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Rebel Governance as Self-Legitimation: The FARC's Justifications of Governance

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How has the FARC insurgency sought to legitimise itself? A central endeavour of armed actors in civil war is the legitimisation of their authority through engaging with civilian communities, as rebel groups are dependent on popular support to sustain themselves. However, less has been said about rebel's internal self-legitimation: rebel groups need to justify their authoritative role and their position of power not only to others but also to themselves to help them identify as rulers. Moreover, any government seeking to make peace with rebel groups will need to take into account these self-legitimation narratives to find workable and sustainable solutions. A rebel group's discourses and practices of governance, I argue, provides a crucial lens to investigate such processes of self-legitimation. This paper discusses the self-legitimation of the Colombian rebel group FARC to provide an empirical snapshot of how the group embedded moral meaning into their governance relations. Drawing on several months of fieldwork in central Colombia where I interviewed ex-combatants about their relations with civilians during the conflict, I argue that the FARC developed a relatively stable legitimisation pattern, a set of discourses and practices, that allowed the rebel group to justify themselves as rulers by emphasising their peasant origin, service provision and violence as revolutionary self-defence.

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Primary author: MINATTI, Wolfgang (European University Institute)

Presenter: MINATTI, Wolfgang (European University Institute)

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