

EVIDENCE BRIEFER

SIX APPROACHES TO PREVENTING AND MITIGATING ELECTORAL VIOLENCE: A REVIEW OF EVIDENCE FROM AFRICA



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*Six Approaches to Preventing and Mitigating Electoral Violence:
A Review of Evidence from Africa*

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INTRODUCTION

Fomenting violence close to voting is a strategy that elites routinely, and deliberately, employ to shape political outcomes. Over the past twenty years academics have undertaken a series of cross-national empirical studies to understand the conditions under which electoral violence is likely to occur, but only in the last decade has attention turned to how election violence may be mitigated or prevented.

Recently, the International Republican Institute (IRI) released a toolkit for preventing and mitigating electoral violence by political parties, which are one of the most pervasive architects of such conflict. To develop the toolkit, IRI surveyed available evidence over a two-year period. The research entailed reviewing the evidence on six intervention approaches applicable to the full range of potential perpetrators (including but not limited to political parties): (i) deterrence theory (e.g., domestic and international election observation missions), (ii) informational interventions (e.g., civic and voter education campaigns), (iii) networks and coalitions (e.g., codes of conduct between political parties), (iv) contact hypothesis (e.g., peace messaging and townhall discussions), (v) social norm changing interventions (e.g., inter-party dialogues and multi-party liaison committees), and (vi) coordination theories (e.g., early warning systems, advocacy campaigns).

This brief summarizes findings from the review of these intervention approaches, highlighting relevant implications for donors and implementers. These findings are suggestive – while they are informed by a review of the evidence, they point to an urgent need to undertake rigorous cross-national studies to assess the impact of different program interventions in varying contexts.

BACKGROUND

During an election cycle the possibility of violence increases as the stakes of political contestation heighten and when outcomes between candidates and incumbents are viewed in a zero-sum manner.

This is particularly true where both the ruling party and its opposition view elections as a zero-sum game. Electoral violence is rarely monocausal; a confluence of factors enables violence before, during or after an election.ⁱ

To prevent and mitigate electoral violence, donors need to develop tools and interventions that empower key political actors to embrace non-violent means of contesting politics. Even in countries where governments deliberately incite violence to maintain their power, donors can equip opposition groups with political tools to gain a competitive edge against the incumbent and become an example for change. For such efforts to be effective, election program implementers and political actors alike must better understand the structural and individual factors that nourish a culture of violence, and the range of interventions that could be explored to mitigate violence around elections.

Many approaches to electoral violence prevention in sub-Saharan Africa suffer from a narrow focus by failing to engage political parties, who are invariably the key perpetrators of violence. Extant election assistance approaches focus on empowering domestic observers to deter violence, helping election management bodies combat systematic manipulation, malpractice, and fraud, or bringing together

representatives of conflicting groups at the grassroots level to talk in a safe space. Other electoral violence prevention programming focuses mainly on civic education and peace messaging to encourage citizens to participate in the elections peacefully and deter them from pursuing violence. While existing approaches are aimed at prevention and mitigation, they target voters and citizens more than political actors and institutions.

IRI addressed this gap by developing a toolkit that interrogated and surveyed evidence on existing approaches to mitigating electoral violence. The toolkit aims to help policy makers and program implementers develop a strategic approach to election violence mitigation that specifically engages political party actors.

Based on an extensive review of literature and the existing programming approaches, IRI's toolkit identified six interventions that the evidence pointed toward as most frequently used to mitigate violence around elections. For each of the interventions, IRI reviewed evidence to better understand implications for program design and implementation.

KEY FINDINGS

Most research studies focus on international election observation missions (EOMs) or technical assistance. There are few systematic studies of other forms of interventions, such as pacts or peace messaging. Data on these interventions comes primarily from case studies, which require structured research such as matched comparisons, experiments, statistical controls, and ethnography to isolate the effects of different interventions.

Deterrence theory (e.g., domestic and international election observation missions)

Description

Deterrence theory entails the application of both positive and negative incentives to alter the choices of relevant actors. In the context of electoral violence, deterrence is a practice of disincentivizing or restraining political parties from undertaking unwanted actions or transgressions such as ballot fraud, voter intimidation, or violence.

Evidence

The presence of election monitors has been shown to improve the quality of elections, such as reducing fraud. Political actors fear both punishment and reputational damage that election observer reports can exact.

While EOMs have reduced election irregularities, their effects on preventing violence are mixed. Positive effects (reduction in violence) are concentrated where election monitors are present. In some cases, the presence of monitors may displace violence geographically or temporally: presence of election-day monitors is associated with increased violence during the pre-election period. Moreover, critical reports issued by EOMs can even usher in post-electoral violence by sparking acts of retaliation. There is also evidence that domestic election observers may strengthen electoral integrity, especially when they are perceived as non-partisan and credible.

Implications

1. EOMs must include robust coverage in the pre-election period. Missions can accomplish this by expanding the number and the deployment duration of long-term observers or by extending collaboration with domestic observers. In the absence of expanded coverage in the pre-election period, monitoring missions are less likely to detect and deter incidents of violence.
2. Expanding coverage of election observers across all polling stations is also crucial to preventing violence from being displaced to unobserved polling stations.
3. EOMs, given their finite resources, should especially ensure coverage in contested areas characterized by diffused power dynamics where no single political actor exercises exclusive influence. It is in these areas where violence and voting irregularities are most likely to occur.
4. Domestic election monitoring may affect the calculus for parties by altering social norms surrounding the acceptability of political violence, while international monitoring may operate primarily through a deterrence mechanism. It is thus useful to coordinate the two approaches when designing election observation missions.

Informational interventions (e.g., civic and voter education campaigns)

Description

Informational interventions rely on providing relevant actors information about a process, and the consequences of supporting or violating that process. Policies and programs that are based on informational interventions rely on the assumption that providing people with information can change their attitudes, and that the change in those attitudes can shape new behaviors.

Evidence

Informational interventions can lead participants to feel empowered to reject electoral violence. Election education conducted by impartial facilitators can prevent violence even in conflict areas and in non-consolidated democracies. EOM reports may also be seen as an informational intervention with respect to post-electoral violence and protest. While information interventions are sometimes associated with decreased election violence, we do not know which information is most important and how it specifically influences behaviors. Further research is necessary to disentangle these effects.

Implications

1. Information should be shared/relayed by an entity that enjoys credibility and a reputation of impartiality. A comparative study of the 2017 elections in Liberia and Kenya found that civic and voter education interventions were associated with reduced violence in Liberia, but not in Kenya. It is unclear why there was this difference, but Liberian respondents reported that the programs were more inclusive and were more likely to reach citizens regardless of their gender or age. Kenyan respondents criticized the campaigns for not being locally tailored. Interventions in both countries were critiqued for starting too late in the electoral cycle.
2. Civic and voter education campaigns should not occur only during election periods. They need to be sustained over a period of time to generate an effect. While evidence does not point to the ideal duration for the program, it is reasonable to assume that the programs need to be continual to

develop a culture of political engagement. They also need to focus on different themes related to political participation, so they are thematically eclectic without being redundant.

3. Voter education campaigns that focus exclusively on civil society may fail because they do not effectively reach the state and non-state actors that are most likely to engage in violence.
4. These interventions are known to operate in three different pathways. People living in communities with election education activities are less likely to participate in electoral violence because they are aware of violence mitigation measures; or, they learned about non-violent alternatives to resolving perceivably intractable disagreements; or, they become more resistant to disinformation from actors encouraging violence through peace messaging aimed at changing social norms. Thus, interventions aimed at providing information to mitigate violence should design different messaging strategies to engage these disparate audiences.

Pacts, pledges, and codes of conduct (e.g., codes of conduct between political parties)

Description

Political parties could benefit from contesting elections without violence if they could be assured that all competing parties will also refrain from violence. Given this coordination dilemma, Democracy Rights and Governance (DRG) interventions might mitigate election violence if they help parties coordinate a commitment to nonviolence through peace pacts or pledges.

Evidence

Codes of conduct can be vehicles for changing social norms if they are actively referenced and become part of the discourse surrounding the elections. Pacts, pledges, and codes of conduct may be more likely to be associated with lower levels of state-initiated violence.

There is a general skepticism in the research about the effectiveness of voluntary codes of conduct. However, political party consultative mechanisms (PCM) seem to be an effective initiative. These institutions foster accountability for political behavior by facilitating inter-party communications and provide a dispute resolution mechanism to mediate disputes before they morph into violence.

Implications

1. Codes should be customized for local contexts and dynamics.
2. Political parties should be involved in developing the code so that they take ownership of it and are engaged in a discussion of what the code entails. The Ghanaian code is frequently pointed to as a model voluntary code of conduct. The code is revised well in advance of each election. Its development has been spearheaded by the Ghana Political Parties Program (GPPP): a group of political parties represented in the parliament. It is, therefore, a document co-developed by peers. The code establishes a National and Regional Enforcement Body to oversee compliance. Party leaders meet once a month at the Election Management Body (EMB) to review compliance with the code. While there are no legal mechanisms to hold signatories accountable, they may be rebuked or publicly called out by the GPPP, their peers, or the Enforcement Body. The Ghanaian code is generally seen as registering a positive effect on mitigating electoral violence.

3. Codes should be clear and specific (e.g., not moving or destroying campaign materials, not engaging in attacks on candidates' private lives, etc.).
4. Codes should be crafted before the start of the electoral cycle to coordinate behavior of the parties in the pre-election, election, and post-election phases. Developing codes before the elections will also provide an opportunity for the parties and the enforcement organizations to coordinate their behavior before the election day.
5. Codes should establish if and how monitoring and/ or mediation will take place. Parties should make it clear to the public if codes are not part of the formal legal framework.

Norms and Behaviors (e.g., peace messaging and townhall discussions)

Description

Social norms are the informal, unwritten rules that define appropriate, acceptable, and obligatory actions in a community. People expect social rewards or anticipate social punishment for upholding or flouting a norm. DRG interventions can nudge people to conform to a norm (nonviolent approaches to negotiating disagreements) or deviate from it (violent approaches to negotiating disagreements).

Evidence

Social norm changing interventions can register an effect on election day violence. It is also likely that these norms diffuse to individuals who are not directly exposed to the interventions. Individual programs or interventions may be effective, especially if they carefully engage those who are most prone to pursuing violence. There is a need to gather systematic evidence on the specific effects of peace messaging on electoral violence.

Implications

1. To be effective, peace messaging needs to be conducted by legitimate and credible leaders and organizations that enjoy moral authority in the community.
2. Social norm changing interventions can be aimed at different audiences and their message should adjust to the appropriate audience whether it is political leaders (not inciting protests), party supporters (not engaging in violence if asked to by political leaders), or the general public (accept defeat of party).
3. Social norms can be sticky and resistant to change. Interventions should be realistic about the expected timeframe for desired change.
4. Many messaging interventions tend to focus on goals that take time to achieve, fail to target the most critical audiences (individuals who are most prone to commit violence), and are conducted by

actors who are seen as partisan. An effective messaging strategy should engage 'messengers' who are perceived as non-partisan. It should be designed with both short and long-term expectations and engage research that provides insight into the most vulnerable groups.

Intergroup social contact (e.g., inter-party dialogues and multi-party liaison committees)

Description

Contact hypothesis stipulates that fostering interpersonal contact is one of the most effective ways to reduce prejudice among groups who harbor animosity toward one another. These intergroup animosities include partisan political divisions. By being in contact and communicating with one another, the groups enjoy the opportunity to appreciate their differences. This enhanced understanding of 'the other' is hypothesized to curb stereotyping, discrimination, and prejudice between groups.

Evidence

In general, moderated dialogues may build cooperation among peer political party leaders that can open lines of communication and contribute to violence mitigation. Inclusive engagement with election management bodies, or another consultative organization, through a multi-party liaison committee, may help address violence.

Meaningful contact over a sustained period through goal-oriented projects may reduce bias, at least at the interpersonal level. For instance, The USAID project "Bumbatira Amahoro," coordinated by a local CSO, sought to prevent Burundian youth, frequently mobilized by political actors during episodes of political violence in Burundi, from engaging in electoral violence.

While there have been extensive studies on the use of intergroup social contact to reduce conflict, there are no rigorous studies on its use to specifically mitigate electoral violence. There are some suggestions from project evaluations that such interventions can have positive effects, though the evidence needs to be systematically analyzed.

Implications

1. Interventions may take sustained contact over long periods of time to yield results and facilitate useful dialogue. Evidence is not clear on the ideal duration of exposure to contact, but the quality of the engagement may be as important as the quantity, and activities where participants share a common goal (e.g., collective victories and/or success) appear particularly promising.
2. Fostering interpersonal contact should start well before the electoral period: building empathy and connections to out-groups may be more difficult if initiated during an already contentious election cycle. Improvement in inter-personal relations do not always translate into acceptance of the outgroup, especially in a short time period.
3. Inter-party engagements through a multi-party liaison committee helps maintain regular communication between parties, hold the parties accountable, and provide a forum for dispute

resolution.

4. Existing structural inequalities should be acknowledged (e.g., economic instability making individuals vulnerable to being recruited for violence, etc.) and may undermine these interventions.

Networks and Collaborations (e.g., early warning systems, advocacy campaigns)

Description

A network is a group of individuals or organizations that pursue a shared objective and interact with one another on an ongoing basis. Support networks function via peer-to-peer sharing, whereas coalitions function via coordinated or complementary action. These networks tend to be loosely organized, whereas coalitions are structured. Such networks generally entail informal commitment, whereas coalitions often require a formal commitment.

Evidence

Networks and coalitions may have the visibility and clout to influence government and stakeholders that individual organizations lack. For instance, the Afghan Women's Network, composed of over 125 civil society organizations, collectively enjoyed the standing necessary to be invited to major national events and to address the UN Security Council. This social and political clout enabled it to push for gender quotas and become a leading voice in advocating for the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law, as well as partner with international organizations on campaigns to increase women's political participation.

Thus, networks can act as agenda setters. Networks and coalitions can be susceptible to disagreements and conflict which can diminish their impact. However, despite the frequency of using networks and coalitions, there is little empirical evidence on how these partnerships work and under what conditions the different formulations may be most useful.

Implications

1. Networks and coalitions build public credibility based on their perceived neutrality. It can often be difficult to maintain cooperation because negative actions of one organization may reflect poorly on the entire network/coalition. For example, the Haitian network Conseil National D'Observation (CNO) deployed more than 7,000 observers during the 2000 elections, which the Organization of American States (OAS) deemed problematic, leading the OAS to refuse to monitor the second round of elections. CNO officially sided with the OAS, but several member organizations, including two of the largest, defected and observed the second round, which tarnished the network's reputation.
2. Networks and coalitions should evaluate decision making processes to ensure that all members realize that they are heard.
3. It is important that networks and coalitions are viewed as independent and non-partisan to all stakeholders. International funding for networks and coalitions can also lead to accusations of bias or

partisanship. For example, networks of domestic election monitors (e.g. the CNO in Haiti, the Alianza Cívica in Mexico, etc.) have had to contend with allegations that the funding they received from the United States would affect their conclusions.

Endnotes

ⁱ For example, violence broke out in Kenya in August 2017 after the Supreme Court nullified President Uhuru Kenyatta's electoral win. When the rerun occurred in October 2017, an opposition boycott, waves of unrest, and voter intimidation throughout the country cast doubt on the integrity of the election. In another example, Nigeria was plagued by politically motivated violence before and during the 2019 off-cycle gubernatorial elections in Kogi state. Civil society organizations (CSOs) reported that violence had disrupted voting in most polling units of the capital by midday. When the electoral commission announced the election results on November 18, 2019, many citizens voiced their skepticism. Some CSOs even requested a rerun because many registered voters could not cast their ballots on the election day.

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