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Electoral Violence in Africa

In the time period 2012–2013, over 20 national elections and two constitutional referendums are scheduled in Africa. In several of these elections, violence is anticipated to play a prominent role. There is great urgency to support the establishment of effective and legitimate electoral institutions and electoral frameworks; institute reforms aimed at lowering the stakes of elections; encourage the devolution of powers; improve the socio-economic standing of the populace; and devise strategies to prevent and manage electoral violence.

Introduction

Since the (re-)introduction of multiparty politics in Sub-Saharan Africa in the early 1990s, electoral competition for state power has become the norm and many states there have since held more than three successive elections. Since the Arab Spring in 2011, several North African countries have also held multi-party elections. While the frequency of elections and the advancements in the quality of democracy across the continent has generated a sense of optimism for multiparty politics, this development has been closely accompanied by another, much more worrying trend, of election-related violence. This trend not only poses a threat to peace and security on the continent, but also risks undermining the long-term sustainability of these democratisation processes.

Recent Election Violence Trends

In the past few years, very violent elections have occurred in countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe. A more common scenario has been that of low-intensity violence, widespread coercive intimidation of both candidates and voters including harassment, imprisonment and assassinations; violent riots and clashes between supporters or security elements of the competing political parties; and attacks on local party headquarters and party symbols. Countries that have displayed such characteristics during elections include Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Equatorial Guinea, Gambia, Guinea, Madagascar, Sierra Leone, Senegal and Uganda. The coup d'états staged during and prior to the elections in both Guinea Bissau and Mali in April 2012 are other examples of election-related incidents.

However, there are great differences across the 54 African countries. Some have seen little or no incidents of election-related violence, whereas others have a repeated history of violent electoral contests. There are also significant variations between different elections within the same country, with some turning violent and some not.

Causes and Consequences of Electoral Violence

Election violence is regarded as a sub-category of political violence that is primarily distinguished by its timing and motive. It is a coercive and deliberate strategy used by political actors – incumbents as well as opposition parties – to advance their interests or achieve specific political goals in relation to an electoral contest. It may take place in all parts of the electoral cycle: in the run-up to elections, on the day of elections, and in the immediate post-election period. Election-related violence is not limited to physical violence but includes other coercive means, such as the threat of violence, intimidation and harassment.

Causes of Electoral Violence

The causes of electoral violence are multifaceted, and can be divided into two broad categories: first, structural factors related to the underlying power structures prevalent in new and emerging democracies, such as informal patronage systems, poor governance, exclusionary politics, and the socio-economic uncertainties of losing political power in states where almost all power is concentrated at the centre; second, factors related to the electoral process and the electoral contest itself, such as failed or flawed elections, election fraud and weak or manipulated institutions and institutional rules governing the electoral process.

The states in Africa are all, to varying degrees, relatively new democracies. Democratic institutions and procedures, including elections, have been introduced or reinforced, while the underlying structures of power in society and the norms governing the political system have often not yet been transformed. The continent has a long history of one-party and dominant political party states where politics and economics are often conflated. As a result politics is often exclusive, intolerant of opposition and sometimes militarised, not least in post-war states. Furthermore, many of the socio-economic and political benefits of democracy have yet to be fully realised among large parts of the population.

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Under such structural circumstances, the stakes at elections become high and the electoral contest tends to be perceived as a zero-sum game. Winning an election may be a matter of survival for the competing parties, as well as for entire communities within the state. The risk of electoral violence may therefore be higher in situations where there is real political competition between various parties and genuine possibilities to change existing power relations. All elections involve elements of uncertainty, but if the winner takes all, the uncertainties of democracy come at a high price. As a consequence, many politicians resort to illicit electoral strategies and make use of militant youth wings, militias or the state security forces to either win the election or strengthen their post-election bargaining position.

Additionally, competitive elections are by their very nature conflictual processes aimed at mobilising divergent interests in society and stimulating political competition between political actors and groups. In societies where the non-violent norms of mature democracies are not fully developed, there is a risk that the electoral contest will contribute to intensifying and polarising existing socio-economic cleavages and other divisions in society. This is especially so in societies where historically, political or socio-economic inequalities have caused violent conflicts. In such cases elections may mean the return, or a turn, to violence.

In societies where the structural conditions of elections create high incentives for violence, the institutional and administrative arrangements in place for regulating the electoral contest can play a key role in either mitigating or instigating election-related violence. The design of the electoral system, for example one that encourages broad-based and inclusive strategies for mobilising voters across existing cleavages in society, is more likely to alleviate the risk for political polarisation. Conversely, systems that are more exclusive, such as the first-past-the-post and winner-takes-all systems, are more likely to encourage violent behaviour, especially in divided societies. The current trend of establishing post-election power-sharing governments in Africa is a direct consequence of these exclusive systems. While power sharing agreements are sometimes deemed temporarily necessary in order to prevent (more) violence, they may set a dangerous precedent for the continent in the sense that every election, legitimate or not, is violently contested in order to force a power-sharing agreement.

Equally, the electoral administrative system, for example a politically independent electoral commission, has the potential to influence the efficacy, transparency and political integrity of the elections.

Consequences of Electoral Violence

The costs associated with electoral violence are high. Even in situations in which the human death toll remains low, election violence may have a critical impact on the electoral process, the outcome of the elections and their perceived legitimacy. In the long run, it may have a negative effect on the prospects for democratic consolidation and on perceptions among the population of democracy as a political system. Electoral violence may also create a humanitarian crisis and halt or reverse socio-economic development programmes. In extreme situations, it may increase the risk of armed conflict or civil war. Election-violence can also go beyond the societies where it occurs and affect neighbouring states by displacing large border populations, introducing a humanitarian crisis, and increasing the circulation of arms as well as armed violence, which may contribute to instability in already volatile regions.

Elections in Africa 2012–2013

In the first half of 2012, ten elections took place in Africa (see Table 1). Of these elections, those in Senegal were most notably peaceful, despite electoral tension and threats. The elections in Gambia saw very little overt violence, but the opposition (who boycotted the elections), the electorate, civil society and journalists were seriously intimidated by the ruling APRC, who were also accused of manipulating the electoral process and bribing chiefs and village heads. Despite pre-election tensions in Lesotho, the elections were peaceful. Elections were held in two countries emerging from the "Arab Spring", Egypt and Libya, and both were peaceful. Two other elections during this period were pre-empted by successful coup d'états, in Guinea Bissau between the two rounds of the presidential elections and in Mali a month prior to the scheduled elections. As an unintended consequence, Tuareg and Salafist insurgents in the northern parts of Mali, who are demanding cessation and the creation of a new Azawad state, took advantage of the chaos created in the capital and have since extended their geographical reach, and the armed conflict with the government has intensified.

Table 1. Elections conducted in Africa January to August 2012

Date	Country	Type of Election	Outcome
February 26 & June 17	Senegal	Presidential & Parliamentary	Peaceful change of government.
March 18	Guinea-Bissau	Presidential	Coup d'état
March 29	Gambia	Legislative	Violence-free, but opposition was heavily intimidated and boycotted elections.
March 31	Mauritania	National Assembly	Postponed indefinitely.
April 29	Mali	Presidential & Referendum	Coup d'état
May 26	Lesotho	General	Peaceful change of government.
June	Egypt	Presidential	Peaceful elections.
July 07	Libya	Constituent Assembly	Peaceful elections.
July	Democratic Republic Congo	Legislative (Senate)	Postponed indefinitely.
July 15	Congo (Brazzaville)	Legislative	Peaceful elections with small-scale post-elections protests.
August 28	Somalia	Presidential	Peaceful elections – no large-scale mobilisation of voters conducted.
August 31	Angola	National Assembly	Peaceful elections, with minor clashes between party militant youths.

Tables 1 and 2, except for the outcome columns, are build on information from the EISA and IFES election calenders for 2012 and 2013.

Table 2. Elections Calendar for Africa September 2012 to December 2013

Date	Country	Type of Election	Anticipated outcome
Oct/Nov 2012	Zimbabwe	Referendum	Small-scale violence in various parts of the country anticipated leading up to referendum, but could excalate after.
October 2012	Togo	Parliamentary	Tense elections anticipated that could escalate into small-scale violence.
November 17, 2012	Sierra Leone	Presidendtial & Parliamentary	Small-scale violence in various parts of the country anticipated.
November 2012	Burkina Faso	Parliamentary	Peaceful elections anticipated.
December 2012	Ghana	General	Small-scale violence in various parts of the country anticipated.
2012	Guinea	Legislative	Postponement of elections anticipated but election related riots and clashes have occurred.
March 4 2013	Kenya	General	Small-scale violence in various parts of the country anticipated prior to elections (based along ethnic lines). Could escalate into large-scale high intensity for second round of Presidential election.
May 8, 2013	Madagascar	General & Referendum	Tense elections anticipated - postponed since 2011.
March-June 2013	Zimbabwe	Presidential & Parliamentary	Depending on referendum outcome in 2012, violence could escalate into large-scale high intensity.
March (tentative) 2013	Cameroon	Legislative	Peaceful elections anticipated – postponed twice since February 2011.

Upcoming Elections September 2012–December 2013

Table 2 shows the elections scheduled for between September 2012 and December 2013. The tables' brief analysis of the anticipated outcomes of the elections in terms of electoral violence is based on the historical and structural conditions prevailing in each country as well as the specific circumstances surrounding these elections.

Upcoming Elections in Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone and Kenya

The three country cases below are located in three different regions in Africa: South, West, and East. They have all been subjected to electoral violence in the previous elections and illustrate different dynamics, patterns and trends with regard to actors, means and motives for violence.

Zimbabwe

The decade-long stalemate in Zimbabwe risks intensifying as the country draws closer to a possible constitutional referendum in 2012 and the next general elections, scheduled for 2013. The Government of National Unity (GNU), in power since 2009, emerged as a result of the extremely violent election campaign in 2008. However, the GNU has not made much progress on the conflict issues it was set up to address. Instead, the two main parties to the power-sharing deal – ZANU-PF and MDC – find themselves polarised and rife with internal rivalries. They both fear losing power and its attendant socio-economic benefits, and struggle with the security sector's increasing grip on the state. The elections will see the end of the GNU, and the winner-takes-all electoral system will ensure that one party wins an all-out victory while the other loses completely. This raises the stakes of these elections.

The constitutional referendum in 2012 is likely to begin a tense and possibly violent six-month period leading up to the general elections in 2013. Using Zimbabwe's history as a barometer for the forthcoming elections, bribery of individuals and community leaders can be anticipated. Intimidation of the electorate has already begun, with constant reminders of the 2008 elections which saw large-scale violence. This is likely to increase with youth militia deployed in the streets. MDC members are likely to be charged with various forms of corruption and even treason. Attempts to undermine the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission and electoral fraud may occur. There is a risk of an escalation into widespread high-intensity violence.

Sierra Leone

During the second post-war elections in 2007, the country saw widespread yet low-intensity forms of violence ranging from riots, arson and clashes between party supporters and security elements to attacks on both candidates and voters. However, the elections were generally considered a success for the advancement of democracy, as the opposition party APC managed to unseat the incumbent SLPP in a close electoral race. As the country draws closer to the elections in November 2012, many observers fear renewed tensions and violence. The country remains highly polarised between the two main contenders, who reflect the country's regional and ethnic divide, although the tension appears to have subsided somewhat in the past few months.

SLPP made the controversial choice of electing Julius Maada Bio – one of the key front figures of the military junta that came to power in 1992 – as its presidential candidate. However, the SLPP has not managed to muster power and some strongmen have since deserted the party. Simultaneously, many of the former fighters who were organised as informal security task forces in the previous elections have now joined the reviving RUF-P. The former-rebel-group-turned-political party largely appears as a proxy force for the APC, with the capacity to both draw votes from poor, dissatisfied youth and be used as a violent tool by the APC if needed. In early 2012 some skirmishes occurred during by-elections in Freetown, which demonstrated the power of the incumbent APC. There are now indications that the APC advantage is too much for the SLPP to even bother resisting. However, rapid shifts in alliances are common in Sierra Leone's politics. The likelihood of election-related violence is low at the national level but is anticipated in some parts of the interior, where election time is a time when local scores are settled.

Kenya

Kenya will hold its next general elections in March 2013. This will be the first election under the new constitution,

which passed a referendum in 2010. The period following the announcement of the results of the previous elections in 2007 saw one of the worst cases of widespread high-intensity violence that left over a thousand people dead and a large number displaced. The trigger for the violence was the uncertainty surrounding the outcome of the elections, as two of the candidates – incumbent President Kibaki and opposition leader Odinga – both claimed victory. However, there were also a number of more long-term structural causes, which remain largely unaddressed.

Kenya has strong ethnic divisions and weak checks and balances on executive power. The previous election-related violence was carried out specifically along ethnic lines. The recent move by key politicians to split from the two main parties in the GNU in order to form parties along ethnic identity lines is reinforcing this trend. In addition, none of the militias used in the last election have been demobilised, or prosecuted, and their socio-economic status as well as that of potential recruits has not changed for the better, with poverty and youth unemployment remaining high. The International Criminal Court has charged two of the main presidential candidates – Uhuru and Ruto – with crimes against humanity. Thus, there is great incentive for them to be elected and escape prosecution – or at least delay it – which raises the stakes. In view of the long history of electoral violence in Kenya, voter and candidate intimidation is likely to take place. With the intensification of the ethnic divisions through political campaigning, violence between ethnic groups is likely to ensue. The Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission has been subjected to budget cuts, which undermines its ability to run the elections. Furthermore, the police and security forces have not been reformed, and their coercive capacities may be used for political purposes.

The three cases above are only a sample of countries that will face elections in 2012–2013. Other countries may face similar challenges – although the outcomes are likely to vary considerably, ranging from peaceful and non-violent to very violent.

Conclusion

Africa has witnessed significant democratic progress over the past two decades, although there is still great variation between various sub-regions and countries. Conversely, much remains unchanged in regard to the underlying socio-economic structures of society and the nature of politics in many African states. Precisely due to the increasing reliance on elections as a means to distribute and regulate political power in society, the stakes of such elections are often high. The socio-economic realities of losing power in societies where almost all political power and economic resources of the state are placed in the hands of the incumbent, coupled with exclusive electoral systems and weak or biased electoral institutions, risk turning elections into a do-or-die affair. This is intensified in societies divided along ethnic and other socio-economic cleavages.

Reforms to improve the lives of ordinary citizens and provide alternative socio-economic assurance to those in power are required in order to move beyond simply establishing formal "constitutional" democracy.

Recommendations

- Implement conflict-prevention policies and strategies in advance, as opposed to post, ad hoc, reactionary measures;
- Establish systems/institutions to monitor, prevent, mitigate and manage election violence throughout the electoral cycle – pre-, during and post-election;
- Conduct conflict analysis of the local context for a clear understanding of the local dynamics. Electoral violence is not limited to overt and large-scale physical violence, but rather includes other coercive means such as threats of violence, intimidation and harassment. By-elections are particularly vulnerable to violence in countries marked by close political competition;
- Address the underlying structural causes of electoral violence: decentralise the power of the executive office including a separation from the security forces, strengthen the role of parliament and implement broad-based socio-economic development programmes;
- Establish electoral systems and electoral administrative units that encourage broad-based and inclusive strategies for mobilising voters;
- Discourage winner-takes-all and first-past-the-post electoral systems in divided societies;
- Strengthen the governance and independence of electoral institutions – including election commissions – to increase their political integrity, transparency and efficacy.

Suggested Readings

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