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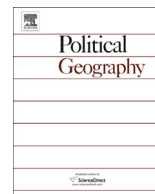
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From secessionism to regionalism: Intra-organizational change and ideological moderation within armed secessionist movements



Gyda M. Sindre ^{a, b, *}

^a Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS), University of Cambridge, 7 West Road, Cambridge, CB3 9DT, UK

^b Department of Comparative Politics, University of Bergen, PB 7802, N-5007 Bergen, Norway

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ABSTRACT

Secessionist movements rarely succeed in their quests for separate statehood. Hence, conflict resolution efforts in secessionist wars tend to focus on making autonomy frameworks acceptable to both sides. This article posits that de-radicalization on the issue of secession and specifically the endorsement of regionalism over secessionism is an important prerequisite for such autonomy arrangements to succeed. A programmatic shift toward regionalism represents a determinant shift in the ideology and *raison d'être* of secessionist movements. Drawing on insights from the literature on party change and rebel group transformation, a twofold contribution is made. First, moderation can occur in the absence of electoral participation as a result of internal shifts in the dominant faction of a rebel group. Second, identifying two mechanisms as drivers for group identity change, organizational diversification and internal debate, it shows how under certain condition fragmentation may induce moderation on core ideological issues of the armed movement. These arguments are developed through an inductive analysis of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). In this case, moderation on the issue of secession was the outcome of the formation and strengthening of a moderate domestic wing, increased internal debate and the subsequent weakening of the symbolic powers of a long-standing insurgent leadership.

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Introduction

Of all types of intra-state conflict, disputes over self-determination are the most intractable and the least likely to end with a settlement (Walter, 2009). A common feature of movements such as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Polisario Front in Western Sahara is that they have maintained their armed struggles for several decades with relatively few resources. What remains clear, however, is that international support is a *sine qua non* in the quest for separate statehood, with East Timor, Kosovo and South Sudan being the exceptions in their achievement of self-determination and international recognition rather than the norm for these 'geopolitical anomalies' (c.f. Jeffrey, McConnell, & Wilson, 2015). Conflict resolution in the case of secessionist wars therefore tends to be found not in awarding recognition but in awarding autonomy to secessionist regions (Caspersen, 2017, 4). International peace

negotiations therefore focus on reaching negotiated settlements that accommodate separatists within the state together with offers of formal reintegration programs and opportunities for armed groups to transform into political parties (Söderberg Kovacs & Hatz, 2016). During the most recent peace negotiations between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government, the international facilitators explored a federal solution as an alternative to self-determination (Stokke, 2009), and recent negotiations between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Philippine government led to the signing of a peace agreement that stipulated rebel group inclusion and special autonomy provisions (Walch, 2014). Indeed, such autonomy arrangements were the basis of the Helsinki agreement signed between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Indonesian government in 2005 (MoU 2005).

Despite the trend by states and international peacemakers to seek to accommodate separatists with forms of territorial self-government and democratic inclusion and the growing number of peace agreements that follow this trajectory, little has been written about the dynamics *within* the armed movements themselves that enable this transition. To date, the literature has tended to view the decision by armed secessionist movements to accept

* Department of Politics and International Studies (POLIS), University of Cambridge, 7 West Road, Cambridge, CB3 9DT, UK.

E-mail address: gms50@cam.ac.uk.

autonomy and demilitarize primarily as a strategic shift in their primary *mode* of mobilization instead of depicting any real change in the group's position on the issue of secession. An implicit premise is that autonomy provisions will appease secessionist demands and that inclusion will have a self-moderating effect on the armed group. The conflict resolution literature, however, has focused on the specific framework for negotiations and on identifying the moment of ripeness for when protagonists may compromise (c.f. [Stedman, 1997](#), [Sisk, 2004](#)). From these analyses, it is generally agreed that the presence or absence of moderate voices within the armed group and the strength of the group's political wing are crucial factors in determining whether the protagonists reach an agreement ([Sisk, 2004](#), p. 257). However, the question of how such moderate wings emerge and under what conditions they prevail vis-à-vis the more radical wings of the movements remains under-explored. This article addresses this lacuna in the literature by focusing on the ideology dimension of armed secessionist movements in order to tackle the question of why and how some armed secessionist movements moderate and adopt a regionalist position.

The present discussion of ideological de-radicalization on the issue of secession, taken here to mean a move from propagating secessionism to propagating regionalism, is situated within the contemporary scholarly debates about rebel group transformation and party change (e.g. [Berti, 2013](#); [Ishiyama, 2016](#); [Manning, 2008](#); [Sindre & Söderström, 2016](#); [Söderberg Kovacs, 2008](#)), while also extending debates in political geography on the significance of transnationality for understanding rebel group behavior (e.g. [Jeffrey et al., 2015](#); [McConnell, Moreau, & Dittmer, 2012](#); [Schlichte, 2012](#); [Salehyan, 2009](#)). The question of what explains ideological moderation on the issue of secession brings into focus an under-explored topic among party scholars and conflict scholars alike, namely how changes in visions and ideas shape prospects for conflict resolution. Although the topic of ethno-regionalism features prominently in the party literature, studies of the ideology of ethno-regionalist movements and parties are rare exceptions (e.g., [Massetti & Schakel, 2016](#); [Massetti, 2009](#); [Newman, 1997](#)). However, as [Gomez-Reino, De Winter, and Lynch \(2006, 252\)](#) conclude, ideology stands out as the most important aspect to cover in future research on sub-national politics. In its conceptualization of ideology, this article follows [Massetti and Schakel \(2016: 60, 76–7f4\)](#) focusing on the core ideology of ethno-nationalist movements, namely the relationship between the region and the state. Regionalist ideology, or regionalism, depicts that the region is a separate body politic vis-à-vis the state to which it belongs ([Massetti & Schakel, 2016](#), p. 60). Secessionist and regionalist positions correspond to radical and moderate ethno-nationalist ideologies respectively ([Newman, 1997](#)).

Against this backdrop, the following argument is made. While general conflict dynamics and state behavior are important factors in explaining why conflicts come to an end, whether an armed secessionist movement adopts a regionalist stance is a matter of internal shifts within the movement and, in particular, the emergence or strengthening of a new faction that propose alternative visions for the movement and territory. Two mechanisms are identified as determinants for promoting ideological change on the secessionism-regionalism spectrum: Organizational diversification and internal debate. Diversification, here taken to mean the manifestation of a more complex political organization that breaks with conventional military hierarchies, follows naturally for any political organization that seeks to cultivate political change ([Berti, 2013](#), p. 19; [Greenwood & Hinings, 1996](#), p. 1033). Internal debate is enabled by such organizational changes, especially if the leadership is weakened and no longer controls the propaganda apparatus or the internal political discourse. The analysis thus challenges

arguments that organizational fragmentation mostly leads to radicalization and violence (e.g., [Cunningham, 2014](#); [Pearlman, 2011](#)). As is suggested here, fragmentation may shift the internal balance of power and allow for a new and potentially more moderate political discourse to emerge. This argument brings nuance to contemporary debates about ethno-nationalist movements that find that fragmentation or the lack of cohesion leads to further radicalization and violence ([Bakke, 2015](#); [Cunningham, 2014](#); [Pearlman, 2011](#)). By taking a closer look at the rebel organization and in particular by identifying the internal fault-lines for fragmentation through the lens of organizational theory, this study shows that organizational change may also induce moderation on the core ideology of armed groups. Furthermore, when taking into account the transnational character of secessionist liberation movements, a central question precludes to whether organizational expansion brought about by the increased engagement in diplomacy, transnational activism and exile beyond the homeland by armed secessionist movements, may influence not only their strategic adaptation, as has previously been suggested (e.g. [McConnell & Wilson, 2015](#); [Salehyan, 2009](#)), but also lead to shifts in political visions and ideological perspectives.

This study uses an inductive approach to develop a framework that helps shed light on how shifts in groups' and individuals' political convictions are products of intra-organizational conflict that arises in the context of organizational change. The above-stated claims also indicate the methodological usefulness of within-case analysis, particularly historical diachronic analysis, which potentially can help explain change in movements and parties with ostensibly similar characteristics. To conduct the within-case analysis, this article uses the Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, GAM) to develop new theoretical insights into the issue of ideological change in secessionist movements. The empirical analysis is built around a combination of primary and secondary sources including interviews with leaders and members of the former armed group conducted between 2006 and 2014. Although the study itself does not provide a general theory for ideological moderation, it identifies a set of mechanisms drawn from the literature on party change and rebel group transformation that sheds light on identity change.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section discusses the concept of moderation, clarifying how it is understood with regard to ideological moderation on the issue of secession. It develops the theoretical argument underpinning this study, drawing attention to key mechanisms driving ideological adaptation by political movements. This is followed by a clarification of the methodology and data used for the analysis. The framework is then applied to GAM, tracing the changes in its organizational structure while explaining the shifts in the group's political discourse. The final conclusion also discusses the usefulness of this framework beyond Aceh.

Theory: moderation and organizational change

Moderation: concepts and approaches

What constitutes ideological moderation within armed groups? Conventionally, studies of political moderation have focused on explaining how extremist political parties, particularly religious parties, have adapted to democracy and the extent to which they have become more inclusive and liberal in their policies and outlook ridding them of exclusionary and illiberal positions (e.g., [Huntington, 1991](#), pp. 165–71; [Kalyvas, 1996](#); [Bermeo, 1997](#)). Hence, numerous studies view moderation primarily as a process of adaptation to democracy employing a teleological argument that political inclusion tends 'to appease the radical tenets of extremist groups' ([Brocker & Künkler, 2013](#)). Others are

more cautious. As [Brocker and Künkler \(2013\)](#) note, moderation may be a temporary strategy to attract more widespread support, both domestically and internationally, implying that once in a position of power, radical parties reinforce their exclusivist illiberal agenda from within.

There are some obvious parallels between this literature on moderation and the literature on rebel group transformation, especially concerning the distinction between ‘strategic’ and ‘real’ moderation and the implications this may have for the stability of peace settlements. Regarding the centrality of inclusion for moderation, scholars have highlighted how the participation in peace talks, international diplomacy and a discourse supporting human rights are often central to enhancing the legitimacy of armed groups, both domestically and internationally ([Caspersen, 2017](#), pp. 141–42; [Berti, 2013](#), p. 161; [McConnell & Wilson, 2015](#)). The desire to be viewed as legitimate politicians may encourage a shift in discourse and even full or partial shift away from the group’s reliance on violence ([Sindre, 2016b](#), [Ishiyama & Marshall, 2017](#)). However, because demands for sovereignty and commitment to democracy are not mutually exclusive, it is not a prerequisite that secessionist movements moderate their goal of secession to reach a peace settlement ([Caspersen, 2011](#); [Whiting, 2016](#)). It is reasonable, however, to assume that a peace settlement that does not ‘resolve’ the core issue of the conflict, i.e. the issue of secession, will most likely prove less stable in the long-run. A peace settlement may also be the outcome of a temporary dominance of a pro-settlement wing within the armed movement ([Ishiyama & Batta, 2011](#)) just as recurring friction between militant and political wings within armed movements may lead to an unstable peace ([Berti, 2013](#)). [Ishiyama and Batta \(2011\)](#) show how for the case of the Communist Party of Nepal (CPN-M), any process of ‘moderation’ that cause party leadership to abandon the goal of a ‘people’s war’ to replace the existing monarchy with a ‘revolutionary council’ and transform into an electoral party was made possible by a temporary truce between a ‘moderate’ and militant faction. Peace negotiations and settlements may be pushed through by power-seeking elites within the movement, who wish to access the spoils of office whereas the ‘true-believers’ may act as spoilers and jeopardize the peace settlement by outbidding pro-settlement forces ([Caspersen, 2017](#), p. 145).

This highlights what [Manning \(2008, 141\)](#) argues to be a conceptual problem of conflating two separate issues in discussions about moderation, namely, that of ‘creating democratic actors’ versus the idea that inclusion leads to changes in the identity of the armed movement. This study is concerned with the latter, namely, what explains identity change in armed secessionist movements, bringing into focus the need to conceptualize which aspect of a groups’ behavior and ideology are transformed or moderated. [Wickham \(2004: 206\)](#) views moderation as the ‘abandonment’ or ‘revision’ of radical goals that ‘enables an opposition movement to accommodate itself to the give and take of “normal” competitive politics.’ Others seek a more fine-tuned operationalization, considering whether specific policies remain ‘exclusionist’ or ‘illiberal’ ([Schwedler, 2007](#); [Ishiyama & Widmeier, 2013](#), p. 538). Combining the two, moderation in ethno-nationalist movements thus assumes a deliberative shift towards endorsing a regionalist political agenda, which in essence also endorses the existence of a multi-ethnic state, as opposed to the largely mono-ethnic state originally engrained in the demand for secession.

Against this backdrop, what remains clear from the above discussion is that the transition to peace is often the result of a commitment to reform by at least segment of the movement’s leadership or a newly formed faction. What is less debated is under what conditions ‘reformists’ take the lead and manage to shift the internal discourse and commitment of the armed movement.

Organizational structure and change: diversification and internal debate

Organizational development of armed political groups is a product of fundamental internal struggles over group identity and power ([Ishiyama & Batta, 2011](#)). Identifying how and when these struggles emerge and how they are addressed internally will help explain not only the groups’ decisions to adjust their strategic behavior but also the conditions under which ideological change may lead groups to adopt alternative political visions.

Insights from the party literature give useful indicators for how to conceptualize change in political groups. According to [Harmel and Janda \(1994: 267–8\)](#), ‘change,’ defined as major alterations of a political party’s strategy and program, usually takes place as a result of an external shock, a change of dominant factions, or a change in party leader. [Panebianco \(1988: 205\)](#) shows that a complex and unstable political environment is expected to affect movement stability negatively, since it ‘increases uncertainty’ and produces diversification among different sub-groups of the party, which can heighten conflict over differences in political strategies among the internal groups – which in turn may lead to factionalism. Because factionalism undermines the stability of the dominant coalition of the party, it also increases the likelihood of party change ([Harmel & Janda, 1994](#), p. 279). Importantly, following this reasoning, factionalism is not synonymous with radicalization. Rather, it is the types of factions that determine which changes will incur. This perspective contrasts with arguments presented in contemporary scholarship on ethno-nationalist conflicts that tends to argue that organizational fragmentation within rebel groups leads to radicalization and violence. [Pearlman \(2011, 217\)](#) argues that the formation of new factions within self-determination movements, i.e., ‘splinter and semi-splinter groups,’ increases the likelihood for a movement to use violence, whereas organizational cohesion renders more peaceful forms of protest. Similarly, [Cunningham](#) notes that ‘[internally] divided self-determination groups’ are both ‘more likely to get selective accommodation by the state’ and to ‘engage in armed violence’ – both with the state and internally ([Cunningham, 2014](#), p. 10). In instances of selective accommodation, radical splinter groups may continue the armed struggle or represent serious spoilers to any settlement reached.

Offering nuance to these arguments, the following case analysis demonstrates that looking more carefully at the rebel organization; what type of sub-groups emerge and the political discourse and ideas that each sub-group propagate enable insights into points of contention, agreement and motivations for change. As suggested by party scholars, organizational change is not always a conflictual process but may occur organically as a political movement grows. This may also be the case for armed political groups as it is in the nature of any political organization, armed or non-armed, to seek growth and expansion as a means to strengthen its position and outreach ([Berti, 2013](#)). The rebel governance literature demonstrates how rebel groups evolve into complex bureaucratic organizations in response to demands from civilians ([Mampilly, 2011](#)). However, organizational change may also be a consequence of shifting opportunity structures that enable increased recruitment and domestic popular mobilization. As such, ‘[o]rganizational change can be understood as an important tool employed by different subunits within the same organization whether to maintain or to gain additional authority and influence, or to shift the internal power dynamics in their favor’ ([Berti, 2013](#), p. 20).

The transnational dimension of the organizational structure of secessionist movements is also important for understanding their organizational evolution. Political geographers have drawn attention to the significance of the ‘global’ in the manifestation of armed groups. As [Schlichte](#) suggests, ‘the formation of an armed group is

always a highly internationalized process' (Schlichte, 2012, p. 720). Sometimes, counterinsurgency campaigns force rebel leaderships to establish themselves outside their territorial base, leading them to form 'governments in exile' that mimic the governmental structures of their state-in-waiting (McConnell et al., 2012). Protracted conflict also creates diaspora communities, which lend economic and political support to the 'cause' and struggle for the homeland. Many members of the diaspora community engage politically, either as part of the diplomatic missions or as political wings of the ethno-nationalist movements. As 'geopolitical anomalies' lacking international recognition, international connections and the development of transnational networks become especially significant to how secessionist movements adapt their struggle over time. McConnell and Wilson (2015, 77) note that when in a position of protracted 'liminality,' governments in exile constantly navigate between 'internal recognition' and 'external non-recognition,' subsequently adjusting their behavior in a constant bid for legitimacy. That said, the literature also cautions against viewing such 'flexibility' as a sign of moderation. While transnational ties may expose leaders and members to new ideas and foster alternative visions, diaspora communities are also known to have a strong commitment to radical nationalism, thus opposing attempts at conflict resolution short of independence (Orjuela, 2008; Smith, 2007).

Hence, organizational diversification, domestically and transnationally, might pose a challenge to the leadership, increase intra-group tensions and damage the group's internal cohesion. However, competition brought about by diversification and the strengthening of new factions and sub-groups may also cause organizations to become more accommodative and potentially induce segments of the leadership group to reconsider their most radical positions. Brocker and Künkler (2013) summarize the general insights from the party literature as follows:

'Where internal party discourse is subject to public discourses (and the rival practices, ideologies and systems of symbolism and meaning expressed therein), finding a receptive audience and being able to mobilise agreement may require the development of more moderate positions, the strengthening of already existing moderate tendencies within the party and the evolution of a "multidimensional" identity of the party' (Brocker & Künkler, 2013, p. 180).

By not viewing fragmentation as indicative of radicalization, fragmentation may well enable a shift in internal practice for how conflicts are handled thus providing space for alternative visions. This aligns with the perspectives in the moderation literature that push for further attention to be given to changes in the belief system of political elites that may provide insights into how the ideological prescriptions of political groups that seek radical outcomes may be altered over time (e.g., Schwedler, 2011; Tezcür, 2010; Wickham, 2004).

Based on the above discussion, this study uses the following conceptualization of when and how ideational and programmatic change can occur: exposure to new ideas may strengthen moderate tendencies (Brocker & Künkler, 2013), and this strengthening, combined with the notion that the leaders of secessionist movements 'bid' for legitimacy, as described above (McConnell & Wilson, 2015), is a fruitful way of thinking about ideological moderation and how reframing becomes possible. To explain decisions by secessionist leaders to undergo a programmatic shift from propagating secession to accepting – or promoting – regionalism and prevent an internal split, it is critical to assess and trace the links between the group's organizational evolution and the shifts in internal power dynamics that occur as the group adopts new programmatic positions. Whether there is an internal shift in the balance of power becomes 'a function of both the degree of authority assigned by the organizational structure and the influence

obtained through informal bargaining and coalition building' (Berti, 2013, p. 20).

The following analysis of GAM identifies three interaction points: the emergence of competing groups within civil society that creates a new momentum and a potential weakening of the movement's leadership; the weakening of a radical wing within the diaspora community and the creation of new transnational networks, which shift the discourse away from the ethno-nationalist stream; and international brokerage as an arena for direct political engagement through international and domestic diplomacy.

Methodology

GAM – a critical case

GAM is chosen as a critical case to assess and describe the links between organizational change and ideological moderation in secessionist movements. GAM is characterized as a critical case in that it is presumed that if the theoretical propositions made are '... valid for this case, [they are] valid for all (or many) other cases' (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 230). In many aspects, GAM represents an archetypical secessionist movement: it combined guerrilla warfare with experiments in governance and attempts to attract international recognition via its 'Government in Exile' and by engaging in international diplomacy. Despite experiencing periodic defeats on the battlefield that forced it to retreat and remobilize, GAM can be considered relatively stable and institutionalized in that it persisted in its struggle for a prolonged periods and had a stable leadership and organizational structure, in addition to a core of loyal followers, including a sizable diaspora community that provided the movement with significant resources.

At the same time, GAM followed an atypical trajectory of conflict resolution in that the move from 'bullets to ballots' was accompanied by ideological moderation on the secessionism-regionalism spectrum. GAM's successor party, Partai Aceh, can be categorized as an ethno-regionalist party.¹ The 2005 peace agreement, the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), signed by the rebel leadership and the Indonesian government stipulated special autonomy and provisions for local political parties.² Since 2006, the former rebels have dominated politics in the province after winning substantial shares of the vote in three consecutive elections.

While the extant literature on the Aceh peace process offers fruitful explanations regarding the context of the Helsinki peace agreement (Aspinall, 2009b; Kingsbury, 2006), the role of civil society and the pro-democracy movement in forging an inclusive agreement (Törnquist, 2011) and the political dynamic of GAM's transformation (Aspinall, 2009a; Stange, 2010; Sindre 2016a), these studies focus on the external factors or the transformation process itself. The decision by the rebel leadership to accept the terms of the MoU is often explained in terms of offering the rebels a final way out without them 'losing face' after a period of heavy military losses. The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, which caused substantial damage to Aceh, is also perceived to have incentivized the rebel leadership's desire to seek peace and restitution for the Acehnese (Le Billon & Waizenegger, 2007; Sukma, 2006). These perspectives align with conventional conflict resolution theory, which emphasizes the centrality of a ripe moment combined with the strategic interests of the protagonists during an internationally led mediation process (Stedman, 1997; Zartman, 1985). In the wider context,

¹ This article follows De Winter's definition that the core mission of ethno-regionalist parties is to protect, enhance or achieve some form of territorial self-government for their homeland (De Winter, 1998, p. 204).

² Aceh is the only province in Indonesia where local parties can run for elections.

GAM's pursuit of democracy and its emphasis on 'replacing bullets with ballots' is also often argued to be part of a broader strategy to gain access to peace dividends and the economic spoils associated with the influx of international aid following the 2004 tsunami disaster (Aspinall, 2009a; Beardsley & McQuinn, 2009). It has also been suggested that the transition to democracy in Indonesia and the subsequent decentralization reform further legitimized the Indonesian state in Aceh, rendering the claim that self-determination was a necessary step in the process of securing democracy and protecting human rights in the province superfluous (Miller, 2006; Robinson, 1998).

While acknowledging the validity of several of these arguments in describing and explaining the enabling environment for the ending of the conflict in Aceh, this paper draws attention to an additional process, namely, that of its ideological de-radicalization, which is understood here as the ideological and behavioral move from propagating secession (radical) toward autonomy (moderate). This move corresponds to the process in which the rebel leadership replaced a narrowly defined claim to self-determination through secession with the risky prospect of seeking representation in provincial-level politics. As Miller (2012) suggests, the framework for self-government enabled former rebels 'to engage constructively with the Indonesian national process of development rather than opposing it.' What is lacking in the current understanding of the resolution of secessionist conflicts, such as that in Aceh, is a deeper assessment of the internal changes that motivate and enable more compromise-oriented attitudes within the rebel organization.

Empirical material

The empirical arguments presented below draw on primary interviews with key figures within the GAM leadership, several mid-level commanders, civil society activists, members of international NGOs and peace monitors in Aceh during the period 2006–2014. The interviews focused on the organizational structures and strategies and broader ideas around ideology and political transformation. Triangulated with secondary material, the interviews reveal how organizational expansion and debate encouraged learning at critical turning points in the movement's existence.³

Retrospectively analyzing the ideology and convictions of members of armed political groups clearly poses several methodological challenges. The most significant challenge concerns the use of retrospective memory of processual change that also requires cognitive adaptation. The analysis presented here can be challenged by arguing that the key actors simply adapted their narrative to fit real-world events as they occurred. One premise for the analysis is that during the Helsinki peace negotiations and in the decade since, leaders and members of the former GAM who are now largely associated with the Aceh Party have adapted a regionalist political platform and program. Although secessionist discourse reoccurs among some former rebel group members, it is no longer the primary driving force within the party or among ex-combatants. Hence, the critical mass of individuals who are convinced of a new political direction is sufficiently large. The argument that some individuals may primarily be driven by economic incentives remains relevant. The analysis presented here does not negate the significance of individual leaders' and members' desire for social and economic advancement as important to

their political participation. While this might be a necessary condition, it is not a sufficient condition for seeking accommodation. For one, leaders who were living in exile chose to remain loyal to the GAM despite opportunities for alternative life choices. For local commanders, access to illicit economies has not been sufficient to ensure demobilization or a shift away from the movement. Indeed, the interviews conducted in the immediate post-conflict period in 2006 revealed anxiety among the commanders that they would lose relevance or that the elections would be hijacked.

Case analysis

Ideology of secession and state visions

The separatist conflict in Aceh was one of the most divisive conflicts in Indonesia's recent history. Debates over regional identity, territorial integrity and autonomy have figured prominently in the formation of the modern Indonesian state. Prior to the colonial period, Aceh had been one of the few territories in what was to become Indonesia that was internationally recognized as a sovereign territory that could defend its borders militarily (Reid, 1969). When Indonesia was constructed as a federal republic in 1949, Aceh's political elites expected a political framework that would allow for a considerable amount of regional autonomy on the part of the constituent states of the newly founded republic. However, faced with increased tensions between an emerging nationalist elite, who viewed centralization of power in the capital Jakarta to be necessary for the country's nation-building project, Indonesia was unilaterally reconstituted as a unitary state in 1950. Subsequently, Aceh lost its status as a semi-autonomous territory and became integrated into the province of Northern Sumatra (Reid, 1969).

Political mobilization in the 1950s and 1960s, prior to the formal establishment of GAM as a secessionist 'liberation movement' in 1976, was focused on reaffirming Aceh's autonomy in relation to Jakarta and the central state. Then-governor Tuengku Daud Beureuh first made a declaration by the Federated State of Aceh in 1953 — after joining the nationwide *Darul Islam Indonesia* rebellion (Kell, 1995). The *Darul Islam* rebellion was not initially a separatist movement but instead aimed to transform the entire state structure in the direction of an Islamic state. In disagreeing with these nationwide aims of the movement, Beureuh's group joined with another emerging rebellion, the Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia Overall Struggle. While none of these movements gained any momentum, the central state sought accommodation through the granting of nominal special autonomy status to Aceh in 1959, which was formally accepted by the Acehnese parties in 1963. Nevertheless, with the onset of the New Order regime, which was characterized by rapid centralization of government structures and centralization of power within the military, any attempt to appease local economic interests was abandoned altogether (Kell, 1995).

Against this backdrop of the manifestation of separatist demands and the political program upon which it was founded, GAM mobilized sufficient organizational resources to challenge the Indonesian state for close to three decades. The GAM founders were primarily driven by a notion of ethnic nationalism as the basis for their claim to statehood.

Immediately after its inception, military counterinsurgency campaigns forced the rebel leadership to flee. Having been granted political asylum, they established a base in Sweden and formed the 'Aceh government', dividing ministerial posts among them. During the 1980s, a heavy crackdown on the separatist movement inside Aceh further strengthened the anti-state opposition and led to rapid growth in the number of members and supporters of the

³ Most of the interviews were carried out in NGO offices, at the headquarters of the Aceh Transitional Committee (KPA), at the Partai Aceh head office (in 2008), at rallies and in hotel lobbies and coffee shops in Banda Aceh.

GAM. Aceh's self-determination struggle thus took place on two fronts: domestically and transnationally. One can crudely describe the domestic sector of the movement as an operative guerrilla structure based around a military wing, while the transnational sector, which was headed by the Government in Exile, supported by a growing Acehnese diaspora.

Anchored in ethno-nationalist demands, the programmatic goal was to reinstate Aceh as a separate state based on the Acehnese *state code* under the rule of the Sultan. The original notion of self-determination was framed in backward-looking terms: there is 'no historical, political, cultural, economic or geographic relationship' with the Javanese state construct of Indonesia. Independence was thus depicted as an act of restoring Aceh's sovereignty. The GAM insurgency also benefited from a narrative of historical opposition to foreign occupiers with lineage from the colonial period. Although the leaders did not offer Islam a prominent place in its political program or discourse, the continued use of Islamic symbols in its flag and emblems and references to Aceh's special historical relationship with the Islamic world formed part of the ethno-national discourse. The emphasis on Islam further strengthened the transnational links of the movement they received training and financial support from Gadhafi's Libya network in the 1980s.⁴

Wartime organizational structure: exile and homeland

While running a rebel organization from a position of exile posed challenges in terms of organizational logistics and cohesion of the on-the ground guerrilla operations, the distance to the homeland also served to strengthen the imagery of GAM, particularly its strength, capacity and relentless work to secure Aceh's future. From their base in an apartment in a Stockholm suburb, Tiro and his 'ministers,' Malik Mahmud, Zaini Abdullah and Bachtiar Abdullah, communicated with their commanders and supporters in Aceh while they kept track of organized Acehnese communities around the world. They established and supported the running of 'government diplomatic offices' in the United States, Malaysia and Australia and organized an elaborate fundraising system in the diaspora communities in these countries.⁵ In the late 1980s, when hundreds of fighters were returning from training in Libya to fight in Aceh, they established a National Assembly (*Majelis Nasional*) in Malaysia. The National Assembly became GAM's command centre in Malaysia, from which they raised funds and organized supplies to be sent to Aceh. The Assembly provided a much-needed organizational link between the exiled leadership and the 'homeland' and was an arena for the recruitment and politicization of combatants. Importantly, the focus was on the war effort at home. Although the significance of the Libya training for the military capacity of GAM should not be overestimated, the fact that GAM was part of a global network of fighters provided internal legitimacy and strengthened the imagery of the leadership as persistent, capable and strong.

The di Tiro name carried strong symbolism of a Free Aceh, a vision that was enabled by the distance between the Aceh homeland and the world outside. Self-assigned as the *Wali Nanggro*, until 1997, he is said to have been in charge of all of GAM's diplomatic activities and public relations and acted as the 'strategic supreme command.' Some authors have argued that 'it was the movement's leaders abroad that kept the conflict in Aceh going for more than two decades' (Missbach, 2013, p. 1057). Despite its

attempts to lobby international organizations and integrate itself into the global network of indigenous and oppressed peoples, the Aceh Government was not very successful at attracting international support, and they were kept at a distance by most major international players and NGOs (Aspinall, 2007; Missbach, 2013). Di Tiro was especially bitter about what he viewed as 'indifference of the UN and the major powers toward the Acehnese cause' (Aspinall, 2002, p. 15). The Aceh Government's greatest accomplishment was propagating within GAM and to domestic audiences a narrative about their continuous efforts as representatives of the Acehnese, working heedlessly to gain international recognition and to inform the world about the plight of the Acehnese people.

In the words of a former commander, 'independence was always imminent, tomorrow or the day after; it was just around the corner.' Missbach (2013) notes that even though GAM did not meet their expectations, people did not abandon hope. The perpetuation of these unrealistic hopes for support from the outside contributed to upholding the level of popular support and trust in GAM. In an interview in 1999, Zaini Abdullah said that 'the outcome [of lobbying] is quite good. Their support is already coming, including from Britain, Norway and other European countries. We are very confident in time our struggle will be granted success.'⁶ Of course, at this particular time, there had been more interest in Aceh from donor countries, especially Norway, Switzerland and Japan, but the focus was on averting a humanitarian crisis and mediating a peace settlement, with little interest in GAM's pledge of independence.⁷ The organizational structure had become more complex, with resources allocated to developing transnational networks for fundraising via the National Council, a tight-knit diaspora community, and more coherent attempts at diplomacy while upholding the pressure at home. The ethno-nationalist ideology that the Aceh Government propagated throughout the diaspora and at home served 'to bridge the gap between the real world of disappointment and defeats and the political longing that they had helped to create' (Missbach, 2013, p. 1080).

New parameters for political mobilization: organizational growth and conflict

The collapse of the New Order regime in 1998 triggered unprecedented opportunity for political mobilization and rebel group organizational expansion within Aceh. While others have analyzed the political climate of conflict escalation and rebel governance (Barter, 2015; Schultze, 2003), the purpose here is to specify the nodes of contact that enable intra-organizational debate to explain ideological moderation on the issue of secession. Thus, important for the argument here is the emphasis on how organizational expansion triggered not only intra-organizational debate and criticism but also the potential alienation of the leadership.

In the immediate period following the end of the New Order, the GAM leadership pursued the military strategy that it was most familiar with, namely, recruitment and training of new fighters and commanders, territorial expansion and low-intensity warfare, and it paid little attention to developing its political apparatus. In addition, this is also the period when the GAM leadership was most effective at implementing a tax collection apparatus. In terms of organizational evolution, this expansion was important for establishing new networks and solidifying GAM's presence beyond its core strongholds (Author ref withheld for peer review). However,

⁴ Approximately 600 GAM members received guerrilla training in Libya from 1976 to 1986.

⁵ Author interview with Bachtiar Abdullah, Banda Aceh, June 6, 2008.

⁶ Zaini Abdullah, interview with DeTAK, July 24, 1999, cited in Missbach (2013, 1071).

⁷ Author interviews with officials from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the International Red Cross, Oslo and Geneva, 2010 and 2014, respectively.

military expansion also meant that GAM's presence was more acutely felt across the province, and its activities became subject to unprecedented scrutiny and attention. While the international community had paid little attention to GAM in earlier periods, the political instability across Indonesia alongside reports of a mounting humanitarian crisis inside Aceh triggered donors to become more attentive to the Aceh problem. The peace talks that followed, headed by an international NGO and supported by donors, were not centered on outlining a solution to the conflict but rather on forging collaborations between GAM and the Indonesian government on how to distribute humanitarian aid (Barakat, Connolly, & Large, 2002; Sindre, 2014).

In terms of political discourse and specifically their position on secession, the talks highlighted GAM's staunch position on independence. To GAM, the peace talks represented a long sought-after opportunity to woo the international community into supporting their independence claim, anchored in their perception of international law. The talks also represented a space to assert its role as the main legitimate representative of the Acehnese. From 1999 to 2004, however, there was a remarkable shift in this discourse.

Organizational change, diversification and internal debate

Opposition groups emerged and grew stronger. For a brief but determinant period from 1998 to 2000, an urban-based activist community of students became the primus motor for the anti-state mobilization, and not the GAM commanders or their leaders. There was great variety in the types of opposition at this time. Many of the opposition groups did not support GAM; in fact, some were as critical of GAM as they had been of the Indonesian state. Others became vocal in their support for self-determination but called for a shift in the modus operandi and the abandonment of the armed movement in favor of non-violent opposition. The formation of SIRA (the Information Centre for a Referendum on Aceh) in 1999, which was a coalition of civil society groups, strengthened the organizational impetus of the activists to increase the pressure on the Indonesian government.

An initial feature of the activist opposition movement was that it grew out of Indonesian networks that identified as Indonesian. Their political message was simple and compelling. They emphasized inclusion, justice, human rights, development and democracy while also asserting their autonomy from GAM, whose program and ideas they viewed as backward-looking and distinctly un-modern (Aspinall, 2009b, p. 129). An independence referendum, they posited, was consistent with modern democratic principles and would not automatically propel GAM into power. Moreover, the SIRA leaders proved to be good organizers, administrators and communicators, as they attracted unprecedented popular support from across the province, set up offices, organized debate forums, printed leaflets and disseminated information over the radio. For several months, it was the blue and white SIRA flag rather than GAM's red and white that was the most visible sign of anti-state mobilization. The largest event organized by SIRA was a 'referendum march' in Banda Aceh on November 8, 1999, which attracted about one million people.

In the meantime, GAM recruited separately and largely undercover. The intensification of the political discourse and the speed with which it moved into the popular domain took the leaders by surprise, and they found themselves on the sideline. From within GAM, some argued that support for a referendum would award the Indonesian government legitimacy as the deciding authority. GAM's leadership feared that a referendum, in the event of it leading to secession, would diminish their political relevance. One argued that '[t]he idea of a referendum was in itself illegitimate. The power to "award" the people that choice was not theirs [the Indonesian

government] to make.⁸ In addition, there was a growing distance between the domestic front of commanders and the exiled leadership that was aligned with the National Council, which now played a central role in recruiting new fighters and strategizing for the military takeover of the district councils and villages.

The initial collaborative activities between GAM and SIRA activists grew out of individual ties between a select few GAM commanders and individual student activists.⁹ The establishment of SIRA offices across the province was welcomed by several of the GAM commanders, who viewed SIRA as a model for strengthening the influence of GAM as a political player. In several places, the activists and NGOs developed close ties with other community leaders, such as *ulama* (religious leaders) and village heads, who opened the mosques for political meetings and gatherings.¹⁰ Through these local links, activists provided organizational and discursive skills, and they boldly raised new concerns and debated Aceh's future prospects. An alliance gradually emerged from these collaborative activities, and eventually, segments of the activist community were incorporated into the rebel organization. For some activists, the meetings shifted their perspective. As one of the activists who joined GAM said, 'I had been very critical of the guerrillas before, but that was before I knew them. When we met face-to-face, I started to value their sacrifice and I also saw the good that they did in their communities. They were indeed true heroes.'¹¹ Aspinall (2009b) details how some groups underwent a cultural revival during this period by starting to speak Acehnese and propagating Acehnese history and ideas.

Activists fulfilled important tasks within the rebel movement as they helped to establish GAM's administrative apparatus. In effect, they took on the function of a rebel civilian wing. They acted as administrators and publicists (Barter, 2015, pp. 235–6), thus providing the GAM apparatus with a set of skills. Crucially, the activists were focused on improving the rebel group's governance apparatus, which included seeking to establish a more systematic, predictable and regular system for tax collection and issuing certificates and diplomas (Aspinall, 2009b, p. 159).¹² They also drew on their NGO experience in overseeing the distribution of aid from international NGOs. However, beyond this specific aspect of governance, the most important function of the civilian wing – and one that has had a lasting impact on the movement in its transition to peace – was to develop a more professional organization that started to resemble a political movement and party.

This professionalization and organizational restructuring included establishing offices across Aceh that nurtured close contact with communities to develop GAM's popular profile, attract new members and supporters and engage in political debate. The civilian wing acted as mediators between rebel commanders and communities and between international NGOs and the rebel commanders. The civilian GAM also gained more traction during the initial peace talks headed by the Swiss-based NGO the Henry Dunant Centre (HDC). These talks were primarily focused on the two sides of the conflict reaching agreement to collaborate in the distribution of aid (Barakat, Lume, & Salvetti, 2000; Sindre, 2014). International NGOs that were responsible for the distribution of humanitarian aid were as critical of GAM as they were of the Indonesian military.¹³ Reports of aid being diverted and the levying

⁸ Author interview, Drs. Adnan Beuransah, Banda Aceh June 4, 2008.

⁹ Author interview, Shadhia Marhaban, March 1, 2007, Banda Aceh.

¹⁰ Author interviews with pro-democracy activists, August 2006, Banda Aceh.

¹¹ Author interview, Shadhia Marhaban, March 5, 2007, Banda Aceh.

¹² Author interview, Muchsal Mina, February 9, 2007, Banda Aceh.

¹³ Author interview, representative from the International Red Cross/Red Crescent, September 2, 2008.

of road fees by rebel commanders in collusion with the military contributed to the image of GAM commanders in the field as running 'amok' (Sindre, 2014). The position of the civilian wing of GAM became further strengthened as they became the primary modes of contact between international NGOs and GAM inside Aceh. In that regard, as skilled negotiators, the activists provided GAM with a new 'diplomatic vocabulary' (Barter, 2015, p. 240). They also pushed for more openness by establishing feedback mechanisms and forums for channeling complaints by Acehnese living under rebel control.¹⁴

In contrast to the Majelis in Malaysia, the aim of GAM's civilian wing was not to facilitate GAM's military struggle, and its diplomacy was not focused on persuading the international community of Aceh's de jure right to self-determination. Rather, it was to develop a political organization that could take on the responsibility of representing the Acehnese and pushing for political reform. From their perspective, such reform could be envisioned to take place within a new state or, alternatively, within a new political framework. Many of the activists who joined the GAM ranks clearly had become convinced that self-determination was the only viable option through which they could shift the political discourse, but their premise and vision for a new state differed significantly from that projected by the National Council and in di Tiro's texts. Hence, although the activists were also 'awakened' and 'inspired' by the history of Aceh's resistance (Aspinall, 2009a), their inclusion triggered renewed emphasis on a political program and debates about the competing visions of Aceh's future. Because the alliance developed domestically and was rooted in the GAM's local network structure, it excluded the central leadership. Hence, collusion led to an internal shift in the balance of power away from the central leadership and toward the network of local commanders. Combined with the changing external political environment, this structure led to the strengthening of a new faction and the weakening of the role of the central leadership. In this context, intra-organizational conflict was not a simple dichotomy of radical versus moderate. Instead, it was the formation of a new faction on the basis of opportunities for alliance building and collusion of interests that cut across the old hierarchical cleavages that had worked as part of the survival strategy for the armed movement. Factionalism thus went deeper and to the core of the movement's purpose, challenging the fundamental visions that its members had for Aceh.

In addition to transforming the rebel organization inside Aceh, the strengthening of GAM's civilian wing also impacted the transnational dimension of the movement. A first formal outcome that reflected the ongoing internal debate over the visions of the 'Aceh state' came in the form of a new 'constitution,' which is often referred to as the 'Stavanger Declaration,' made in Norway in 2002. At the meeting were the leadership, members of the diaspora, and key figures within the civilian wing who had been forced to flee and seek refuge abroad after renewed counter-insurgency campaigns. The manifesto played down the ethno-nationalist language and explicitly stated that the prospective Government of the State of Aceh would be based on democratic principles. This aspect was the most critical element in the 2005 peace negotiations (Kingsbury, 2007, p. 173). Bahctiar Abdullah said that 'the Stavanger meeting was important because it united the different groups and fronts within the movement ... Many had been skeptical of the civil society approach, and now they got a better understanding of what they were trying to achieve. The meeting served to unify the movement and streamline the political message.'¹⁵ Justification

was also offered retrospectively. Nur Djuli, who later became a key figure in the Helsinki process, advocated for a 'modernization' of the 'state code' rather than replacing it with something completely new.¹⁶ 'We did not abandon our vision; we have adapted it so that others can understand it.'¹⁷ The original state code was largely influenced by traditional Acehnese models of authority, which entailed a 'state code' based on divisions of power between a king (*Wali Nanggroe*), a religious (Islamic) authority (*Imam Syah Kuala*), a cultural authority (*Princess Putroe Phan*), and the government administration (*Bentara*). Within this structure, 'no individual (or single group) dominated the political process.'¹⁸ The 'state code' was thus described as a 'power-sharing' framework that, while not based on a model of electoral democracy, was 'much more "democratic" than the traditional Javanese hierarchical authority structures.'¹⁹ Based on this framework, the movement also espoused an ideal about the traditional power-sharing mechanisms between a village chief, the imam and the *bentara* and the 're-introduction' of procedures of consultation at the village level.²⁰ Others from among the leadership proposed 'making the "state code" more modern' by suggesting that GAM should transform into a 'social democratic party.'²¹

The emphasis on regionalism was thus not formally endorsed or even propagated prior to the Helsinki agreement, but the internal shifts in the balance of power and the de-emphasis on ethno-nationalist discourse to the advantage of democracy and human rights made such a shift tenable. This shift provided a new basis upon which peace talks could be facilitated. To that end, the mature moment did not come from battle fatigue but rather from the manifestation of GAM into a new type of political movement. From this perspective, it was feasible for the international negotiators to frame the peace talks around the core conflict issues and focus the negotiations on questions of regional autonomy, with the aim to reach a compromise.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper set out to identify mechanisms for ideological moderation on the issue of secession within armed secessionist movements. A shift from demanding secession towards demanding autonomy should be understood as a process of ideological de-radicalization in the core ideology of ethno-nationalist groups and is, as is argued, a prerequisite for negotiated settlements that maintains the existing state. It is also reasonable to assume that ideological de-radicalization on the issue of secession increases the chances for long-term political stability as secessionist wars end. The theoretical argument developed in the conceptual framework has been illustrated through an analysis of how organizational expansion led to a shift in ideological discourse within the Free Aceh Movement (GAM).

First, the argument presented here highlights that the move from demanding a new state to adopting a regionalist stance, is largely a function of the internal shifts in the movement's dominant

¹⁶ Author interview, Nur Djuli, Banda Aceh, February 8, 2007. Nur Djuli's perspective is also elaborated on in Kingsbury (2007).

¹⁷ Author interview, Bachtiar Abdullah, June 8; Zaini Abdullah, June 6, 2008.

¹⁸ Kingsbury (2007, 17) citing Malik Machmod, the 'Prime Minister': *Adat bak Po Teumeureuhom, Hukum bak Syah Kuala, Kanun bak Putroe Phan, Reusam bak Bentara* (Power rests with the king, Law with the Great Imam of Syah Kuala, Tradition with the Princess of Pahang and Regulation with the Bentara). Also discussed in author interviews with GAM leaders Zaini Abdullah, Bachtiar Abdullah, Nur Djuli and Muzakir Manaf Mualem in February 2007 and June 2008.

¹⁹ Author interview, Zaini Abdullah, Banda Aceh, June 6, 2008, Banda Aceh.

²⁰ Author interview, Nur Djuli, March 2006. See also Kingsbury (2007) for details.

²¹ Author interview, Bachtiar Abdullah, June 1, 2008, Banda Aceh.

¹⁴ Author interview, Munawarliza Zein, Banda Aceh, August 5, 2006.

¹⁵ Author interview, Bachtiar Abdullah, June 8, 2008, Banda Aceh.

faction triggered by two mechanisms, organizational diversification and internal debate. For the GAM case, the incorporation of civil society activists into the rebel organization led to the strengthening of the civilian wing, increased internal debate over state visions and a weakened rebel leadership. The outcome was internal debate and emphasis on developing a new political program, which transcended the movements' domestic and transnational organizational structure. The strengthening of ties between activists and certain individuals among the leadership ahead of the Helsinki negotiations encouraged a strategic shift among the leadership. On the one hand, this shift conforms to the theoretical expectation that the emergence of a pluralistic sphere that subjects the movement to public scrutiny could potentially bring about significant changes. On the other hand, when taking into account the transnational character of secessionist liberation movements, the GAM case illustrates that although moderates will benefit from international activism to attract international attention, as the internal focus shifts from seeking international recognition for an independent state towards regionalism, domestic political dynamics and intra-organizational changes take precedence.

Second, the study has shown that the party literature, and especially the literature on organizational change and moderation, sheds new light on the internal politics of armed radical movements. GAM conforms to several theoretical expectations from the party literature, such as Harmel and Janda's (1994, 281) argument that factionalism may provide an internal impetus for movements to change. As has also been highlighted by Berti (2013) and Schwedler (2011), ideological moderation does not necessarily depict a linear process in that requires a unified organizational transition. Rather, it is a function of the emergence of a moderate wing that supplants the dominant faction. In this setting, potential spoilers may either be weakened and sidelined, or incorporated into the movement. Arguably, the latter will increase chances of a stable transition from armed to non-armed movement, while the former may only pose a spoiler problem if they regain strength at a later point.

This line of reasoning also emphasizes the role of the leadership and moderates in successfully convincing the broader rebel organization of the benefits of a compromise solution. In Aceh, the discursive reframing of autonomy as 'self-government' in place of the more common term 'special autonomy' and the recasting of GAM as 'liberators' and 'defenders of peace' proved an important strategy to ensure continued commitment by ideological hardliners, especially during the volatile period of negotiations. The mechanisms identified in this study, organizational diversification, as a specific form of fragmentation, and internal debate help explain the conditions under which moderates take the lead within radical movements in questions over war-to-peace transitions and post-war political trajectories.

Third, while the literature on party change and rebel group transformation alike have suggested that moderation should primarily be understood as the endorsement of democratic principles, this study has suggested that ideological moderation on the issue of secession is equally important. When both states and former armed groups accept the premise of a multi-ethnic and multi-regional state, focus can shift towards de facto governance and peace-building. The change in ideological positions is closely tied to the organizational impetus of the movements reflecting a transition identifying as 'state-challengers' or 'governments in waiting' to conform the institutional framework of competitive pluralism and party politics within the state.

With attention to identifying mechanisms that explain changes in ideology, these insights can potentially help explain moderation – or lack thereof – in other armed secessionist movements as well. For instance, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the

Philippines has moderated on the issue of secession and signed the *Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro*, which stipulates autonomy. Moderation in the anti-government position of MILF leaders can be illustrated by the increase in collaborative activities between rebel commanders and the government prior to the signing of the agreement, including contributing to shaping government development policies (Walch, 2014, pp. 47–8). An issue to be further explored is the viability of the argument that such collaboration took place in a context of the strengthening of the political wing and whether this corresponds to an internal shift in discourse.

The failure of the peace negotiations between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government to reach a compromise can be partially understood in light of the argument developed in this paper. The LTTE underwent a process of organizational diversification similar to that of GAM: They formed a political wing, established administrative offices and developed alliances with Tamil parties (Sindre, 2014). Yet, the militant wing remained in control over political issues and any alliance between activists in the diaspora and LTTE moderates, never gained enough leverage to shift the discourse away from the narrowly defined ethno-nationalist agenda. While there are several other reasons why the conflict between the LTTE and Sri Lanka military re-escalated after 2006, lack of internal debate and continued exclusion of alternative voices may shed some light on the question of why the LTTE proved less amenable to compromise on the issue of secession. Future research on the links between rebel governance, rebel fragmentation/cohesion and conflict resolution should therefore focus on the relative significance of the military wing remaining in control over political issues despite the presence of an apparently prominent political wing.

Future research can build upon the present conclusions and examine how they hold across cases. At the policy level, this article has provided evidence in support of including civil society in peace talks, although it also cautions against assuming that civil society has sufficient leverage to directly impact change. A better understanding of how power is distributed within these movements, how it evolves and the relationship between central leadership and on-the-ground networks would help in determining where to put pressure. Similarly, the article has drawn attention to ideology as a central feature for understanding the political adaptation and change by armed political groups in the context of war-to-peace transitions.

Conflicts of interest

None

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