As rebel organizations are associated with violence and war, the term “rebel use of nonviolent action” seems paradoxical at first glance. Yet, some rebel organizations — after pursuing their aims through militant means unsuccessfully — do start to use mass-based nonviolent action, mobilizing and organizing the population to participate in large-scale mass protests, demonstrations, or boycotts, sometimes to great effect. I conceptualize nonviolent action as a rebel strategy and explore the implications for key assumptions in the conflict literature, especially about who should be considered a conflict actor and what contentious action might look like. I will then explore nonviolent action as a contentious conflict strategy with unique benefits and challenges. Building on this, I propose a theoretical framework takes an organizational approach to understanding rebel group behavior, which accounts for the role of civilians as potential group actors. I demonstrate this theory using the example of Timor-Leste’s National Council for Maubere Resistance’s violent/non-violent campaign, using qualitative data from 40+ interviews with former resistance leaders, guerrillas, and non-violent activists.

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