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Trends in Electoral Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa

Summary

- Studies indicate that violence in Africa's elections affects between 19 and 25 percent of elections. In many countries where electoral violence is a risk, it tends to recur and may consequently lead to an unfavorable view of democratization.
- The regularity with which electoral violence occurs suggests that underlying grievances or structural characteristics may be tied to the elections and fuel the violence.
- Electoral violence, especially recurrent, seems indicative of more widespread systemic grievances and tensions. Tensions over land rights, employment and ethnic marginalization are three dominant characteristics of recurring electoral violence. These areas intersect and are frequently manipulated by politicians.
- Some recent actions taken by the government and civil society may offer insights into reversing the trends of recurring violence. These actions warrant further analysis in order to improve strategies to reduce violence.

“ Electoral violence, especially recurrent, seems indicative of more widespread systemic grievances and tensions. Tensions over land rights, employment and ethnic marginalization are three dominant characteristics of recurring electoral violence.”

Conflict and tension during elections have been common in Africa's new democracies—coming into existence in the 1990s during the third wave of democracy.¹ In fact, many new democracies, especially those with strong authoritarian legacies or deep ethnic cleavages common in many African countries, find it difficult to manage political opposition.² The manner in which these tensions are managed can make the difference between an election that proceeds peacefully versus one that degenerates into violence.

Luckily, most elections are not intensely violent. Although the media may focus on the horrific violence that followed the elections in Kenya and Zimbabwe, studies indicate that violence in Africa's elections affects between 19 and 25 percent of elections.³ In many countries where electoral violence is a risk, it tends to recur and may consequently lead to an unfavorable view of democratization. In at least one case—Republic of Congo (or, Congo-Brazzaville)—one may argue that the electoral violence laid the foundation for a civil war. Unfortunately, attempts to prevent, understand and address electoral violence are not well developed. In many instances, the perpetrators are not charged, the victims receive little or no redress, and the causes of the violence remain unexamined. This Peace Brief will provide an overview of some characteristics of electoral violence and identify some responses taken by national governments and the international community to address electoral violence.

Recurrent Electoral Violence

Port Gentil and Libreville, Gabon; Northern Ghana; Niger Delta, Nigeria; Lome, Togo; and Kenya have all been scenes of repeated electoral violence. Indeed, the regularity with which electoral violence occurs in many areas suggests that underlying grievances or structural characteristics may be tied to the elections and fuel the violence. Academic research remains underdeveloped in this area, but a few scholars are beginning to focus on grievances over land rights, jobs and ethnic marginalization as contributing to electoral violence. In reality, these tensions intersect and are frequently manipulated by politicians.

Land

The politicization of ill-designed or unfair land tenure laws has served to motivate violence in a number of cases. As Catherine Boone argues, tensions in Côte d'Ivoire over economic crises, nationalism and the unclear rights between indigenous and non-indigenous inhabitants in the country's south and southwest regions were exploited by politicians who fanned the fears of the indigenous. Consequently, the non-indigenous—comprising true foreigners, Muslims, and those with northern sounding names—were often violently expelled from their lands and homes and subjected to harassment. The transformation of this conflict into one of citizenship and identity lies at the root of the violence following the 2000 elections and the attempted coup in 2002 by northern military personnel.⁴

Economic marginalization

In other instances, politicians exploit sentiments of economic discrimination or dominance of one ethnic group by another. In Kenya's Coast province, the 1997 parliamentary elections threatened to unseat the two representatives of the ruling Kenya African National Union party as they faced opposition from non-indigenous voters in the constituency. Concurrently, the Coast's Digo people accused the non-indigenous of taking their jobs, educational opportunities and land. Exploiting these sentiments, politicians armed local groups to threaten the migrants, effectively driving them out. Approximately 130 migrants were killed and 100,000 were displaced. With the resulting displacement, the politicians retained their seats.⁵

Ethnic marginalization

Identity politics represent a third dominant characteristic of recurrent electoral violence. The chieftaincy dispute between the Kusasis and Mamprusis in Ghana's northern region, which predates Ghana's independence, serves as an example. In the past, the National Democratic Congress and its political tradition were seen to side with the Kusasi's claims to chieftaincy and the traditional area, while the Mamprusis were validated by the New Patriotic Party and its political tradition. Thus, violence between the two groups occurs with each political cycle as each tries to undermine the others' political aims by using violence to put their preferred political parties on top. In 2008, the violence and tensions reverberated beyond the northern regions, with conflicts erupting between the Kusasi and Mamprusi migrant communities in Accra.⁶

Undermining Democratization

There are indications that elections with high degrees of conflict or continuous violence may slow the consolidation of democracy. An analysis by Afrobarometer of Africans' view of democracy suggests that poor elections are to blame for dissatisfaction with elections as means to attain

political representation. Indeed, among the eighteen countries surveyed by Afrobarometer, the three countries where elections have been relatively free of violence—Ghana, Botswana, and Namibia—are the most satisfied with elections as a means to engage the government. On the other hand, Zimbabwe, Nigeria and Zambia, where elections have been more violent and controversial, are the least satisfied.⁷

Violence can also undermine the entire election itself. With the presence or threat of violence, voters may opt not to register or decide to stay away from the polls altogether, candidates may withdraw, or politicians may use it as a reason to cancel or postpone the election.⁸ When domestic and international observers judge that an election has been marred by violence, the legitimacy of the result is jeopardized, as is the legitimacy of the elected official. For example, at the start of Nigerian President Umaru Yar'Adua's term, he had to acknowledge the problems in Nigeria's electoral process, and he was forced to submit to a review of his own electoral victory. Many other elected officials also saw their victories reviewed and, in a number of cases, reversed. This hardly serves as an auspicious beginning for an administration.

A Precursor to Civil War

One may argue that the postelection violence in 1993–1994 in the Republic of Congo laid the groundwork for its civil war in 1997. After the result of the May 1993 legislative election, which gave President Pascal Lissouba's party a majority, was disputed by the other two contenders, Denis Sassou-Nguesso and Bernard Kolelas, violence erupted between their militias. The election was re-run in October 1993, and although the opposition picked up a few more seats, Lissouba's party retained its majority. Even though the opposition agreed to participate in the assembly, violent clashes had resumed by November. Between November 1993 and January 1994 as many as 2,000 people were killed.⁹ In 1997, clashes between militia loyal to Sassou-Nguesso and Lissouba broke out as a result of disputes over electoral rules, attempts by Lissouba's supporters to stop the electoral process, and claims of assassination attempts by Sassou-Nguesso, among other issues. From May 1997 until October when Sassou-Nguesso captured the presidential palace, as many as 15,000 people lost their lives.¹⁰ Clashes continued over the next two years, claiming the lives of 20,000 more.¹¹

Management of Electoral Conflict and Violence

Despite Ghana's recurrent electoral violence, actions taken in 2008 by the government and civil society may offer some insights to reversing this history. Three months before the December 2008 general elections, the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) trained and deployed electoral violence observers to 26 constituencies that were considered likely to experience violence. The observers collected data on incidents of violence, perpetrators and victims, and the consequences of the violence. In partnership with the government's National Commission on Civic Education and religious leaders, CDD-Ghana and the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers used this information to develop workshops promoting peace, broadcast radio programs encouraging peaceful elections, and organize educational events to promote peace and non-violence. Preliminary reports suggest that the number of violent incidents decreased after these interventions: 42 incidents of violence were recorded in the first month and 20 incidents in the second month of the project.¹²

It is difficult to assess whether the activities of civil society and the government, in response to the observers' reports, were solely responsible for the decrease in violence, but the effect and impact of their interventions still warrant careful analysis in order to improve strategies for reducing violence. Notwithstanding these efforts, during the tense days between the first and second rounds of the presidential election, a crowd—armed with machetes—gathered at the electoral commission's

office to protest the first round's results and the airwaves were littered with derogatory ethnic slurs.

For countries less successful in preventing electoral violence, commissions have at times been established to inquire into the cause or extent of the violence; it may be treated as a passing phenomenon; or it may be addressed as a criminal matter. Following Kenya's 1992 and 2007 elections, where more than 1,000 people died and several hundred thousand were displaced on each occasion, commissions were established to investigate the violence. These commissions have not resulted in punishing the perpetrators, though many were named. Ethiopia treated the electoral violence following the 2005 parliamentary elections as a criminal matter. Approximately 30,000 suspected opposition supporters were arrested and charged with an assortment of crimes, including subverting the constitution.¹³ Yet other countries have treated incidents of violence as episodic phenomena, leaving them largely unaddressed by the national government. This occurred following the 2000 postelection violence in Côte d'Ivoire.

Employing a more robust response, some countries develop a political agreement between opposition groups and the government in a bid to resolve the underlying causes of violence and maladministration of the election. Kenya, Zimbabwe, Togo, and Zanzibar have each adopted such agreements. While Kenya and Zimbabwe's postelection political agreements (PPAs) have received a great deal of attention and are more robust than those of Togo and Zanzibar, it is still too early to evaluate their effectiveness. However, in light of the attention they have received, important considerations for policymakers are the implications for democratization efforts and the message it sends about the use of violence, when losing political parties are incorporated in a government of national unity in order to keep the peace.

The agreements in Togo and Zanzibar portray two different paths for creating PPAs. Following the killing of approximately 500 to 800 people after the 2005 presidential elections, Togo created a government of national unity and agreed to a comprehensive political accord (CPA).¹⁴ In the CPA, Togo addressed some of the critical impediments to free and fair elections, such as the composition of the electoral commission, the creation and review of the voters' registry, and the role of the security forces. The parties also agreed to the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. These reforms were meant to cover principally the 2007 legislative elections, which by all accounts proceeded smoothly and without violence. The CPA has been unevenly implemented and some of the reforms have been reversed. Indeed, the March 4, 2010 presidential elections have been followed by opposition protests over the transparency of the vote count; they claim to have won the election, but refuse to appeal to the constitutional court, as they do not believe it will adequately resolve the electoral dispute.

Zanzibar began negotiations for the Muafaka Agreements after the 1995 elections produced protests from the opposition Civic United Front (CUF) about the fairness and legitimacy of the polls. The Muafaka Agreements focused on remedying the problems with registration, bias of the electoral commission, and other logistical issues. Muafaka I of 1999 was never implemented, plunging the 2000 elections into a tense atmosphere. The victory of Chama Cha Mampinduzi (CCM) in Zanzibar's legislative elections produced protests by CUF, who also charged CCM with harassment of their supporters. Thirty people were killed in clashes with police.¹⁵ After the violence, CCM and CUF negotiated Muafaka II of 2001. CUF and CCM did not create a GNU, forming instead the Joint Presidential Supervisory Commission. By the time of the 2005 elections, the Muafaka Agreement was largely unimplemented. Although the elections were not violent, the CUF refused to recognize the CCM government until 2009. At present, CCM and CUF are debating when and whether to form a GNU. With the 2010 elections scheduled for October, it remains to be seen if there is sufficient electoral reform and political good will to forestall violence.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief seeks to provide an overview of some characteristics of electoral violence in sub-Saharan Africa and identify responses taken by national governments and the international community to address electoral violence.

Conclusion

Electoral violence, especially the incidents that occur with some regularity, seems indicative of more widespread systematic grievances. Treating electoral violence as a criminal matter or a cyclical phenomenon is not likely to end future elections from being violent. The more robust approach of adopting postelection political agreements in Togo and Zanzibar showed early promise, but the protests following the recently held elections in Togo show a continuing institutional weakness for managing electoral conflict.

Moreover, further research is needed to improve measurement of electoral violence and, correspondingly, the factors that trigger it; the effects of electoral violence on democratization; and effective methods for managing the threat or eruption of electoral violence.

Endnotes

1. Samuel P. Huntington defines the third wave of democracy in "The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century." It captures democratizing countries after 1974 into the early 1990s.
2. Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder. *Turbulent Transitions: Why Emerging Democracies go to War*, in eds. Chester Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall, "Leashing the Dogs of War: Conflict Management in a Divided World"; Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset. *Introduction: What Makes for Democracy?* in eds. Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset, "Politics in Developing Countries: Comparing Experiences with Democracy."
3. Dorina Bekoe counts an election as violent if one person is killed; 25 percent meet this criterion ("Managing Electoral Conflict in Africa," unpublished manuscript, March 2009); Scott Straus and Charles Taylor assigned gradations of violence, with 19 percent representing those elections which feature repression, a violent campaign, and incidents leading to 20 or more deaths in a paper entitled, "Redistricting by Other Means: Democratization and Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1990-2007," for a USIP Workshop on electoral violence in Africa, June 16-17, 2009. In a more general paper on electoral violence, Fischer finds that 24.5 percent of elections resulted in violence (Jeff Fischer. "Electoral Conflict and Violence: A Strategy for Study and Prevention." *IFES White Paper*, 2002-01, February 5, 2002 (electronic version), pp. 17-18.
4. Catherine Boone. "Electoral Populism where Property Rights are Weak: Land Politics in Contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa." *Contemporary Politics*. January 2009, pp. 183-201.
5. Human Rights Watch. "Playing with Fire: Weapons Proliferation, Political Violence, and Human Rights in Kenya." May 2002, pp 2-3; 24.
6. CDD-Ghana and CODEO. "Preventing and Managing Conflict in Election 2008." Final Draft Report, January 2009; Christian Lund. "Bawku is still volatile: Ethno-political Conflict and State Recognition in Northern Ghana." *Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 41 no. 4 (2003).
7. Afrobarometer. "Citizens and the State in Africa: New Results from Afrobarometer, Round 3." *Working Paper* no. 61, May 2006, p 12.
8. Kristine Höglund. "Electoral Violence in Conflict-Ridden Societies: Concepts, Causes, and Consequences." *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 21 (2009), pp. 417-418.
9. U.S. Department of State, Congo Human Rights Practices, 1994; United Nations. "Congo-Brazzaville: Background Brief on Congo-Brazzaville." October 22, 1997. Integrated Regional Information Network for the Great Lakes (<http://www.africaaction.org/docs97/braz9710.htm>).
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11. Polity IV Country Report 2003: Congo (Brazzaville); University of Maryland Center for International Development and Conflict Management.
12. Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) "Conflict Prevention, Management and Peace Promotion in Election 2008: Observers' Report, pp. 26-27;" Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) and Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO), 2nd Stakeholder Confidential Briefing, November 21, 2008, p. 2. See also Franklin Oduro. "Preventing Electoral Violence." USIP Workshop on Electoral Violence in Africa, June 16-17, 2009, Washington, D.C.
13. Lahra Smith. "Political Violence and Democratic Uncertainty in Ethiopia." USIP Special Report, no. 192. August 2007, p. 7.
14. United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). La Mission d'établissement des faits chargée de faire la lumière sur les violences et les allégations de violations des droits de l'homme survenues au Togo avant, pendant et après l'élection présidentielle du 24 avril 2005, 29 August 2005 (<http://www2.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/EVOD-6H3JDK?OpenDocument>).
15. "Constitutionalism and Political Stability in Zanzibar: The Search for a New Vision," A Report of the Fact Finding Mission Organized Under the Auspices of Kituo Cha Katiba, October 2003 (<http://www.kituoachakatiba.co.ug/zanzibap.htm>).



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