

Mafias and governments

Eric Blair

6 January 2007

Mafias are governments. They provide social services and protection from external threats, and in order to do that and maintain hegemony, they collect taxes and threaten physical harm upon those who don't comply with the plan.

That describes the traditional mafias, both in the Godfather style of old and the more modern Crips & Bloods style. It also describes the kings and feudal lords from centuries ago, who each had their own little army to protect against the neighbor's little army. It describes both Hezbollah—the organization that attacked Israel and then organized the reconstruction effort after the completely inevitable bombing—and the recognized government of Lebanon. For that matter, it even describes the government of the U.S.A., France, China, or any other government represented at the U.N.

[Sorry, no citations today; this is just a set of interesting ways to think about things. Feel free to contribute citations. Also, I'll use *government* and *mafia* interchangeably herein.]

The violence thing I'll talk about how microgovernments provide social services next time; today I'll focus on the negative side: microgovernments tend to be orders of magnitude more violent than the larger governments. The mafias spend a lot of time flexing muscle, and for easy-to-understand reasons.

You *know* you're going to lose any fight against the U.S. government (though the U.S. Court of Claims rules for the claimant as often as for the Federal Govt), so you don't try. Forget what you saw in the movies: there is no way that you are going to overthrow the U.S. government or otherwise force your way into power, so you don't try. That means that although the government has the ability to use force against you, it never really has to. Forget what you saw in the movies: the odds are about nil that the Feds are going to show up at your door one day and cart you off.

The small mafia is a whole 'nother story. With limited legitimacy and others who want to claim that they are the ones who should be controlling the taxes/protection money, it is very conceivable that others could take over, so the microgovernment needs to show that it is in control. History has shown that this often means killing people. Hamas members kill Fatah members, and Fatah members kill Hamas members.

Maintaining legitimacy: a case study In days of old, the Catholic church (the reader will recall that the word *catholic* means *universal*) was a government.

It had military force, which it used during the Crusades and against subjects who disobeyed. It was Church members who kept Galileo under house arrest and tortured people during the Spanish Inquisition. In the regions it controlled, it had about 100% membership, just as the U.S. Government collects taxes from all relevant parties (the only difference being that the Church had a 10% flat income tax, while the U.S. has a progressive tax rate).

Modern churches are not governments (well, outside of Vatican City.) They exert social pressure and make an effort to get government to use its coercive force to advance church goals, but they have shifted to maintaining their power exclusively by trying to be nice. It'd be great if that were enough, but we've never seen a non-militarized church as the sole government in a territory (counterexamples, anyone?). Thanks to the tourists, Vatican city has among the highest crime rates of any country¹. Membership rates are pretty far down: there are millions of people throughout what used to be the Catholic territories that are no longer affiliated with any church at all.

From which we learn that virtuous behavior and a divine endorsement are not enough to keep people subscribed to the team. For any modern government, it is difficult to ask the counterfactual question of whether people would support the government if there were no threat of force at all. Evidently, most wouldn't.

The model and the moral For those who need a model, observe the game between the government in power and the other (either subjects or the neighboring power). First, notice the fixed value r , It indicates the perception of strength, and will factor in to how effectively people perceive the government's ability to maintain power. For the U.S.A., $r \rightarrow \infty$, because nobody expects it to get dislodged any time soon; for the streetcorner pusher, r is low because competitors could move in relatively easily.

Given this, the government chooses its display of military might, p . I assume that if there is no revolt, the payoff is $-10p$, meaning that the government prefers to keep p as low as possible. That is, they use violence only as a tool to maintain power, and not because they enjoy violence or the display of phallic imagery for its own sake.

After the government selects p , the other decides whether to revolt/invade or to maintain peace. If it does revolt, then it expects to succeed with probability $1 - pr$, and to fail with probability pr . You can see the payoff to failure is much larger than the payoff to success, since failure usually means the revolutionaries get killed. That said, the opposition has an easy question: is the payoff to revolt greater than zero? You can easily verify that in equilibrium, the other will revolt only when $p < 1/(11r)$.

Working up the game tree, we see that the government will thus set $p = 1/(11r)$

There is an important moral to the game: *a government's use of force is inversely proportional to the perception of strength*. The superstable U.S. government does not have people wandering the streets of Washington with machine

¹<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/2639777.stm>

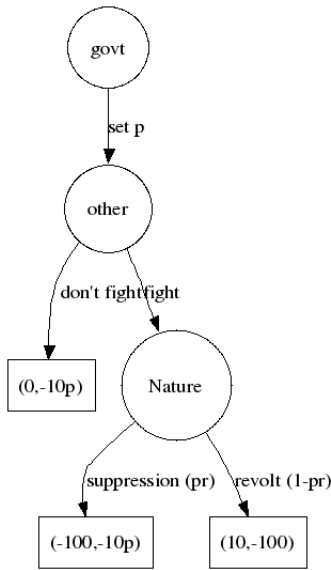


Figure 1: The game between those in power and everybody else.

guns; Hezbollah was on the verge of disappearing and so had to lob some missiles into Israel.

Wouldn't it be nice if the organization being questioned put more effort into social services instead of violence? Yeah, it'd be wonderful, but somehow that never really happens.

For Israel and its environs, the policy implications are easy: we'll only have peace when both sides stop denying the legitimacy of the government(s) on the other side of the border. That means that Hamas causes destruction when it calls for the dissolution of Israel, and Israel causes destruction when it denies the legitimacy of Hamas. Israel gets about half a point here for taking great pains to work out how to put together a Palestinian government whose legitimacy it and others will recognize, but that may or may not put it back in the positive.

So should we never question legitimacy? That would be silly. But we should recognize the consequences of inciting the organization being questioned into proving itself. Go ahead, oppose the two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine issue, either by insisting that Israel eliminate the Palestinian Authority or that the Palestinian Authority eliminate Israel. Just recognize that when you oppose the two-state solution, you are rooting for more misery and killing.

OK, that's enough for one column; more next time.