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Item Type	Preprint
Authors	Uppsala University;Höglund, Kristine;Jarstad, Anna K.
Publisher	African Centre for Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD)
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Download date	2026-11-13 05:00:38
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/224697

Policy & Practice Brief

Knowledge for durable peace

ISSUE # 001

June 2010

Strategies to prevent and manage electoral violence : Considerations for policy

By Kristine Höglund and Anna K. Jarstad, Uppsala University



Executive Summary

Electoral violence is a sub-category of political violence, which deserves special consideration from the policy community. Indeed, electoral violence has received increasing international attention in recent years due to the devastating effects of outbreaks of violence in Kenya, Zimbabwe and Afghanistan around elections. The notion of violence-free elections is encapsulated in the term 'free and fair' elections, serving as a benchmark for determining the legitimacy of elections. Efforts by local and international actors include electoral assistance, peacekeeping and monitoring missions, civic and voter education. Yet, understanding of the consequences of specific strategies and how their returns can be maximised, remains limited.

The main conclusion of this policy brief points to a re-evaluation of conflict management and preventive strategies and highlights five recommendations:

1) Victims need to be better taken into account and cared for;

2) Monitoring and education are activities that need to be carried out on a long-term basis;

3) Conflict-mitigation measures should be included in the electoral process design;

4) To ensure security, a balance between deterrence and confidence building has to be found; and

5) To improve peacebuilding around election times, the multiple actors involved need to coordinate activities to avoid overlap and to identify policy gaps.

This Policy and Practice Brief forms part of ACCORD's knowledge production work to inform peacemaking, peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

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THE AFRICAN CENTRE FOR THE CONSTRUCTIVE RESOLUTION OF DISPUTES

Introduction

This policy brief offers insights for policymakers regarding strategies to prevent and manage electoral violence. It is based on a study on the experiences of the conflict-ridden province KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. We perceive of electoral violence as a sub-category of political violence, which deserves special consideration from the policy community (Höglund 2009, Höglund, et al. 2009, Fischer 2002). Indeed, electoral violence has received increasing international attention in recent years due to the devastating effects of outbreaks of violence in Kenya, Zimbabwe and Afghanistan around elections. The notion of violence-free elections is encapsulated in the term 'free and fair' elections, serving as a benchmark for determining the legitimacy of elections. Efforts by local and international actors include electoral assistance, peacekeeping and monitoring missions, civic and voter education (Abbink and Hesseling 1999, Sisk 2009, Kumar 1998). Yet, understanding of the consequences of specific strategies and how their returns can be maximised, remains limited. Analysis for policy needs to take into account the social divisions and potential conflict lines in society. If electoral violence is not addressed it can have longstanding consequences for social cohesion and the legitimacy of democracy.

Electoral Violence and Peacebuilding

Elections are key elements of democratic processes. They provide for transparent and peaceful change of government and distribution of power. For this reason, a strong emphasis on democratisation as a means to durable peace emerged among international policy circles in the early 1990s. The notion of supporting peacebuilding in tandem with democratisation developed as a consequence of the recognition that political repression and discrimination often is the very reason groups took to arms in the first place. Hence, democratisation does not only open up for manifestations of politcal rights, but is also seen as a response to addressing the root causes of conflict. Support to strengthen institutional capacity to promote democratic norms and to ensure democratic rule of law is now seen as crucial for peacebuilding. Elections and democracy promotion have thus become central strategies to build peace in countries shattered by violent conflict.

Yet experiences and recent research suggest that democratisation in transitional or war-torn countries, and elections in particular, can become a hinderance rather than a solution to peacebuilding (Snyder 2000, Jarstad and Sisk 2008). In fact, elections can generate conflicts, rather than solving them (Paris 2004, Reilly 2002, Lyons 2005, Collier 2009). For several reasons, violence can be an attractive option to influence the electoral process and outcome. In transitional and war-torn countries, incumbents are often manipulating or believed to be tampering with the electoral processes. The opposition parties also have incentives to further their strength through the use of violence. Spoiler groups intent on disrupting the election may use violence to prevent the election from taking place or to make sure that the election outcome is declared invalid. Such violence is potentially damaging for democratic processes and can undermine progress towards democratisation. Electoral violence - beyond direct effects such as hindering people from casting their vote and preventing candidates from participating in the election - can have long-term effects of causing disillusionment and frustration with politics. The absence or presence of political violence during an electoral process is also central to determining the legitimacy of an election. From a conflict prevention perspective, low intensity or localised violence can serve as a 'training ground' for more large-scale violence campaigns, including civil war. Managing election-related violence, thus, is important in the long-term effort to build a strong, democratic and peaceful society, based on the rule of law, accountability and transparency.

A number of strategies are used to manage and prevent electoral violence. These strategies are to a varying degree applied by different actors. The actors involved in managing and preventing electoral violence include 1) local and international monitoring and observer missions; and 2) national, regional and local dispute resolution and mediation missions. The bodies involved in these activities range from public authorities, political parties, an electoral commission, religious organisations, civil society, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and traditional authorities such as chiefs or clan leaders. Five main types of strategies can be identified. First, the presence of monitors can be instrumental in preventing electoral violence through naming and shaming mechanisms and by creating awareness of tensions building up. Second, mediation can be carried out in high-tension situations to solve an ongoing election-related dispute. Third, the legal framework and institutional design provides the basis for combating impunity and for creating conditions discouraging violence. Fourth, law enforcement highlights the deterring function of security forces. Fifth, voter-focused strategies emphasise the importance of long-term prevention though the cultivation of democratic norms and tolerance in society at large.

Recommendations

1. Do not forget the victims of violence

How violence is perceived - whether it is politically motivated or not - varies, depending on where you sit and how you are affected. An argument sometimes invoked in relation to violence around election times, is that it is in fact not at all related to the election but instead due to common criminal activities. However, if people believe that violence is politically motivated, it will have political consequences. When politicians and political activists are targeted by violence, the consequence may be that certain political campaigns do not reach all areas in each electoral district and in the country. This constrains the right to freedom of information and is a hindrance to a free political choice. When voters are targeted during registration or around elections, the consequences may be that citizens refrain from voting, or vote for a certain political party out of fear, rather than as a free choice. When electoral violence takes place, adequate support is vital for the development of a well functioning democratic society and for durable peace. Strategies to prevent and manage electoral violence mainly focus on the perpetrators of violence, and the perspectives of the victims of such violence are often neglected. A united approach to support the victims of violence is important so that those affected can cope with the consequences of violence. Strategies directed towards the victims of electoral violence can also prevent violence from negatively affecting the attitudes towards democratic politics, a necessary condition for sustainable peace.

Practitioners and policymakers of electoral violence management should:

- Include in their analysis an assessment of how victims are affected by electoral violence and how their different needs (material, physical and psychological) can be addressed.
- Develop a diversified strategy to accommodate different target groups to prevent severe individual as well as political consequences of electoral violence.
- Allocate adequate resources to develop a policy and strategies to address the consequences of electoral violence, and to implement and evaluate such policy.

2. Monitoring and education should be continuous activities

Violence related to electoral processes often begins way ahead of elections. In some places, politicians are always potential targets of political violence. Citizens at large may feel constrained to openly and freely voice political views, engage in public debates, and organize themselves politically. In addition to restrictions of political rights, the consequences of such an insecure environment include difficulties in holding politicians accountable.

Electoral violence needs to be continuously addressed. Conventionally, there is a focus on national and general elections. For instance, electoral violence monitoring and citizen's and party education programmes are concentrated on the period ahead of such elections. However, by-elections are sometimes even more prone to violence than the general elections, and violence can also take place between elections. Therefore, to prevent and manage seriously the causes and consequences of violence, a policy for electoral violence management - especially monitoring and voter-centred strategies - needs to be carried out on a long-term basis and continue between general elections.

Practitioners and policymakers on electoral violence management should:

- Carry out the groundwork for preventing violence during interim periods.
- Support political party development, citizen education and media training.
- Continuously monitor volatile areas during and especially around any by-elections.
- Allocate adequate resources for maintaining monitoring capacity also in between elections.

3. Include conflict-mitigating measures in the electoral process design

The institutional design - including the legal framework and the electoral system - constructs incentives and disincentives for electoral violence. Some regulations create especially high stakes for elections. For instance, in majoritarian elections in single-member constituencies, the importance of specific individuals increases their risk of becoming targets of violence. Arrangements for by-elections can create shifts in the power balance, thus raising the stakes and putting certain individuals at risk of intimidation and violence. Under other arrangements, resignations in the interim period are handled though substitutes from the party list. Electoral laws can set out the legal constraints on the use of violence, the mandate and powers of the election management bodies as well as regulations on who may stand in elections. Such laws can also stipulate an electoral code of conduct, which can involve agreement on avoidance of hate speech and other activities that may spur violence and polarisation.

Typically, the consequences of institutional design centre on the political system and electoral laws. However, an all-encompassing policy for conflict-mitigating measures in the institutional design is especially important in countries with experiences of political violence. More attention needs to be directed at measures which

can support the implementation of the legal framework. Without sanctions against those breaking the electoral law, including violence makers, a culture of impunity is upheld. At the same time - in societies which have experienced violence - it can be difficult to ban all those with a violent past from politics. There are for instance a number of activities which can ensure that the code of conduct is known and respected. A peace pledge - which brings together political parties, religious and civil society leaders - to publicly declare a commitment to a code of conduct - is one such instrument. The openness and publicity of peace pledges aim at upholding the standards of free and fair elections.

Practitioners and policymakers working on electoral violence management should:

- Consider the consequences of the electoral system for the risk of violence, and analyse potential changes to electoral systems, codes of conduct, and other regulations on the electoral process.
- Stipulate sanctions against violence makers, for example by limiting the right for repeat violence-makers to engage in politics, to avoid a culture of impunity.
- Design measures and allocate adequate resources for activities which can support the institutional setting and legal framework, for instance through the use of peace pledges.

4. For security - find the right balance between deterrence and confidence-building

Due to high levels of mistrust and insecurity around election times, increased deployment of security personnel is sometimes necessary. Under the conditions when national capacity for security is low, or when domestic security forces are themselves involved in violence, international peacekeepers and police can act as external guarantors. In other cases, domestic security forces - police, military police, intelligence etc - can play important roles in preventing violence around elections both in the short-term and the long-term.

In the long run, the importance of security forces lies in their deterring function and their law-enforcement capacity. Without the enforcement of electoral laws, the legal constraints on the use of violence around election times are toothless tools. This is especially so in countries which have experienced conflict and where a culture of impunity has often become more or less omnipresent. In the short-run, increased security presences - especially in high-tension areas - can deter the use of violence more directly. However, a show of force can also be provocative. Individuals and groups may feel threatened by personnel in arms and uniforms. Others may feel that deployment of security personnel is interference in their neighbourhood. Political parties may be especially provoked if the security apparatus has a strong connection with the incumbent party. For this reason, deterrence needs to be coupled with confidence-building measures. Conventionally, security is upheld by the police and, in extreme circumstances, also by the military. However, in countries with election violence, a more comprehensive approach is required. Respected civil society organisations and traditional or clan leaders, need to be involved in building confidence and encouraging respect and tolerance. Such networks are also important for identifying potential areas of tension and individual trouble makers. The judiciary needs to function effectively in collaboration with the security apparatus in order to combat impunity. A policy on electoral security, thus, must be planned and carried out in collaboration with a multiplicity of actors.

Practitioners and policy-makers of electoral violence management should:

- Engage in close collaboration with local actors in order to uncover networks of violence makers and to identify peace-promoting elements.
- Encourage collaboration between national security forces, local security forces, peace workers, political parties and other relevant actors.
- Train security forces in the electoral law(s) and the codes of conduct.
- Develop a policy and strategies to address electoral security from a comprehensive perspective encompassing both deterrence and confidence building, and allocate adequate resources to implement and evaluate such policy.

5. Coordinate activities to avoid overlap and identify gaps in peacebuilding

The multiplicity of actors involved in prevention and management of electoral violence requires great coordination and role division among local and international actors and among international actors. The prevalence of involving different actors in electoral security and conflict management means that there is a risk of overlap. It is unfortunately no guarantee against some areas being neglected. Such gaps are often due to a lack of coordination in the planning and division of tasks and areas of importance for violence management. There are several positive examples where electoral monitoring has been coordinated among international, domestic agencies and hundreds of civil society organizations to successfully monitor an election. If an independent electoral commission has capacity and legitimacy, such an agency is particularly suited for such coordinating activities. However, the lack of sufficient coordination remains a challenge in many situations of electoral violence.

There is also a risk that different measures and activities undertaken for electoral security may undermine each other. For instance, the deployment of security forces may be necessary in an election, resulting in reinforcements arriving in areas in which they have no prior knowledge about the local context. While this may increase the capacity of the security forces to act in a more neutral and independent manner, it might have the drawback of undermining existing networks of contacts between for instance monitoring agencies in the area and local police. For this reason, it is important that initiatives to promote security take into account existing networks of knowledge and capacities, and are carried out in collaboration with other actors working in the same or related area.

Practitioners and policy-makers of electoral violence management should:

• Plan electoral violence management in coordination with other peacebuilding initiatives to avoid undermining other actors' activities.

• Encourage international violence monitors and peace missions to access information on local peacebuilding initiatives to assess further needs for conflict management before and during an activity, event or mission.

• In cases where civil society networks are well-developed, support such networks to coordinate the different tasks.

• Support an independent electoral agency to assess and evaluate different capacities among actors for specific tasks.

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About the Authors

Kristine Höglund is Associate Professor at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, Sweden. Her research covers issues such as the dilemmas of democratization in countries emerging from violent conflict, the importance of trust in peace negotiation processes, and the role of international actors in dealing with crises in war-torn societies. She recently published the book *Peace Negotiations in the Shadow of Violence* (Martinus Nijhoff, 2008).

Anna K. Jarstad is Associate Professor at the Department of Government, Uppsala University, Sweden. Together with Timothy D. Sisk she has edited *From War to Democracy*: Dilemmas of Peacebuilding (Cambridge University Press, 2008). Her research covers conflict management in ethnically divided societies and the nexus of democratization and peacebuilding in war-torn socie¬ties, especially in Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Cyprus, Kosovo, Macedonia, New Zealand, and South Africa.

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ACCORD
THE AFRICAN CENTRE FOR THE CONSTRUCTIVE RESOLUTION OF DISPUTES

The African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD)
Private Bag X018 Umhlanga Rocks 4320 South Africa
Tel: +27-031-502 3908
Fax: +27-031-502 4160
Email:info@accord.org.za
Website: www.accord.org.za

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