



1

Introduction

The Scope, Nature, and Pattern of Electoral Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Seventeen African countries held presidential, legislative, or parliamentary elections in 2011.¹ In eleven countries (60 percent), the elections were violent in some manner. The type and degree of violence ranged from persistent harassment and intimidation experienced by Kizza Besigye, the presidential challenger in Uganda, to the intense violence that gripped Nigeria for three days following the presidential elections, killing 800 people and displacing 65,000. Indeed, the year started on a violent note, with news in the first quarter of 2011 dominated by the near civil war that broke out following the presidential elections in Côte d'Ivoire, taking some three thousand lives and displacing about one million over the course of four months.

Why does electoral violence happen in some places and not others? What are its triggers? What are its consequences? Who are the main perpetrators, and who are the victims? How can it be stopped?

This book provides some initial answers to these questions, through a theoretical and practical framework for thinking about and addressing them. It features pioneering work on the scope and nature of electoral violence in Africa, investigates the forms that such violence takes, and ana-

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1. In this chapter, "Africa" refers to the forty-nine sub-Saharan countries on the African continent.





lyzes the stakeholders, structures, and strategies that can precipitate it, as well as those that can reduce or prevent it. While this phenomenon certainly happens in other regions, the book's focus on Africa is an opportunity to study electoral violence among a group of countries that have come of age and embarked on democratization at roughly the same time. This book is a first attempt to document the scope, quality, and circumstances of electoral violence in Africa using both quantitative methods and case studies.

What Is Electoral Violence?

The existing scholarly literature does not offer much guidance in thinking about elections and violence in Africa. Only a few books and articles aim to understand electoral violence as a specific phenomenon (Laakso 2007; Fischer 2002; UNDP 2009; USAID 2010; Bardall 2010). Therefore, what it is and when it occurs will likely remain a source of debate as more scholars begin to focus on it. But some researchers and institutions have begun to join around the notion that electoral violence is a subset of political violence distinguished by its timing, perpetrators and victims, objectives, and methods (UNGA 2010; Höglund 2009; Fischer 2002; Sisk 2008). These are important criteria because they help separate electoral violence from other types of violence that may happen to occur around election time; that is, that an act of violence occurs during the election period does not make it electoral violence.

When Does Electoral Violence Happen?

While electoral violence can take place at all stages of the electoral process—before the election, on election day, and after the election—defining precisely when it occurs is a point of contention. The danger in looking too far ahead of the polling date is that we may include incidents unrelated to the election. In contrast, looking too close to the polling date may result in underreporting electoral violence. This is especially true if politicians start to foment violence far ahead of the election date, as they did in Kenya in the early 1990s and in Zimbabwe in the past decade. Scott Straus and Charlie Taylor, in their chapter in this book, document electoral violence from six months before the election until three months after the election.

Election day, by several accounts (including the results of Straus and Taylor's analysis), is usually peaceful, which emphasizes the importance of focusing on the pre- and postelection periods (Höglund 2009, 416). The little quantitative research that has been done, including Straus and





Taylor's work in this volume, also shows that most elections in Africa—80 percent, in fact—are not as intensely violent as the ones in Nigeria, Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Côte d'Ivoire. In an early work on electoral violence, Jeff Fischer examined fifty-seven elections in 2001 to ascertain the level of violence, the perpetrators, and the opportunities for preventing violence. From a dataset spanning countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Caribbean, he found that fourteen countries, or 24.5 percent, experienced conflict or violence (Fischer 2002, 4). Straus and Taylor find that 20 percent of all elections in Africa from 1990 to 2008 resulted in intense and destabilizing violence.

Who Are the Perpetrators, and Who Are the Victims?

In order to prevent future violence or properly understand its drivers, it is important to know who commits electoral violence and who suffers from it. Jeff Fischer, in his pioneering work documenting the extent of electoral violence, identifies victims as including voters who conflict with the state and disagree with the results of the election; perpetrators as including the state that disagrees with the protests lodged by the voters; and victims and perpetrators as including those in clashes between rival political supporters (Fischer 2002, 17). In the setting of a conflict-ridden society, Höglund, echoing other studies, explicitly identifies political parties (both government and opposition) as the “key organizers” of electoral violence. She expands Fischer's categories to include guerrilla and militia groups committing violent acts on behalf of politicians (Höglund 2009, 416; UNGA 2010, para. 20). Notably, in some cases, victims can also be perpetrators: in the aftermath of Kenya's 2007 elections, the Kikuyu were first persecuted by the Kalenjin before resorting to reprisal attacks. In the end, each case will determine the most relevant actors, but the critical factor in identifying the perpetrators and victims is to understand the objectives of electoral violence: which groups want to alter the outcome of the election, and which groups will be affected in their pursuit of this goal (Höglund 2009, 415–16; UNGA 2010, para. 24)?

While the most overt forms of violence—clashes between two opposing sides, state security services' violent suppression of demonstrators, political assassinations—are the easiest to document, less obvious forms of conflict are more difficult to recognize or quantify. In this volume, Straus and Taylor identify a broad set of actions characterizing electoral violence. These include not only overt acts that result in assassinations, deaths, and injuries, but also harassment and intimidation of political rivals, confiscation of newspapers, disqualification of candidates, and short-term arrests



of political opponents. These last categories of violence may not directly cause deaths and injuries, but they can hinder the administration of, and participation in, elections.

Why Study Electoral Violence?

Some have dismissed the need to study electoral violence as a separate phenomenon, because, per capita, it is not a significant source of violence. Indeed, even in this volume, Straus and Taylor point out that electoral violence does not necessarily result in a significant spike in a country's overall level of violence; other sources of conflict are more significant. The paradox of electoral violence is that it is usually a brief, time- and event-bound period of violence, with generally low levels of tension but with enormous bearing on a country's democratization process and institutional reform priorities and on its leaders' legitimacy.

Electoral violence may affect the process or outcome of an election by determining voter turnout, candidates' participation in the electoral process, whether an election should be held, or a government's legitimacy (Höglund 2009, 417–19). In Zimbabwe, for example, the intense violence following the first round of the presidential election of 2008 resulted in the decision by the leader of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change, Morgan Tsvangirai, to withdraw from the second round. In contrast, many in Darfur called for postponement of Sudan's elections because of the region's instability and the fear of more violence. Violence can keep voters away. The threat—and, at times, reality—of violence by hired political thugs kept many away from the polls in Nigeria in 2007. Similarly, before Kenya's 1992 election, the violence that displaced hundreds of thousands of those opposing President Daniel arap Moi resulted in Moi's victory by rendering them unable to vote. Finally, violence can also weaken the internal and external legitimacy of an election and an elected official. In Nigeria, seven of thirty-six governors elected in 2007 were eventually removed from their positions after their election was deemed flawed by state election tribunals (Ilo 2011). Even the election of Nigerian president Umaru Yar'Adua was questioned: the Nigerian Supreme Court eventually ruled his election legitimate, but only twenty months after the polls. The cloud over the elections and the uncertainty of the electoral turnovers undermined officials' ability to govern.

Electoral violence can affect a country's regard for democratization. Citizens who experience repeated or intense electoral violence may view democratization in a less favorable light than do others who have not been so subjected. Some evidence for this is found in the survey results reported



by Afrobarometer. Specifically, the 2006 surveys for Zimbabwe and Nigeria, both of which experienced violent elections, indicated a less favorable opinion of “elections as a means to represent the true voice of the people in government” than in Ghana, Namibia, and Botswana, where elections have been more peaceful (Afrobarometer 2006, 12). More general data from Afrobarometer indicate that 71 percent of those who viewed their country’s last election as not free and fair or with major problems were not at all satisfied with democracy. In contrast, 50.7 percent of those who viewed their elections as free and fair or with minor problems were very satisfied with democracy. Moreover, when observers judged elections to be not free and fair, or free and fair but with major problems, only 40 percent of respondents thought of their country as a full democracy. In contrast, when observers judged the elections to be free and fair, or free and fair but with only minor problems, the number of respondents who classified their country as a full democracy rose (Alemika 2007, 7). Thus, from a policy perspective, if democratization is the goal, then reducing the prospect of electoral violence should also be one of the objectives. From a more academic perspective, the presence of electoral violence should be one of the variables included when seeking to explain the conditions under which democracy becomes consolidated.

New democracies face a particularly high risk of political violence in general, and electoral violence in particular. This is especially true for poorer, ethnically diverse, and postconflict countries. Thus, for institutions and governments promoting democratization to replace dictatorships, it is important to consider that the expected reduction in political violence has not materialized in new democracies. Rather, the opposite has occurred. Paul Collier argues that new democracies do not reduce political violence, because they do not usher in more accountability or more legitimacy (Collier 2009, 18–52). The lack of accountability means that governments do not fear repercussions for failing to live up to promises.

Collier’s research demonstrates that electoral competition in poorer, newly democratizing countries does not entice governments to perform better, because the requisite checks and balances are missing. Rather, it provides incentives for politicians to employ the worst tools at their disposal (i.e., violence and repression) to win. Consequently, democracy in these settings does not make a government legitimate. The result is that democracy does not bring peace, and grievances continue to mount, making political violence in general, and electoral violence in particular, much more likely (Collier 2009, 18–52; Laakso 2007, 228–30; UNDP 2009, 8). Moreover, in an institutionally weak environment, without the attendant institutions to allow for tolerance of opposing views and the mitigation of



outbreaks of violence, nascent democracies cannot successfully accommodate and manage the diverse new political interests that emerge when the political system opens up—especially if those new political views threaten the status of existing elites (Mousseau 2001, 550–51; Laakso 2007, 227). Furthermore, in new democracies with significant ethnic divisions, political transitions can lead to ethnic violence as satisfying different ethnic groups becomes ever more difficult (Laakso 2007, 226–27). Political coalitions, which could hold together diverse interests in more mature democracies or even in one-party systems, may be less binding in a competitive multiparty environment with no history of political compromise or accommodation (Mansfield and Snyder 2007, 163, 169–71).

Postconflict states, like some new democracies, may be more prone to electoral violence. This is an important finding, given the tendency for many peace agreements to proclaim the formal end of a conflict through the organization of elections. Höglund highlights four features that make postconflict states more vulnerable to such violence. First, postconflict states are apt to have stronger patronage networks than other states, given the divisiveness of conflict environments. In such an environment, where the demands of loyalty supersede efficiency, inclusivity, and the rule of law, electoral violence is likely because power is sought by any means necessary (Höglund 2009, 420). Such extremism is particularly likely if elections are held too early, before political parties have a chance to form properly or before armed groups can fully make the transition into political parties (Reilly 2002, 121–22, 133–34). Second, in some postconflict environments, incomplete demobilization and disarmament results in the easy availability of arms should the results of an election be unfavorable to one side. Politics and institutions may not be demilitarized, allowing political actors to disregard opportunities for inclusiveness (Höglund 2009, 420; Lyons 2004, 44, 48). Clearly, such an environment enabled the postelection violence in Angola (1992), the Republic of Congo (1993), the Democratic Republic of Congo (2006), and Côte d'Ivoire (2010) once the political leaders rejected the results. Third, postconflict states may perpetuate a culture of violence and intolerance if disputes are not resolved peacefully. And finally, the suspension and weakening of many institutions in postconflict states may result in a culture of impunity, allowing violence to pay (Höglund 2009, 421; Lyons 2004, 39–40).

Africa's ethnic diversity may, in some cases, also make the transition to democracy and multiparty elections more difficult and violent. In many African countries, political parties are based on ethnic, religious, or regional divisions that operate in a highly centralized system (Mousseau 2001, 551; Van de Walle 2003, 297–321). Indeed, some politicians explicitly build



their support through ethnic or religious appeals, exploiting existing cleavages and grievances for their own political gain. Constructing political battles that pit one ethnic or religious group against another reinforces the sense of marginalization that the losing group will feel (Diamond, Linz, and Lipset 1995). For elections in new democracies where contenders and supporters perceive zero-sum games, political and economic influence will accrue to the ethnic or political group whose candidate wins; losers will be marginalized—thus raising the stakes and the potential for violence (Diamond, Linz, and Lipset 1995; Collier 2009, 51–73).

Finally, electoral violence may serve as the impetus for a civil war. This was arguably the case in 1994 in the Republic of Congo (ROC) and nearly the case in Côte d'Ivoire's postelection violence of 2010. In ROC, after the October 1993 legislative election resulted in President Pascal Lissouba's victory, militias supporting him and those supporting the two other challengers clashed violently. Even after the election was rerun in November 1993, with Lissouba's party winning again, violence ensued. As many as 2,000 people were killed during November 1993 to January 1994 (U.S. State Dept. 1995; United Nations 1997). Four years later, in May 1997, these same political and ethnic cleavages resulted in more violence as the militias supporting Denis Sassou-Nguesso and Lissouba clashed again, this time over a dispute of the electoral rules, attempts by Lissouba supporters to stop the election, and Sassou-Nguesso's claims of assassination plots against him, along with other issues. During the six months of violence until Sassou-Nguesso seized the presidential palace, about 15,000 died (Bazenguissa-Ganga 1999, 39–42; De Beer and Cornwell 1999). Over the next two years, 20,000 more lives were lost (Polity IV 2010). Likewise, the four months of postelection violence in Côte d'Ivoire in 2010 and 2011 broke down along the same ethnic lines and issues that caused the civil war in 2002. Many feared that if a resolution was not reached in time, Côte d'Ivoire would return to full-blown war. Even so, with some three thousand dead and one million displaced—nearly the same numbers as in 2002—one may argue that civil war returned to Côte d'Ivoire in 2011.

Scope, Patterns, and Management of Electoral Violence in Africa

This book documents and analyzes the incidents of electoral violence in Africa through rich quantitative and qualitative approaches. The chapters reveal a number of significant interlocking and complementary insights as to the causes, warning signs, and prevention of electoral violence. Most prominently, the chapters demonstrate the high risks posed by close elections, a state's declining economic fortunes, and weak institutions. In seek-



ing to prevent electoral violence, the chapters give policy recommendations that are designed to create inclusive forums for discussing divisive issues, developing programs that specifically focus on electoral violence, and starting violence prevention programs several months before the elections.

The book begins with the only known dataset of electoral violence in Africa, compiled by Straus and Taylor, spanning from 1990, the dawn of democracy's third wave, until 2008. The African Electoral Violence Dataset (AEVD) allows scholars and policymakers to determine the frequency, intensity, scope, and nature of electoral violence in Africa over eighteen years. Straus and Taylor's work shows that electoral violence has distinct patterns and that by recognizing them, policymakers, civil society activists, and scholars can devise strategies to mitigate—and even prevent—its occurrence. Notably, the data show the following:

- Most violence takes place *before* an election.
- For nearly half the countries in the database, electoral violence is a regular occurrence.
- The incumbent is usually the perpetrator of the violence that occurs.
- Presidential elections are slightly more violent than legislative elections.

Understanding these characteristics of electoral violence in Africa is an important first step in determining whether a country is at risk of violence, and in developing strategies to address it.

Straus and Taylor, in their chapter, also identify these six possible scenarios and motivators of electoral violence, suggested by the data:

- harassment and intimidation in protest or support of political candidates, not resulting in deaths
- elimination of the opposition through assassination, arrest, or torture
- violence in order to physically displace opposition supporters
- violence used to gain (or retain) access to resources in order to consolidate electoral support
- pockets of electoral violence, where violence is restricted to certain regions or districts
- protests over a result or process that lead to repression and violence

Many of the cases in the book illustrate these different scenarios of electoral violence. The first scenario, where electoral violence is least intense, appears in a number of chapters, embedded in analyses of more intense violence—illustrating the variation in electoral violence that can take place even concurrently in the same country. Incidents of harassment and intimidation that do not always lead to deaths are discussed in the cases of

Nigeria (Sisk), Zimbabwe (Boone and Kriger), Côte d'Ivoire (Boone and Kriger), Ethiopia (Smith), and Ghana (Oduro). The case studies presented by the chapter authors also feature the other specific scenarios of electoral violence described by Straus and Taylor:

- Eliminating the opposition: Some contenders in Nigeria's 2007 election lost their lives as political opponents tried to eliminate each other. The Ethiopian government imprisoned the leaders of the opposition following the 2005 elections.
- Redistricting: In 2005, Operation Murambatsvina in Zimbabwe displaced urban supporters of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change.
- Redistribution: Violence to redistribute resources was evident in the cases of Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, and Nigeria.
- Pockets of violence: The violence in northern Ghana, which did not spread to the rest of the country, represents an "island of electoral violence," as did the violence in Zanzibar.
- Protests leading to violence: The protests before and after the 2005 elections in Togo were severely repressed by the government, leading to nearly 800 deaths.

The second chapter, thus, is both groundbreaking and foundational: it presents a critical first step in understanding both the scope and variation of electoral violence in Africa and the different scenarios in which it may occur.

The third and fourth chapters balance out the AEVD and reinforce each other by providing a broader context for electoral violence. Sisk frames electoral violence as a function of a country's progress on democratization, the political economy of state capture, the capacity of the electoral commission, and structural factors driving conflict. Sisk's chapter, which examines the factors that fuel violence in Nigeria (2007 and 2011) and Sudan (2010), may help explain why some countries are more prone to electoral violence than others even though they carry similar risk factors. Within this framework, for example, Nigeria's experience in 2007 demonstrates that the deep fissures in the ruling party, the centralization of political and economic resources, the culture of impunity, and the inability of the state police to investigate electoral offenses created an environment conducive to violence. More specifically, it made violence a likely tool in securing the vote, which explains why violence was prevalent before the election and on polling day.

Catherine Boone and Norma Kriger address the role that patronage resources play in fomenting violence during elections. In their analysis of

the steadily deteriorating situations in Côte d'Ivoire and Zimbabwe, it is evident that as incumbents felt increasingly threatened by the opposition while also experiencing declining resources for sustaining patronage networks, the propensity to use violence increased. Complementing Sisk's discussion of institutions, the political economy of state capture, structural factors driving conflict, and the capacity of the electoral commission, Boone and Kriger illustrate the political and economic context that has led political leaders to use violence to win elections.

The fifth chapter (Bekoe), looking specifically at Togo and Zanzibar, examines the efficacy of postelection political agreements (PPAs) to break the cycle of intense electoral violence by creating power-sharing arrangements and examining the root and proximate causes of electoral violence. PPAs raise critical questions about the role of elections, the message they send regarding the use of violence in contesting electoral disputes, and their effects on democratization efforts. A key finding is that while PPAs may stop the violence in the very near term, if institutional reforms are not enacted or not credible, subsequent elections are likely to return to violence or, at least, high tension. In both Togo and Zanzibar, the persistent weakness of institutions was a key element in the opposition's distrust of the implementation of promised reforms.

The issue of institutional reform is critical in Mueller's chapter on Kenya's postelection violence. She documents the paradox of Kenya's seemingly strong institutions—benefiting from years of international donor support for reform—being unable to prevent the descent into violence. Mueller demonstrates that the persistence of informal, biased regulations enabled President Daniel arap Moi to distribute patronage and, in the process, arm supporters, in the effort to win elections. The resulting “diffusion of violence,” Mueller argues, needed only the spark of the too-close-to-call 2007 election to precipitate a descent into ethnic killing. Beyond Kenya, Mueller's analysis sounds this cautionary note to the international community about its approach to, and assessment of, democratization efforts: beware the drawbacks of focusing too closely on formal institutions and ignoring the actual incentives that drive politicians to seek office. In Kenya, as in many transitional democracies, Mueller argues, politicians benefit from violence.

The payoff from electoral violence is at the center of Lahra Smith's chapter on Ethiopia's 2005 and 2010 elections. In 2005, nearly 200 people were killed and 30,000 opposition supporters were imprisoned, as the government cracked down on opposition supporters when the opposition's gains caught it by surprise. The effect was the “nonviolent” 2010 elections in Ethiopia—a result predicted by Höglund (2009). In 2010, voters chose



the ruling party overwhelmingly—paradoxically, with a turnout of more than 93 percent—largely due to fears of repression. Moreover, civil society, which bore a heavy toll in the government’s crackdown and was subjected to a harsher operating environment following the 2005 election, was noticeably absent from the electoral process. The Ethiopia case underscores the importance of understanding the broader context in which an election takes place, and illustrates the detrimental effects of violence.

The case studies end on a hopeful note, with Ghana demonstrating the real possibility of preventing electoral violence. Notably, the Ghanaian election was not entirely free of violence. As in Ethiopia and Kenya, it was a close election, but critical interventions at the national and local levels prevented violence from escalating and kept tensions from transforming into more violent confrontations. Oduro outlines state- and nonstate-led interventions that helped reduce tensions. For example, expatriate voting, which the opposition feared would invite fraud, was disallowed through an interparty advisory council. The ruling party’s attempt to prevent the release of the results of the runoff election was overruled by the fast-track court, and the losing party’s threat not to accept the results was resolved with the intervention of nationally recognized mediators. Coordinating across different sectors, the largest domestic election observation mission delivered early warnings of violence to the media, security agencies, the electoral commission, and other key stakeholders and public institutions. And on election day, the domestic observers used parallel vote tabulation to track the official results. As Oduro writes, these initiatives drove home the point that “the peaceful conduct and outcomes of elections are not the sole responsibility of the [electoral commission].”

To date, there are few multidimensional analyses of electoral violence. This book attempts to broaden academics’ and policymakers’ understanding of the conditions surrounding electoral violence—its scope, nature, patterns—the consequences it may generate, and what may be done to prevent or at least mitigate it. The dataset and the case studies suggest that electoral violence is not necessarily inevitable, may be prevented, and should be understood within its location-specific political context. Collectively, they reveal that a country’s history of electoral violence, a close election, the presence of weak institutions, and declining state resources raise the risk of electoral violence. Thus, at a time when holding elections remains a key objective of many international institutions, nongovernmental organizations, and Western governments, it is important to distill the difficulties of doing so in the new and transitional democracies found in Africa and to develop strategies for avoiding the violence that often accompanies them.



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