are accurate across all four disputes. As each of these twelve predictions is independent, my theory’s accuracy is powerful supporting evidence that rebel leadership disputes are triggered by changes in rebel leaders’ relative power, measured in fighters loyal to them. In the process

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<sup>22</sup>Interview 16, Laguna de Apoyo, June 2016.

Table 1: FSLN leaders and power bases

Leader	Power base	Abbr.
Carlos Fonseca	<i>Partido Socialista Nicaragüense</i>	PSN
Oscar Turcios	<i>Frente Estudiantil Revolucionario</i>	FER
Pedro Aráuz	<i>Frente Estudiantil Revolucionario</i>	FER
Luis Carrión	<i>Movimiento Cristiano Revolucionario</i>	MCR
Eduardo Contreras	<i>Comando Juan José Quezada</i>	JJQ

tracing sections that follow, I observe the posited observable implications throughout each leadership dispute.

### Predictions about rebel leadership disputes

My theory makes three predictions based on relative changes in rebel leaders' power bases. These predictions pertain to a) the *timing* of leadership disputes, b) the *identities* of the disputants, and c) the *outcomes* of leadership disputes. All three predictions proved accurate in every dispute—twelve correct predictions in all—furnishing strong evidence that relative changes in rebel leader's power bases cause rebel leadership disputes.

First, the theory predicts that rebel leadership disputes occur shortly after a new rebel leader's power base grows strong enough to challenge or threaten the incumbent. Figure 2 compares the Eigenvector centralities of each *cantera* within the FSLN over time, along with one operational network (JJQ) that functioned as a power base in the fourth dispute.<sup>23</sup> As can be seen, leadership disputes in the FSLN invariably initiated within two years after a challenging leader's power base (a *cantera* or operational network) reached an Eigenvector centrality of at least .5.<sup>24</sup>

While this sequencing matches the expectations of the theory, it would mean little if the challengers were not the leaders of the networks shown above. Thus, the theory predicts the identity of the disputants: challengers should be the leaders of rising *canteras* or operational networks. There were, at any given moment, a dozen or more elite commanders within the FSLN who might contend in a leadership dispute, but only one or two leaders of rising *canteras* or operational networks. Thus, we would not expect to observe this pattern unless there were a causal relationship between a leader's growing power base and his participation in a leadership dispute.<sup>25</sup> Yet the theory accurately predicts the identity of the challenger in all four leadership disputes: case, at least one challenger in every dispute was the unambiguous leader of a rising *cantera*

<sup>23</sup>Prior to 1969, the *Juventud Patriótica Nicaragüense* (JPN, not shown in Figure 2) was the FSLN's most central *cantera*. The JPN was also recruited by Fonseca and its membership significantly overlapped with the PSN.

<sup>24</sup>Whether or not an Eigencentrality of .5 represents a generalizable threshold or not could only be confirmed by comparing this case with social network analyses of many more leadership disputes.

<sup>25</sup>Outside of the mechanism presented here, we would have no prior belief that a rebel leadership dispute is more likely to involve a rising *cantera* leader. We might suppose that any high-ranking commander—or even a rank-and-file fighter—may challenge the leadership.

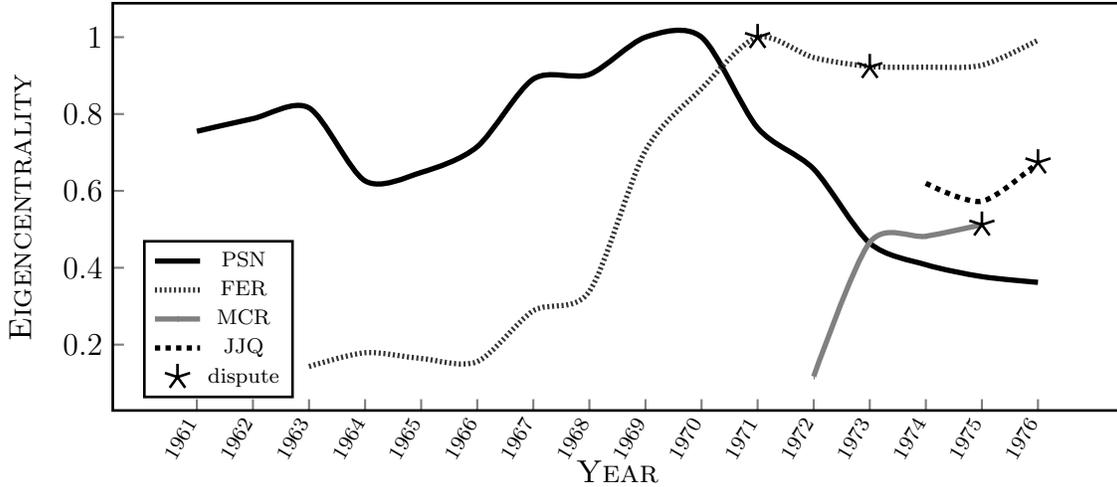


Figure 2: *Cantera* centrality and the timing of leadership disputes

or operational network (see Table 2). By contrast, there is far less correlation between participation in a leadership dispute and the challenger’s *formal* rank within the rebel hierarchy. Oscar Turcios was Fonseca’s second-in-command and Eduardo Contreras a member of the FSLN’s paramount National Directorate, but Pedro Aráuz and Luis Carrión were not even members of the National Directorate when their leadership disputes began.

Finally, my theory predicts the outcome of leadership disputes based on the relative sizes of the incumbent’s and the challenger’s power base. Where challengers have substantially larger power bases, I expect an internal coup; where the incumbent and challenger have comparable power bases, I expect an organizational split (Tamm 2016). As demonstrated by Table 2 my theory performs well in predicting the outcomes of leadership disputes. The first dispute, where an internal coup was predicted, ended in a power-sharing accord favoring the challenger, an outcome closely resembling an internal coup. Other disputes ended in unambiguous coups and splits, as predicted by the theory.

The theory’s predictive success provides compelling evidence that changing balance of loyalties explains the FSLN’s leadership disputes, internal coups, and organizational splits.<sup>26</sup> In the following sections, I process trace each of the FSLN’s four leadership disputes. Not only are my theory’s predictions accurate; I also observe each of the balance of loyalties mechanism’s posited steps in every dispute.

<sup>26</sup>We gain further confidence when we consider that the causal role of leaders’ power bases differs slightly over the course of the dispute. Leadership disputes are caused by leaders’ *beliefs* about relative power: they occur when an incumbent feels threatened by a rising commander, or when a commander believes himself strong enough to challenge an incumbent. The final prediction demonstrates that their beliefs are well-founded: the leaders’ power bases, measured in terms of loyal fighters structured by *canteras* or operational networks, do correspond to the outcome of leadership disputes.

Table 2: Predicted and observed leadership dispute outcomes

Dispute	Predicted challenger	Incumbent's power base (Eigen-centrality)	Challenger's power base (Eigen-centrality)	Predicted outcome	Observed outcome
Dispute 1: Fonseca vs. Turcios (1971-1973)	Turcios	0.464	<b>0.924</b>	Internal coup	Power-sharing accord favoring challenger
Dispute 2: Fonseca vs. Aráuz (1973-1974)	Aráuz	0.408	<b>0.922</b>	Internal coup	Internal coup
Dispute 3: Aráuz vs. Wheelock, Carrión, & Huembes (1975)	Carrión	<b>0.927</b>	0.512	Organizational split	Organizational split
Dispute 4: Aráuz vs. Contreras (1976)	Contreras	<b>0.992</b>	0.674	Organizational split	Organizational split

## Leadership dispute 1

Historians trace the institutional origins of the FSLN to a *Partido Socialista Nicaragüense* (PSN) “cell” at the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua* in León (UNAN-León) founded in 1956 (IES 1985). Radicalized by the Cuban revolution in 1959 (Booth 1985, 110–112), the cell broke with the accommodationist Moscow-line PSN in 1961 and committed itself to armed struggle (Zimmermann 2000, 65). Former PSN cell member and FSLN co-founder Carlos Fonseca emerged as the organization’s first major leader. PSN cadres continued to join the FSLN until 1967 (Guevara López 2002, 51), forming Fonseca’s dominant power base until the late 1960s.

The Cuban-inspired revolutionary wave also left behind another small student organization, the *Frente Estudiantil Revolucionario* (FER).<sup>27</sup> The FSLN took control of the FER’s leadership in 1963 (Ortega Saavedra 2004, 146), even as the student movement became “quiescent” (Booth 1985, 112). Few recruits entered the rebel group from FER during this period. However, a 1967 regime massacre of civilian protestors on Roosevelt Avenue in Managua impelled a second wave of student mobilization from 1967 to 1970,<sup>28</sup> and the FSLN seized on anti-regime anger by “open[ing] the doors of the FER and many students entered, without the condition that they be Marxists.”<sup>29</sup> The FER became a major *cantera*—a source of dozens of FSLN commanders and rank-and-file fighters. Few FER recruits met Carlos Fonseca, who spent much of this period imprisoned in Costa Rica (IES 1985).

Instead, Oscar Turcios, who assumed control of the FER after the National Guard killed its previous leader in 1969, benefited from the *cantera*’s growth. He was selected for the role of the FSLN’s National

<sup>27</sup>Interview 26, Managua, December 2016.

<sup>28</sup>Interview 27, Managua, December 2016.

<sup>29</sup>Interview 21, Managua, October 2016.

Table 3: Relative power of FSLN *canteras*, 1967–1971

Year	Eigencentality	
	PSN	FER
1967	<b>0.891</b>	0.288
1968	<b>0.903</b>	0.339
1969	<b>1.0</b>	0.705
1970	<b>1.0</b>	0.866
1971	0.764	<b>1.0</b>

Coordinator in part because he was one of the earliest student leaders:<sup>30</sup> in 1965 he directed the FER along with Daniel Ortega, founding its newspaper *El Estudiante* (The Student) (Ortega Saavedra 2004, 168). After spending 1968 to 1970 in Cuba, Turcios returned to Nicaragua, where as National Coordinator, he “took up all of the organization’s work” (Díaz Lacayo 2010, 703), above all recruitment and training, a process Turcios called the “accumulation of strength in silence [*acumulación de fuerzas en silencio*].”<sup>31</sup>

Analysis of the network dataset demonstrates that the FER rapidly rose from a marginal *cantera* to the FSLN’s most central *cantera* between 1968 to 1971. Table 3 shows the Eigenvector centrality of the FER from 1967, the year of the Roosevelt Avenue massacre, to 1971, when the first leadership struggle initiated, compared to the PSN *cantera* that constituted Carlos Fonseca’s power base. In 1967, Fonseca commanded an overwhelmingly central position within the FSLN’s network (see Figure 3). Thus, when frictions first emerged between Fonseca and Turcios after a failed 1967 guerrilla *foco*, Fonseca simply responded with *internal discipline*, temporarily demoting Turcios in favor of a loyalist, Tomás Borge (Ortega Saavedra 2004, 192; Borge 1992, 273). By 1971, Fonseca’s power base was still formidable, but the FER had become the most central node in the FSLN’s network (see Figure 4). As its leader, Turcios now had a strong position from which to challenge Fonseca’s formal authority over the FSLN. My theory correctly predicts both the timing of the dispute and the identity of the disputants: beginning almost immediately after assuming control of the FER in 1971, Oscar Turcios struggled with Carlos Fonseca for control over the FSLN’s direction (Zimmermann 2000, 165).<sup>32</sup> The timing of onset, 1971, supports the hypothesis that Turcios’ growing power base gave him the leverage necessary to challenge Fonseca.

The ensuing struggle for “supremacy in the leadership of the FSLN” played out in a series of missives arguing for different strategic emphases (Ortega Saavedra 2004, 250). According to Matilde Zimmermann, who reviewed the leaders’ dueling communiques, Turcios proposed that the FSLN focus on building its strength in the Segovia mountains (writing “It will be from the countryside that we will advance on the

<sup>30</sup>Interview 21, Managua, October 2016.

<sup>31</sup>Bayardo Arce interviewed in Baltodano (2010a).

<sup>32</sup>Interview 16, Laguna de Apoyo, June 2016.

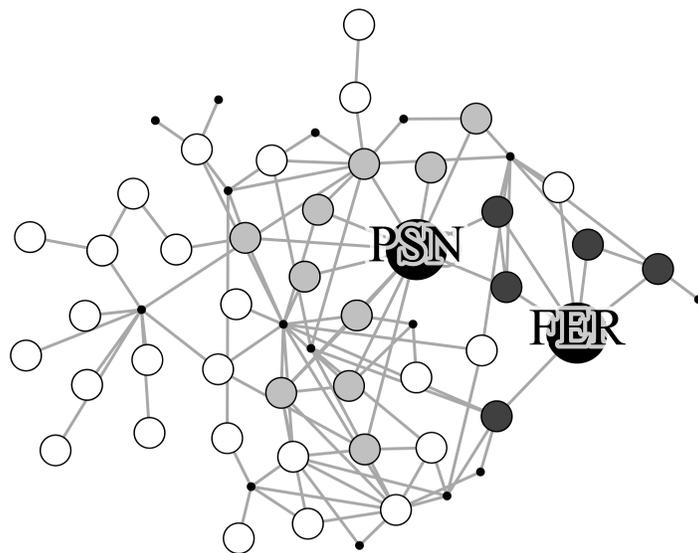


Figure 3: The FSLN in 1967  
 PSN: Carlos Fonseca's power base, FER: Oscar Turcio's power base

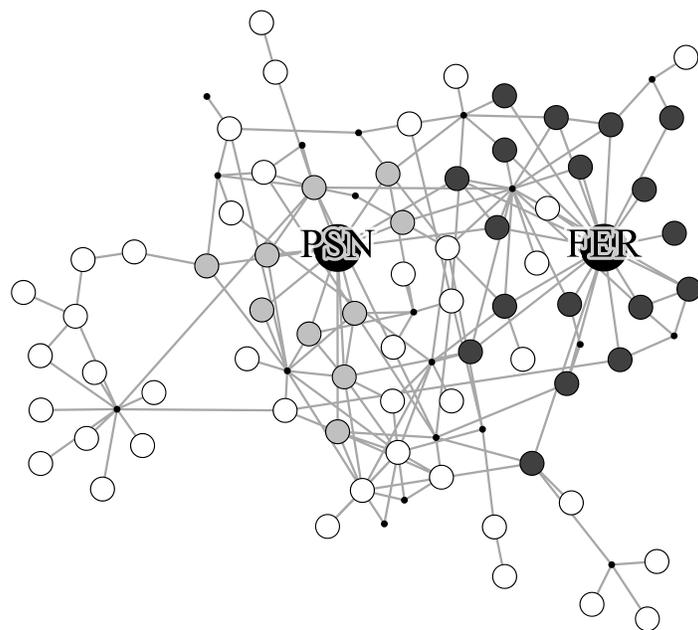


Figure 4: The FSLN in 1971  
 PSN: Carlos Fonseca's power base, FER: Oscar Turcio's power base

cities and take them”), a position called the *guerra popular prolongada* (GPP, or prolonged people’s war). Meanwhile, Fonseca wrote that this reduced to “just copying an approach from books about experiences in other countries,” and advocated building strength in cities, towns and agricultural sectors for a potential insurrection (Zimmermann 2000, 167, 169).

While the content of the dispute may have been strategic differences, the conduct of the dispute reflected each leader’s relative power: the leaders bargained with each other to define the strategic direction of the FSLN. In mid-1973, both sides attended a meeting in Nandaime (Ortega Saavedra 2004, 250–1). The cadres present at this meeting accurately reflected each leader’s power base, providing some evidence that the respective power bases played a role in determining the outcome of the dispute between leaders: Turcios attended the meeting with two of his top lieutenants, Ricardo Morales and Carlos Agüero, both student movement leaders whose chief responsibilities were organizing the FER and its new recruits (FSLN 1980; Cabezas 1982, 105–112), while Humberto Ortega and Tomás Borges, recruited from first-generation *canteras*, represented Fonseca. The outcome of the negotiations—a power-sharing accord—also reflected the respective power base of each leader. In the accords struck at this meeting, “the thesis that predominates is the *guerra popular*, without rejecting judgments of the insurrectional type” (Ortega Saavedra 2004, 251), an incomplete victory for Turcios. It is uncertain whether this dispute would have eventually culminated in a leadership coup, because the National Guard killed Turcios a month later (Alegría and Flakoll 1982, 202).

The causal process evidence above shows that the leadership dispute stemmed from changing *balance of loyalties* due to new rebel recruitment. External support cannot explain the dispute, as the FSLN received none at this time (Zimmermann 2000, 164), and the evidence for state repression and strategic/ideological differences is mixed. The FSLN’s mountain *foco* and student cadres suffered asymmetric battlefield losses in the years prior to the dispute. However Turcios’ dispute with Fonseca revolved not around the strategy of “accumulating forces in silence” a response to these losses), but rather over the relative importance of guerrilla and urban warfare. The FSLN also suffered a leadership decapitation (Julio Buitrago, Turcios’ predecessor organizing the FER), which might deplete inter-leader ties, yet Turcios’ rank was higher and his personal links to Fonseca stronger than Buitrago’s (Ortega Saavedra 2004, 203, 220). Finally, though ideological differences were real, there is evidence that ideological differences were “cheap talk”: other commanders point to conflicts over pride, position, and personality before the dispute (Borge 1992, 230, 232; Hernández 1982, 69; Ortega Saavedra 2004, 285),<sup>33</sup> while in 1973 Turcios proposed an alliance with the Conservative Party in which “Sandinista guerrillas could distract and neutralize the National Guard while the opposition carried out a coup” (Zimmermann 2000, 174)—a strategy, needless to say, completely at odds with the stated GPP platform “that envisioned up to 30 years of rural guerrilla warfare as a precondition for an FSLN

<sup>33</sup>Interview 16, Laguna de Apoyo, June 2016. See also interview of Henry Ruiz in Baltodano (2010a).

victory” (U.S. Dept. of State 1988). In sum, ideological differences were superimposed onto earlier personal and personnel disputes, and leaders manipulated and disregarded ideology when inconvenient. Moreover, ideological differences cannot explain why Oscar Turcios possessed the military resources to challenge Carlos Fonseca, nor explain their dispute’s outcome. State repression and internal ideological contestation served as short-term *triggers*, but the shifting *balance of loyalties* was the underlying cause of Turcios’ and Fonseca’s leadership dispute.

## Leadership dispute 2

Rather than ending, the leadership dispute intensified after Turcios’ September 1973 death. Pedro Aráuz Palacios replaced Turcios as interim National Coordinator and leader of the FER, inheriting Turcios’ *cantera* and thus his relative power superiority over Carlos Fonseca. With the underlying balance of power still shifting away from Fonseca, my theory predicts a continuation of the leadership dispute, this time with Aráuz challenging Fonseca’s overall leadership, and predicts that this dispute should end in an internal coup. All of these predictions were borne out.

The FSLN recruited Aráuz, a university student at UNAN-León and a member of the FER’s secretariat, in 1969.<sup>34</sup> He became Oscar Turcios’ top lieutenant, and on Turcios’ death, was a natural successor because “Oscar and Pedro were like two sides of the same coin. Oscar took him everywhere, so Pedro knew the whole structure, and that’s why they decided on him.”<sup>35</sup> Aráuz held two key roles that allowed him to swiftly consolidate the FER as his power base: first, he conducted FER recruitment, and second, he monopolized communications with Henry Ruiz’s guerrilla column in the Segovia mountains, assuring that they heard only his accounting of events.<sup>36</sup> Having gained the loyalty of the FER *cantera*, Aráuz was able to challenge Fonseca’s leadership despite lacking his predecessor Turcios’ legendary military skills and long trajectory in the FSLN.<sup>37</sup> Oscar Turcios’ death buried his power-sharing accord with Fonseca, allowing Fonseca to attempt to reclaim the mantle of unquestioned leader of the FSLN. Yet he would be stymied by Aráuz’s sudden and, to Fonseca, unexpected rise. Armed with my theory, we are much less surprised by Aráuz’s challenge. When Aráuz assumed leadership of the FER in September 1973, it had become the most central *cantera* within the FSLN’s network, with an Eigenvector centrality of 0.924. By contrast, Fonseca’s PSN had declined to 0.464, leaving him with a narrower power base than Aráuz’s (see Table 4 and Figure 5).

As predicted by my theory, a) Fonseca, the formal leader, attempted to impose internal discipline on Aráuz, and b) Aráuz, the *de facto* power, mobilized his power base. After Turcios’ death, Fonseca ordered

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<sup>34</sup>Interview 21, Managua, October 2016.

<sup>35</sup>Mónica Baltodano (2010a), who served directly under Aráuz in the FSLN-GPP.

<sup>36</sup>Interview 24, Estelí, November 2016

<sup>37</sup>He led the FER “by default,” by “out-surviving” others, and was a “relative unknown.” Interview 30, Managua, January 2017 and interview 29, Managua, January 2017.

Table 4: Relative power of FSLN *canteras*, 1972–1973

Year	Eigencentality	
	PSN	FER
1972	0.657	<b>0.927</b>
1973	0.464	<b>0.924</b>

two personnel moves intended to restore his authority over the FSLN. First, he promoted Jaime Wheelock, a Cuba-based intellectual with few ties to the rank-and-file, to the National Directorate, and second, he assigned Henry Ruíz, the commander of the Segovian *foco* and presumably more pliant than Turcios or Aráuz, to be the new National Coordinator. Aráuz rejected both changes, telling one of my informants “Look. I’m going to be the boss [*jefe*].”<sup>38</sup> In response to Aráuz’s disobedience, Fonseca attempted to apply internal discipline by chastising him and ordering him to join the *foco* as a rank-and-file guerrilla (a punishment Wheelock later referred to as being sent to a “concentration camp” (Fonseca Amador 1976, 28).<sup>39</sup> Yet Aráuz could defy this new order “because he had dominion over the structures... Carlos didn’t even know who was in the *Frente*, he didn’t know and he didn’t know how to find them.”<sup>40</sup> Aráuz actively mobilized his power base, going “from cell to cell weakening the figure of Carlos Fonseca in front of the cell... Saying that Carlos had been outside for a long time, that he hadn’t been here pulling his weight; he weakened Carlos’ authority.”<sup>41</sup>

The leaders settled into an uneasy impasse, which Aráuz contrived to break. In October 1974, Pedro Aráuz and his top lieutenant, Eduardo Contreras, proposed that “the members of the National Directorate can only make use of their authority when located inside the country” (Fonseca Amador 1976, 11). This resolution nullified Fonseca’s authority as long as he stayed in Cuba. Partly to force Fonseca’s acquiescence, Contreras led the Chema Castillo raid with the Comando Juan José Quezada (JJQ). This spectacular operational success (described above) “was also a mechanism to strengthen the internal leadership and their positions against the external leadership.”<sup>42</sup> Fonseca and Ortega backed down, affirming Aráuz’s position and canceling Wheelock’s appointment to the DN. Critically, Fonseca and Ortega accepted Aráuz and Contreras’ resolution that they could not make use of their authority while outside Nicaragua (Fonseca Amador 1976, 11), placing all decision-making authority in Aráuz’s hands.

<sup>38</sup>Interview 24, Estelí, November 2016. Aráuz—who controlled communication with the isolated *foco*—went so far as to hide news of Ruíz’s promotion from Ruíz himself.

<sup>39</sup>Carlos Fonseca Amador, “Reunión general para informar sobre problemas de la organización,” Havana, 14 Nov. 1973, CHM reg. 00293, caja 2B, quoted in Zimmermann (2000, 178).

<sup>40</sup>Interview 29, Managua, January 2017.

<sup>41</sup>Interview 29, Managua, January 2017.

<sup>42</sup>Interview 16, Laguna de Apoyo, June 2016. See also Henry Ruiz’s interview in Baltodano (2010a): “The operation’s goal was to break out those compañeros who were in prison, and besides, to carry a message to talk to the Directorate in Havana, that is to say, Carlos Fonseca.” Bayardo Arce told Baltodano: “to show those outside that we had consolidated and everything, that we began to put forward operations.”

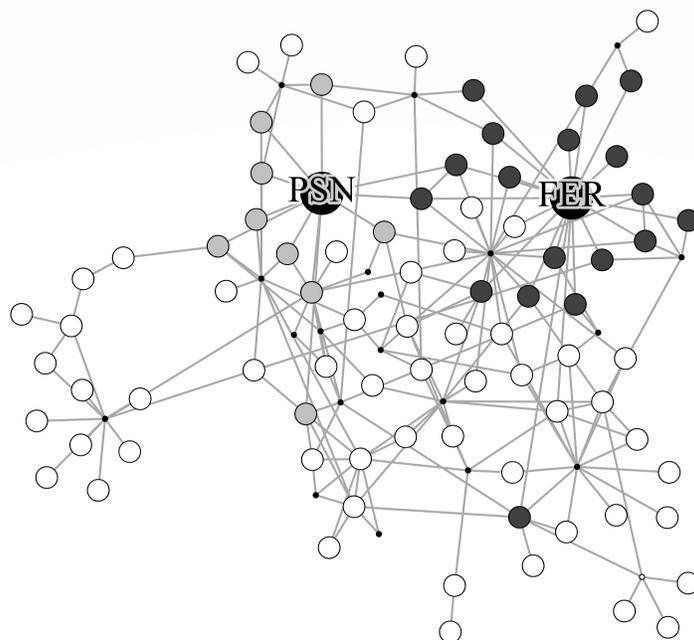


Figure 5: The FSLN in 1973  
 PSN: Carlos Fonseca’s power base, FER: Pedro Aráuz’s power base

As predicted by my theory, the dispute culminated in Aráuz’s internal coup. The incumbent Carlos Fonseca attempted to deploy internal discipline against an upstart commander, while Pedro Aráuz ignored the sanctions and mobilized his larger power base. While Carlos Fonseca was not driven from the FSLN, he was reduced to an emeritus role. Day to day operational authority was now concentrated in Aráuz’s hands—as my theory would predict based on the FER’s dominant network centrality within the FSLN.

State repression—specifically, Turcios’ killing—helps explain the timing of this leadership dispute.<sup>43</sup> As Staniland (2014) argues, leadership decapitation depletes horizontal bonds of trust between leaders. In line with this theory, Turcios’ personal ties to Fonseca were far closer than Aráuz’s: Carlos Fonseca, who had been exiled to Costa Rica and then Cuba during the entire period since Aráuz’s 1969 recruitment, had never met Aráuz (IES 1985). According to one FSLN commander, Fonseca wanted to replace Aráuz with Henry Ruiz precisely because the two enjoyed a better personal relationship (even though, as detailed below, they disagreed on strategy).<sup>44</sup> Nonetheless, while leadership decapitation triggered the conflict between Fonseca and Aráuz, it cannot predict the identities of disputants nor the outcome of the dispute.

The FSLN received negligible external support, and there is little evidence that strategic/ideological

<sup>43</sup>There is no evidence for Christia’s (2012) asymmetric battlefield loss mechanism, as the FSLN avoided battles between 1971 and 1973.

<sup>44</sup>Interview 29, Managua, January 2017.

disagreements played a role in this leadership dispute. The rhetoric used by Fonseca and Aráuz, reported in interviews and documents, does not mention ideological or strategic differences. Rather, the rhetoric centered on a) personnel assignments and b) resentment at Fonseca leading from Cuba rather than Nicaragua. Meanwhile, had Fonseca wanted to push back against Turcios' prolonged people's war strategy, his selection for the new National Coordinator, Ruiz, would have been the least logical choice in the entire organization: Ruiz had been the sole commander of the FSLN *foco* for four years, and utterly devoted to the *foco* strategy.<sup>45</sup> Fonseca's primary goal was promoting a competent, trustworthy lieutenant, not promoting an ideological vision.

### Leadership dispute 3

Even before Pedro Aráuz's coup, the FSLN incorporated a new *cantera*, the *Movimiento Cristiano Revolucionario* (MCR), which became the FSLN's second largest *cantera* by 1974. My theory accurately predicts a leadership dispute between Aráuz and the MCR's *cantera* leader, Luis Carrión Cruz, ending in a 1975 split.

In 1972, a group of well-off, liberation theology-inspired students relocated to a Christian Base Community in the "impoverished slums" of the Managua, founding the *Movimiento Revolucionario Cristiano* (MCR) under Luis Carrión Cruz's leadership (Foroohar 1989, 78–79). According to a founder, "the FER wasn't for us... So then, what we did was connect a number of people in the university through their relations with Christian groups, which we had established when we were high school students or a little later, and it was like a network."<sup>46</sup> Following a devastating December 1972 earthquake and the Somoza regime's embezzlement of international aid,<sup>47</sup> the MCR radicalized, grew rapidly, and was incorporated into the FSLN. Dulce María Guillén describes the process (Alegría and Flakoll 1982, 192):

The leaders joined directly and, little by little, the rest of us joined up... The *Movimiento* became what at that time we called an intermediary organization. The *Movimiento Cristiano* didn't disappear when those who started it joined [the FSLN], but rather continued growing with new people, and this came to be a first step to reaching the *Frente Sandinista*, above all for the Christian youth sector.

The MCR recruits maintained an identity as revolutionary Christians, distinct from the typically secular FER students. By 1974 "in Managua there were many more people in the *Movimiento Cristiano* than the FER—the FER [in Managua] was weak" and FER leader Pedro Aráuz had "less dominion, less control,

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<sup>45</sup>Interview with Henry Ruiz in Baltodano (2010a).

<sup>46</sup>Interview 17, Managua, June 2016.

<sup>47</sup>The 1972 Managua earthquake hit hardest in precisely the marginal barrios where the popular Church and the MCR had set down roots (Foroohar 1989, 119–130).

Table 5: Relative power of FSLN *canteras*, 1972–1975

Year	Eigencentality	
	FER	MCR
1972	<b>0.947</b>	0.117
1973	<b>0.924</b>	0.466
1974	<b>0.922</b>	0.482
1975	<b>0.927</b>	0.512

less presence” in Managua.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, MCR leader Luis Carrión rapidly rose to an elite position in the FSLN’s hierarchy due to his key role in founding the MCR *cantera*: when he “joined the *Frente Sandinista*, he did so as the leader of an organized group of people, not as an individual, and without idealizing the *Frente* and its leaders.”<sup>49</sup>

Table 5 compares the Eigenvector centrality of the FER *cantera* and the MCR *cantera*, while the network graphs in Figures 6 and 7 visualize the relative growth of the MCR *cantera*, Luis Carrión’s power base. Given the growing relative power of the MCR *cantera*, my theory predicts a leadership dispute between its leader and the incumbent. This should be a challenging test for my theory, because other than leading a *cantera*, Carrión possessed few attributes that would lead us to expect his involvement in a leadership dispute. He was a recent recruit, had no military achievements, and was of relatively low rank. Yet this unlikely prediction proved accurate, strongly supporting my theory.

The second leadership dispute differs from the first in a key respect: the incumbent Aráuz was challenged not by one but by a coalition of three subordinate FSLN commanders, Wheelock, Carrión, and Roberto Huembes. Of these three, only Carrión was a *cantera* leader. This allows us to observe how Aráuz’s attempts to impose internal discipline succeeded or failed depending on the extent of their target’s power base. In short, Aráuz was able to impose internal discipline on Wheelock and Huembes, but his attempts to impose internal discipline on Carrión went awry. Carrión fought back, taking most of the recruits from his MCR *cantera* with him to his FSLN-TP splinter group.

The dispute began in early 1975 with conflict between Aráuz and Wheelock. Somewhat “resentful of the people in Cuba” for being denied his promised position in the DN,<sup>50</sup> Wheelock cultivated relationships with key FSLN leaders in Managua, including the city’s new chief of operations Roberto Huembes and MCR leader Carrión. Wheelock relayed strategic deliberations among FSLN members in Cuba, where debates swirled between *foquista* and insurreccional proposals. The three commanders in Managua began pressing

<sup>48</sup>Interview 30, Managua, January 2017

<sup>49</sup>Interview 30, Managua, January 2017

<sup>50</sup>Interview 30, Managua, January 2017.

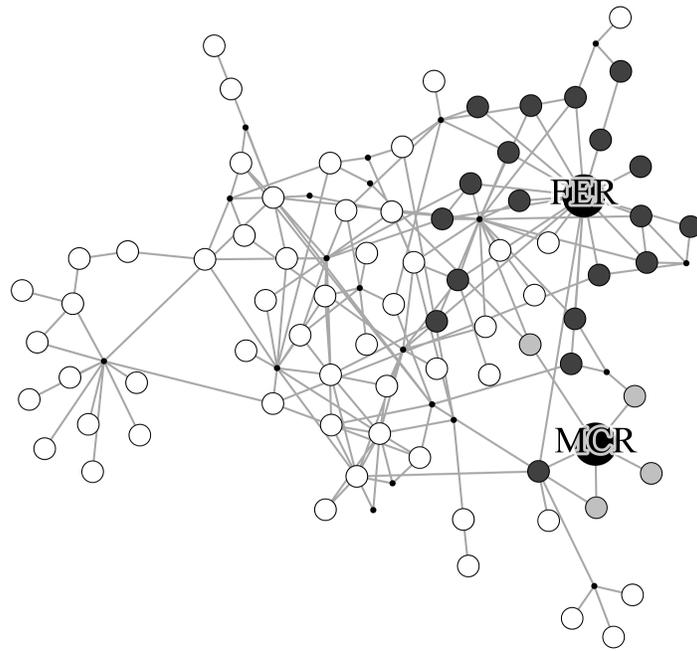


Figure 6: The FSLN in 1972  
 FER: Pedro Aráuz's power base, MCR: Luis Carrión's power base

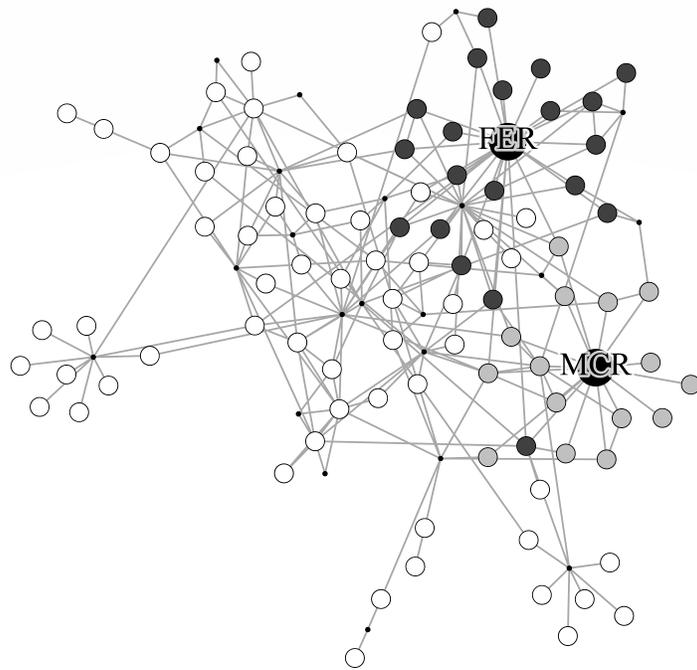


Figure 7: The FSLN in 1975  
 FER: Pedro Aráuz's power base, MCR: Luis Carrión's power base

Aráuz for strategic changes, though without “a totally clear idea of what [they] were going to do.”<sup>51</sup> Aráuz responded with a second effort at a “disciplinary” solution:<sup>52</sup> he ordered Wheelock to the guerrilla *foco* in the mountain with the pretext that he would write a history of the *campesino* struggle<sup>53</sup> Instead, Wheelock negotiated reassignment to Costa Rica. That Wheelock accepted exile demonstrates that a discontented leader needs a power base—a substantial, loyal group of fighters—to foment a splinter group or internal coup. The militants inside Nicaragua “didn’t know [Wheelock] and didn’t recognize him.”<sup>54</sup> His power base within the FSLN was limited to a handful of personal friends.

After Wheelock’s exile, Huembes and Carrión continued to press for strategic changes. Aráuz responded once again with internal disciplinary measures, ordering Huembes to head to the mountains. When Huembes refused and sought, with Carrión, to resign, Aráuz’s lieutenants expelled them from the FSLN.<sup>55</sup> Contacting Wheelock, the expelled commanders decided to reorganize as a splinter faction, the FSLN-TP, each drawing on their relations with other members of the FSLN to retain whatever structures they could.

My theory helps answer two important questions about this dispute. First, why did Aráuz respond with severe sanctions to relatively minor acts of insubordination? In interviews, my informant referenced Aráuz’s calculations of relative power. Specifically, Aráuz became increasingly suspicious that his former lieutenant Eduardo Contreras had “made a turn” while in Cuba, and was preparing to ally his own growing power base with Fonseca’s.<sup>56</sup> My interlocutor’s assessment that Aráuz was preoccupied by relative power concerns is consistent with the *cantera* centrality statistics, which show the FER’s erosion. Aráuz’s top lieutenant Bayardo Arce, recalling a period in late 1976, also provides strong evidence that Aráuz interpreted the leadership disputes in terms of loyalty and power relations. Deciding to train incoming recruits himself instead of delegating the task to Arce, “he told me that he went [to run the training] because he that leads [*jefea*] the combatants is who has the real power. And if he had sent me, I would have had the real power, and that even so he came back afraid that I had made a play, an ambush, something like that to control the GPP.”<sup>57</sup>

Second, why did Aráuz’s sanctions fail? The importance of the *cantera* to not only mobilize fighters but to structure their choices throughout conflict is particularly pronounced here. *Canteras* embedded FSLN recruits in a latticework of overlapping relationships. During the leadership disputes, FER recruits supported Aráuz, and as long as a critical mass of FER members remained loyal to Aráuz, the social mechanism against defection was very strong. Conversely, MCR recruits supported Carrión, even though he lacked a reputation

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<sup>51</sup>Interview 17, Managua, June 2017.

<sup>52</sup>Interview 30, Managua, January 2017.

<sup>53</sup>“That sounded false, right?” Luis Carrión told Mónica Baltodano (Baltodano 2010c).

<sup>54</sup>Interview 16, Laguna de Apoyo, June 2016.

<sup>55</sup>Interview with Luis Carrión in Baltodano (2010c).

<sup>56</sup>Interview 17, Managua, June 2016.

<sup>57</sup>Interview with Bayardo Arce in Baltodano (2010a).

or a history of successful militancy, because he “organized the Movimiento Cristiano, through which many people entered the Frente, and with whom he had a history of many years of work, of struggle, of friendship.”<sup>58</sup> Though Carrión was technically the junior partner in the FSLN-TP (behind Huembes and Wheelock), his *cantera* enabled its three leaders to form a splinter group when faced with Aráuz’s sanctions.

Competing hypotheses do not adequately explain the second dispute. While the FSLN did suffer through state repression prior to the split, a leadership decapitation did not precipitate the dispute nor did violence disproportionately affected the MCR *cantera*. Battlefield losses were not referenced by the principal actors in this dispute; Carrión, in his interview with Mónica Baltodano, makes clear that it was not the FSLN’s losses, but rather the Chema Castillo raid’s success in sparking a popular reaction in Managua that inspired the challengers’ strategic demands. External support also fails to explain this split, as (once again) neither side received sponsorship from an external power.

While genuine strategic disagreements help explain the dispute, there is ample evidence that ideological commitments amounted to “cheap talk.” As one FSLN commander and historian explained to me,

When this division took place, Luis [Carrión] is as clear as can be that they didn’t have a Marxist-Leninist thesis; that was a construction made later. . . . And this typically occurs in these processes of division. The processes of division, when they get started with personal problems, they need a self-justification in front of the militants, in front of the base, and then you end up creating that self-justification, creating a proposal of identity. To establish for oneself an identity.<sup>59</sup>

The disputants themselves confirm this insightful account. In a recent interview, Wheelock allowed that, “at heart it was also a struggle for political hegemony that took the form of a strategic discussion” (Hellmund 2013, 162). Another disputant told me that,

Maybe if things had followed another course, we wouldn’t have united so much, but to the extent that [Aráuz and his lieutenants] repressed us we joined together to defend ourselves better. I think that was the genesis [of the coalition]. There *was* also a principle of identification and political sympathy that afterwards strengthened and deepened—but it was more a defensive action so that they couldn’t grab us one by one.<sup>60</sup>

The strategic demands of the future leaders of the FSLN-TP were simultaneously genuine and instrumental, and hardened endogenously throughout the dispute. Furthermore, ideological differences again triggers a dispute predicted by a rapidly changing balance of power between *cantera* leaders. The challengers did

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<sup>58</sup>Interview 30, Managua, January 2017.

<sup>59</sup>Interview 16, Laguna de Apoyo, June 2016.

<sup>60</sup>Interview 30, Managua, January 2017

not have the intention of founding a splinter group, but rather of influencing the FSLN's strategic direction. Both Aráuz's strong disciplinary reaction, best explained through reference to his relative power calculations, and Carrión's MCR *cantera* were necessary to transform the challengers' strategic demands into an organizational split.

## Leadership dispute 4

In 1976, the FSLN endured a second organizational split: incumbent Pedro Aráuz, now allied with his one-time opponent Carlos Fonseca, attempted to exclude challenger Eduardo Contreras from the organization; in response, Contreras and his allies formed "an autonomous group:" the FSLN-TI (Ortega Saavedra 2004, 292). Rather than a *cantera*, Contreras cultivated the loyalty of an *operational network*: the Juan José Quezada (JJQ) command, the squad that conducted the Chema Castillo raid.

Three factors allowed Contreras to draw on the JJQ as a power base. First, the Command underwent three months of extensive training together (Wheelock 1979, 56). This training period, twice as long as the US Army's six-week boot camp, offered participants ample time to form strong interpersonal bonds and to increasingly identify with the Command. Second, after the operation itself, all thirteen command members and eight freed prisoners landed together in Cuba, where because of logistical and security challenges most remained unable to return to Nicaragua for nearly two years.<sup>61</sup> This forced cohabitation provided additional opportunities to cohere as a group, which may be why almost all of these 21 later followed Eduardo Contreras into his *Tercerista* tendency (FSLN-Tendencia Insurreccional, or TI). Third, the fact that they were "selected and extracted from distinct regions of the country" meant that the members of the group possessed strong ties to several different *canteras*, while the liberated prisoners were mostly elite commanders from the FSLN's earliest cohorts. The JJQ therefore attained an Eigenvector centrality out of proportion with a simple count of its members. In practical terms this meant that members of the JJQ could draw on preexisting relations of trust to facilitate coalition-building with other centers of the FSLN's organization.

At the beginning of 1975, immediately after the raid, the JJQ operational network possessed an Eigenvector centrality of 0.549, third behind the FER (.927) and MCR (.512) *canteras*. In mid-1975, the FSLN-TP splintered, taking most of the MCR recruits with it. After removing the members of FSLN-TP from my dataset, I re-calculated the FSLN's Eigenvector centralities for 1975. This revealed a starkly divided organization: Aráuz's FER (.914) and Contreras' JJQ (1.0) are far and away the most central nodes, at near parity with each other (see Figure 8). My theory predicts a leadership dispute between incumbent Aráuz and challenger Contreras. Because the leaders' power bases were evenly matched, the theory also predicts that the dispute's outcome would be an organizational split. Both predictions are accurate.

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<sup>61</sup>Interview 29, Managua, January 2016

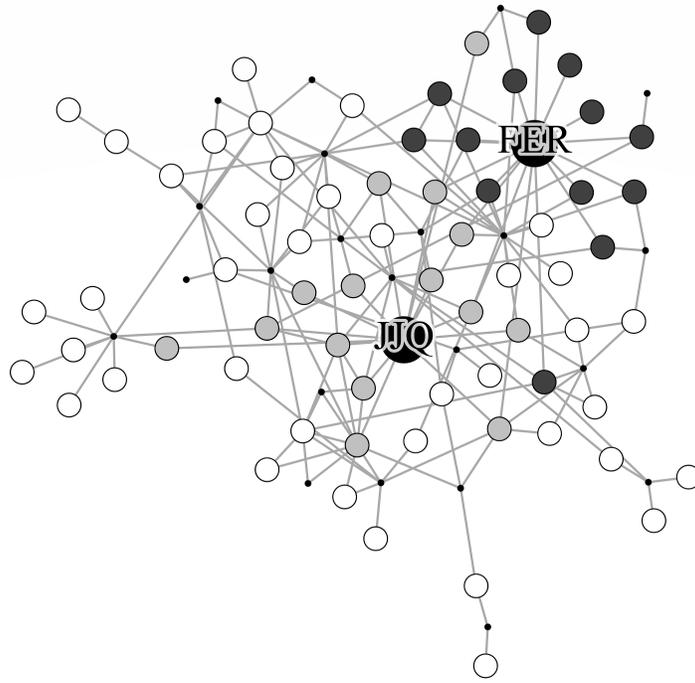


Figure 8: The FSLN in 1975  
 FER: Pedro Aráuz’s power base, JJQ: Eduardo Contreras’ power base

A leadership dispute between Aráuz and Contreras raged over the course of 1976. The conduct of this dispute also included two behaviors expected by the mechanism: internal sanctions and coalition-building. First, Aráuz attempted to invoke his formal power over Contreras. When this attempt failed, Aráuz sought to increase his formal power by allying with the deposed but still respected Carlos Fonseca. Meanwhile, Contreras attempted to construct a coalition that would be large enough to defeat his rival, allying with Fonseca’s former lieutenant Humberto Ortega and feeling out an alliance with the FSLN-TP. When Fonseca perished in a National Guard ambush in November 1973, Aráuz gave up on his efforts to control the entire FSLN and split the rebel organization a second time.

At the end of 1974, Contreras’ arrival in Cuba—where he arrived with not only his assault team and the freed prisoners, but “vested with all the authority of a successful, spectacular blow” against the Somoza regime—radically shifted the balance of power between himself and Aráuz.<sup>62</sup> One interviewee told me that at this point Contreras “aspired to be the maximum leader” of the FSLN, replacing both Fonseca as titular leader and Aráuz as *de facto* leader of the organization.<sup>63</sup> According to Belli (2002, 109–10), once in Cuba Contreras began to shift his strategic leanings from Aráuz’s *guerra popular prolongada* to the insurreccional

<sup>62</sup>Interview 16, Laguna de Apoyo, June 2016.

<sup>63</sup>Interview 17, Managua, June 2016.

strategy proposed by Humberto Ortega. Worried by Contreras' growing influence and independence, Aráuz took two steps: first, he sought an alliance with Fonseca, and second, he invoked his formal power, arguing that Contreras had no authority while outside Nicaragua.<sup>64</sup> Contreras and Ortega responded by arranging a meeting with Jaime Wheelock, seemingly in an attempt to reincorporate the embryonic FSLN-TP into the FSLN structures on their side of the leadership dispute (Fonseca Amador 1976, 5). After siding with Wheelock, Contreras and Ortega mobilized their own power base against Aráuz: by “carry[ing] the discussion to the bases of the organization in the exterior [of Nicaragua], at the same time as they foment it in the bases in the interior to which they can gain access” (Fonseca Amador 1976, 8).

Fonseca returned to Nicaragua in December 1975 (Zimmermann 2000, 186). He called for a meeting of all major FSLN commanders, to be held at Zínica in northern Nicaragua, where flanked by Henry Ruiz's guerrilla *foco*, he hoped “to demonstrate that he had maximum authority over The Organization [FSLN]” and to re-unite the factions forming under Aráuz and Contreras (Torres Jiménez 2005, 290; Rivera Quintero and Ramírez 1989). Fonseca's gambit failed. He never reached the *foco*; instead he was caught and killed in November 1976 by National Guardsmen (IES 1985).<sup>65</sup> During Fonseca's time isolated in the mountains, Aráuz had closed his structures to FSLN members in Cuba. In response, Contreras and Ortega reentered Nicaragua in mid-1975, and, calling a meeting of elite FSLN commanders linked to them by *cantera* or Contreras' operational command, founded the FSLN-*Tendencia Insurreccional* (FSLN-TI, also called *Terceristas*) (Baltodano 2010b; Ortega Saavedra 2004, 292). With Fonseca's death, Aráuz was left without his major ally and did not have a realistic chance to build a larger coalition than Contreras. Unable to win the leadership dispute, he settled for a draw: he formed a rump FSLN he called the FSLN-*Guerra Popular Prolongada* (FSLN-GPP), and sent directives to his fighters that “the comrades from the other tendencies, from the Tercerista tendency and the Proletaria tendency, were to be considered as traitors” (Rivera Quintero and Ramírez 1989, 141–42). The FSLN, already divided into two organizations, had now split into three.

There is little evidence the dispute was caused by state repression. There were no significant leaders killed between Turcios' and Fonseca's deaths (the latter the culmination, rather than the cause, of the division between FSLN-GPP and FSLN-TI). The asymmetric battlefield losses mechanism is not well-supported either: contrary to Christia's (2012) expectations, battlefield losses prior to the split clustered in the incumbent, rather than challenging, rebel faction. As before, the FSLN received no material external support during this period, while Cuba avoided involvement in the leadership dispute.

Finally, there is only mixed support for strategic disagreement, and evidence for elite “cheap talk.”

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<sup>64</sup>This was the same resolution Aráuz and Contreras had earlier used to strip the exiled Fonseca of his decision-making powers the previous year.

<sup>65</sup>Some blamed Henry Ruiz for Fonseca's death, holding that, amidst rising tensions with Pedro Aráuz and hoping to wrest control of the GPP for himself, Ruiz lingered en route to the planned reunion. Ruiz forcefully denied this account in an interview with Baltodano (2010a, tk), but it is consistent with—indeed, predicted by—my theory.

Strategic differences did feature in the rhetoric of disputants on both sides. But strategic positions were instrumentalized according to the needs of individual FSLN leaders. For example, Humberto Ortega

migrates to Costa Rica without any intention of entering Nicaragua and as Henry Ruiz rightly said, what's he going to come back for? He's an ungainly, skinny man with [health] problems and can't shoot. So what's he going to come do in an armed struggle? So he stays there, but he develops the thesis that affirms that the leadership doesn't necessarily have to be inside, right?<sup>66</sup>

Claimed strategic differences acted as claims to rightful leadership, “because obviously if someone accepts this new vision, well, those who were the creators and promoters [of the old vision] cease to be the leaders, of course. That is, you can't hold on to leadership if you've been upholding a failed thesis, right?”<sup>67</sup> Yet the strategic differences claimed by leaders often failed to correspond with their actions. For example, the FSLN-TI and the FSLN-GPP independently planned to capture the National Palace in 1978—a quintessential urban commando raid, ostensibly the TI's strategic innovation.<sup>68</sup>

In sum, while strategic differences may have again triggered various episodes within the dispute and lent differing identities to the disputants, there is little evidence that disputants *in their actions* were motivated by strategic commitments as opposed to their relative power. There is even less evidence in the fourth and final dispute that state repression or external support played a causal role. Meanwhile, a comparison of rebel leaders' relative power, unlike strategic differences, successfully predicts the timing of disputes, identities of disputants, and outcome of disputes.

## Results of process-tracing tests

When introducing the balance of loyalties mechanism earlier in this paper, I described the observable implications of each step and the process tracing tests which I used during my analysis. Table 6 presents summary results of my analysis. I observed the full causal mechanism and the expected observable implications in three out of four disputes. The only exception, the second dispute, began *in media res* after the first leadership dispute was interrupted by the death of FER leader Oscar Turcios. As in the first dispute, the FER's support elevated its new leader Pedro Aráuz to challenge the incumbent Carlos Fonseca. I observed the last two steps of the second dispute as expected. In short, process tracing uncovered strong evidence that shifts in rebel recruitment and operational networks caused the FSLN's leadership disputes, internal coups, and organizational splits.

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<sup>66</sup>Interview 16, Laguna de Apoyo, June 2016.

<sup>67</sup>Interview 17, Managua, June 2016.

<sup>68</sup>Interview of Henry Ruiz in Baltodano (2010a).

Table 6: Evaluating the causal mechanism across four leadership disputes

	Dispute 1	Dispute 2	Dispute 3	Dispute 4
Disputants	Fonseca vs. Turcios	Fonseca vs. Aráuz	Aráuz v. Wheelock, Carrión & Huembes	Aráuz vs. Contreras
Year(s) of dispute	1971-1973	1973-1974	1975	1976
Process tracing evidence	Step observed?	Step observed?	Step observed?	Step observed?
Rebel group recruits <i>cantera</i> or forms operational network	Yes	Not applicable	Yes	Yes
New leader's power base grows relative to incumbent's	Yes	Not applicable	Yes	Yes
Shifting balance of power provokes leadership dispute	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Leadership dispute produces coup or splinter	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Table 7 compares my theory with alternative hypotheses, highlighting those making correct predictions and with evidence for their causal mechanisms in each dispute. The alternative hypotheses largely fail congruence tests, or were not backed by process tracing evidence. As can be seen, state repression occurred in every time period, yet process tracing revealed limited evidence connecting these events to the disputes and splinters that followed. Moreover, battlefield defeats and leadership decapitations also punctuated the FSLN's periods of unity: guerrilla *focos* were annihilated at Raiti-Bocay in 1963 and Pancasán in 1967, with Carlos Fonseca's imprisonment following each disaster, yet neither led to a leadership dispute. Depredations from 1976 to 1978, when leaders of all three tendencies were killed, helped convince the factions to *reunify*.<sup>69</sup>

Nor can external support explain the leadership disputes as it was negligible throughout the case study period. According to FSLN-GPP commander Henry Ruiz, “[after] 1968, Cuba suspended the policy of training us militarily. They didn’t run us out of the country, because Cuba didn’t run anybody out, but they preferred not doing anything than giving military training to those whose plans they didn’t know.”<sup>70</sup> Another top FSLN commander reports that Fidel Castro, fearing American counterintervention, is reported to have said as late as 1977 that, “The best help I can give you is not to help you at all.”<sup>71</sup> Cuba also withheld external support during the factional dispute because “they didn’t want to be seen as taking sides” (Randall 1994, 240).

Finally, some evidence supports the role of ideological and strategic disagreements; however, evidence of genuine ideological commitment must be balanced against equally abundant evidence of “cheap talk”: elites instrumentally developed ideologies that justified their own claims to leadership, invented ideologies *post hoc* as “justifying narratives” (Christia 2012, 6) to explain their participation in power struggles, and frequently

<sup>69</sup>Interview 26, Managua, December 2016.

<sup>70</sup>Interview with Henry Ruiz by Mónica Baltodano (2010a)

<sup>71</sup>Edén Pastora, quoted in Booth (1985, 134).

Table 7: Evaluating hypotheses across four leadership disputes

Explanation	Dispute 1: CF vs. OT (1971-3) Result: Power-sharing accord		Dispute 2: CF vs. PA (1973-4) Result: Internal coup	
	Correct prediction?	Evidence for mechanism?	Correct prediction?	Evidence for mechanism?
Balance of loyalties	Yes	Strong	Yes	Strong
State repression	Yes	Mixed	Yes	Strong
External support	No	-	No	-
Ideological/strategic disagreements	Yes	Mixed	No	-

Explanation	Dispute 3: PA vs. JW, RH, & LC (1975) Result: Split		Dispute 4: PA vs. EC (1976) Result: Split	
	Correct prediction?	Evidence for mechanism?	Correct prediction?	Evidence for mechanism?
Balance of loyalties	Yes	Strong	Yes	Strong
State repression	Yes	No	Yes	No
External support	No	-	No	-
Ideological/strategic disagreements	Yes	Mixed	Yes	Mixed

abandoned their own ostensible strategies for tactics indistinguishable from those of their ideological opponents. Moreover, the whole history of the FSLN is rife with ideological and strategic disagreements: until the final leadership dispute, internal debates were not only tolerated but encouraged. Ideological and strategic differences are too ubiquitous to explain leadership disputes, yet may serve as triggering mechanisms and self-justification for disputes rooted in changing balances of loyalties.

### 5.1 The difficulty of explaining dispute timing

The above analysis leaves one significant question unanswered: what explains the precise timing of leadership disputes? More specifically, why do some disputes initiate early, when the incumbent retains his relative power advantage or parity with the challenger, while other initiate later, when the challenger has gained the advantage. The question of precise timing is important, because it determines whether the rebel group will split or succumb to an internal coup. Unfortunately, the precise timing of disputes is difficult to predict. On the one hand, changes in the relative balance of power give both old and new leaders strong incentives to initiate disputes: challengers desire formal power commensurate to their *de facto* power, and incumbents to retain their formal power despite their eroding *de facto* power. Yet this structural cause of disputes is different from the precise trigger of disputes. Predictable disputes are unpredictably triggered by the

vagaries of individual leaders' decision-making processes, which are subject to uncertainty, miscalculation, conflicting incentives, learning, the content of interpersonal relationships, and certainly not least, individual personalities.

Leadership disputes begin when either the incumbent or the challenger decides to seek the revision of the status quo. The incumbent has incentives to do so earlier (when a potential challenger is still weaker) but uncertainty on several fronts may lead to miscalculations. First, disputants are likely to be unsure of the extent of their and their rival's relative power. Subordinates' loyalties are private information that may be falsified (hence the usefulness of *canteras* as a heuristic for assessing the loyalties of a substantial number of militants). For example, Agustín Lara Valdivia,<sup>72</sup> Leticia Herrera (2013, 200), and one of my informants<sup>73</sup> all described the great lengths to which Pedro Aráuz went to ascertain commander loyalties when he was the incumbent. Following this, the challenger has an incentive to wait to initiate a dispute until his power base is overwhelming, but cannot be sure his power base will actually continue growing. Maybe new recruitment will stagnate and loyal *canteras* suffer attrition? Maybe now is his best chance? Maybe the best moment has already passed? Maybe he has miscalculated and overestimated his loyalists?

Second, leaders cannot be certain of their rival's intentions, or even if they are potential rivals at all. The power plays of his challengers seems to have caught Carlos Fonseca by surprise. As the FSLN's co-founder and "indisputable leader, bearing a mystique and unquestionable authority,"<sup>74</sup> Fonseca may have assumed that his hold on the FSLN was secure. His decade-long relationship with his first challenger, Oscar Turcios, may also have contributed to Fonseca's complacency (and help explain why their dispute ended in a power-sharing accord, rather than a coup). Even if Fonseca had been more conscious of his slipping relative power and Turcios' designs, it would have hurt the FSLN as a whole to expel or demote Turcios, who was, after all, a highly successful organization-builder. This highlights the mismatch in incentives between incumbent leaders, who must be wary of competent commanders, and rebel organizations, whose existential struggle with the state depends on cultivating competent commanders. Given uncertainty and misaligned incentives, it is not surprising that Fonseca made little attempt to control his rising lieutenant until it was too late.

Third, these miscalculations and misjudgments are subject to learning by disputants over time. For example, while Fonseca was complacent with Turcios, he immediately tried to replace Pedro Aráuz with someone he thought would be more politically dependable (Henry Ruiz). In turn, Aráuz, after taking power in a coup, was explicitly aware both that he lacked legitimacy and that his leadership depended on maintaining a relative power advantage over his subordinates. Aráuz cultivated the loyalties of new *canteras*

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<sup>72</sup>In interview with Mónica Baltodano (2010d).

<sup>73</sup>Interview 26, Managua, December 2016.

<sup>74</sup>Interview 16, Laguna de Apoyo, June 2016, in the context of explaining to me exactly how that unquestionable authority came to be questioned by Oscar Turcios.

(for example, by training incoming recruits himself, rather than allowing his lieutenant Bayardo Arce to lead the training), and preemptively struck down rising threats to his leadership at the first sign of challenge (expelling Jaime Wheelock, Luis Carrión, and Roberto Huembes), while seeking to shore up his legitimacy (allying with Fonseca against Eduardo Contreras). Aráuz had learned early on that his top lieutenants were the main danger to his leadership and developed a comprehensive strategy to maintain formal power.

Incumbents' learning extended to operational networks as well. Contreras had no loyal *cantera*, but became a powerful challenger after leading a spectacular operation and gaining the loyalty of his operational network. In 1978, Humberto Ortega, now clearly the leader of the FSLN-TI, wanted to plan an *even more* spectacular operation: the capture of the National Palace with Congress in session (called *Operación Chanchera*, or "Pigsty"). However, he couldn't lead it himself, as he had been shot and crippled in 1970, and he didn't want to create a new Contreras who could challenge his power.<sup>75</sup> Though Ortega could have chosen from several competent and daring lieutenants, instead he sought out Edén Pastora, off fishing sharks in Costa Rica after a brief stint in the FSLN several years previously (Ramírez 2015). Pastora's lack of ties with others in the FSLN was, for Ortega, his principal virtue: even those in his new operational network distrusted him for his dilettantism and his non-Marxist political orientation.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, while he led the operation, once the command team had captured the Palace, Pastora wasn't even allowed to take part in the actual negotiations, which were directed by proven FSLN commander Dora María Téllez, his "political advisor."

In conclusion, uncertainty, miscalculation, and learning, along with the personality traits of individual leaders, all play a role in determining whether a leadership dispute initiates early, when the incumbent retains an advantage or parity (leading to a split), or late, when the challenger has gained the advantage (leading to an internal coup). Thus, we may predict that when rebel groups recruit new *canteras* or form large operational networks, both internal coups and organizational splits become more likely. However, we may not predict *ex ante* whether an internal coup or an organizational split is more likely or when in the trajectory of a latent dispute such a concrete outcome will materialize.

## 6 Conclusion

This paper raises several important issues. First, irregular warfare takes place in a low-information environment. This observation is not new: Kalyvas (2006) and Weinstein (2007) highlight how rebel groups' pursuit of information shapes their patterns of selective violence and recruitment. However, scholars have rarely considered whether the low-information context extends to rebel groups' internal processes, and if so,

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<sup>75</sup>Interview 29, Managua, January 2017.

<sup>76</sup>Interview 29, Managua, January 2017.

how it mediates them. I answer the first question in the affirmative: not only rank-and-file militants but even central FSLN leaders had limited knowledge of the activities and intentions of those outside their most immediate circle of contacts.<sup>77</sup> I then show how limited information constrains the choices and allegiances of rebel group members, while producing miscalculations that lead to conflict between rebel elites even where they may seek to avoid them. The low-information context helps explain organizational splits, a clearly suboptimal outcome for most rebel groups. Low information may likewise be taken as a starting point for understanding other hard-to-explain rebel group behaviors.

The low information problem also confronts scholars seeking to reconstruct processes within clandestine organizations. Participants' knowledge of events is limited by compartmentalization; in network analysis terms, participants see only their immediate ego-centric network, but not events within the organization as a whole. Given the extreme fragmentation of knowledge about the FSLN's leadership struggles, interview research on its own was unlikely to shed enough light on the events in question. Thus, this paper highlights the utility of formal network analysis in overcoming the limitations of ego-centric interview research. Likewise, the FSLN Commander Dataset represents a major empirical contribution. While comprehensive network datasets of the internal structure of numerous organizations (businesses, karate clubs, social movements) exist in great quantities, few analogous datasets cover rebel organizations (but see Kenney, Coulthart, and Wright (2017)). It also testifies to the value of historical research in conflict studies (Kalyvas 2001, 118). Though my cases occurred in the 1970s, by far the most important sources of network and process tracing evidence were published only in the last decade or so.<sup>78</sup>

Second, I have extended the concept of power relations to the internal dynamics of rebel organizations. When studying the behavior of rebel groups, scholars usually treat them as unitary. This has consequences for the type of answers developed for a range of important questions. For example, numerous studies have sought to determine a rational basis for violence against civilians and for terrorism, although this behavior is often counterproductive for a given rebel group's overarching goals. Some scholars, disaggregating rebel movements into distinct groups, have advanced explanations based in the "dual contest" that rebels fight with the state on the one hand and competing rebel groups on the other hand (Cunningham, Bakke, and Seymour 2012). However, this paper points to a third contest: the struggle inside of rebel groups between leaders and their lieutenants for supremacy over the group. This third contest may well help to explain much behavior that otherwise seems irrational. In the FSLN's leadership disputes, for example, one emerging faction's decision to carry out ostentatious hostage-taking operations was as much a product of their internal struggle

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<sup>77</sup>For example, one informant, a high-ranking commander in the FSLN-TI, told me she was unaware of the divisions until 1977—two years after the first split—because her immediate superior simply never disclosed them. Interview 29, Managua, January 2017.

<sup>78</sup>Above all, Baltodano's (2010a) interviews, Ortega's (2004) comprehensive, yet not entirely trustworthy history, and memoirs (e.g. Torres (2005), Loza (2009), and Herrera (2013)).

with the incumbent leadership as of the organization's struggle with the state. A similar logic may explain the choice of terrorist tactics in other conflicts.<sup>79</sup> As scholars investigate the sources of rebel group behaviors, they must take into account the pressures and incentives of this "third contest."

To what extent are the logics of the "third contest" generalizable? After all, the FSLN's small size meant that relations between its leaders and rank-and-file militants were intimate, in a way that would be unlikely for, say, the 60,000-strong Taliban in Afghanistan (Dawi 2014). Would the dynamics outlined in this paper scale up to such a large group? Would fighter loyalties still map onto networks in conflicts where rebel groups resort to kidnapping new recruits? These questions remain open pending further research. Nonetheless, some examples suggest that scholars may well find these dynamics outside of Nicaragua. For example, Kenny (2010, 539) reports that the Irish Republican Army's 1969-1970 split into the evenly-sized Provisional Irish Republican Army and Official Irish Republican Army "was as much a battle among political entrepreneurs for control of the flood of potential new recruits as it was the fragmentation of a pre-existing organization." Meanwhile, "Abimael Guzmán, leader of the Shining Path in Peru, was so paranoid about being ousted in a coup that he "surrounded himself with female lieutenants but readied none to command in his absence" (Price 2012, 19). Stepping outside of the civil war context (but remaining within revolutionary organizations), Sheila Fitzpatrick (1984, 109–10), in her analysis of the leadership struggle between Joseph Stalin and the war hero Leon Trotsky, points out that "Stalin had none of the attributes that the Bolsheviks normally associated with outstanding leadership." Rather, as General Secretary he "was in a position to manipulate what one scholar has labelled a 'circular flow of power:'" by controlling recruitment to the Communist Party, he was able to both stock the Party's ranks with loyalists and to assure their continued loyalty. Even as far afield as the Roman Empire during the Crisis of the Third Century (235–284 AD), rival imperial claimants split—fragmented—the empire into three parts when "control over a significant body of troops had to be delegated to a subordinate general. Success on the part of this man, or even just the prospect of the cash payment traditionally given out on the occasion of a change in the holder of the imperial office, could lead his army to proclaim him emperor" (Collins 2010, 7). In this way the basic ingredients for leadership disputes put forward in this paper—a disjuncture between formal and *de facto* power, with the currency of *de facto* power the loyalty of subordinates gained through recruitment or operational control—appear common to poorly-policed human institutions, great and small.

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<sup>79</sup>In contrast with a view of terrorism as "the coercive instrument of choice" directed at states (Pape 2003, 344). Similarly, the third contest may lead to rebel diplomacy: each FSLN faction pursued diplomatic efforts in Cuba, Venezuela, Panama, and Costa Rica from 1976–79 (Belli 2002), seeking not only "visibility, credibility, and acceptance on the world stage" in their struggle against the Somoza regime, but also acknowledgment as the legitimate leadership of the FSLN (c.f. Huang 2016, 91).

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