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The Armalite and the Ballot Box: Dilemmas of Strategy and Ideology in the Provisional Ira

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Abstract

For revolutionary movements, the twin tasks of external legitimation and grass roots mobilization often conflict with the maintenance of an exclusive

organization with tight discipline, restricted membership, and doctrinal purity. With its “armalite-ballot box” strategy, the contemporary Provisional Irish Republican Army is attempting to circumvent these conflicts and reconcile political action with the armed struggle for national liberation. In this paper, I examine the contexts and conditions surrounding the emergence of this strategy and discuss three factors—structural incongruence, ideological conflict, and the problem of legitimation—that limit its effectiveness, I argue that the strain generated by the shift toward greater inclusiveness will result in either the schisms which have characterized gun and ballot dualism in the past or in a far-reaching organizational transformation.

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