Addressing election violence in Liberia

1. Democratic governance in Liberia

Only since the 1990s has there been a notable drive for democratic governance in sub-Saharan Africa that goes beyond merely strengthening governments' technical and administrative capacity to also promoting democracy through, for example, fostering political responsiveness and accountability.[1] A country's ability to hold non-violent elections has become an important indicator of democracy and is vital for free and fair citizen participation.[2] Liberia's experience with democratic governance has been even more limited than sub-Saharan Africa's short history. Indeed, the 2011 elections were the first time that Liberia had a national electoral management body, the National Elections Commission (NEC), capable of organising a national election without external assistance.[3]

Despite the numerous and complex challenges that the NEC faced in organising the 2011 election, including demarcation of new constituency boundaries and establishing candidacy requirements, no serious voting roll irregularities arose on polling day and only isolated incidents of violence were reported.[4] The run-off election was similarly transparent, well-administered, and conducted in accordance with all applicable laws, but was marred by low voter turnout, reports of violence, and a boycott by the opposition party, the Congress for Democratic Change (CDC).[5]

The issues with the run-off election revealed a number of worrying features: deep divisions within

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[1] Alence, "Political institutions and developmental governance in sub-Saharan Africa," 164.
[2] Frazer and Gyimah-Boadi, eds. *Preventing Electoral Violence in Africa*, 15.
[3] The Carter Centre, "National Elections in Liberia, Fall 2011: Final Report," 3.
[4] Ibid, 4.
[5] Ibid, 6.

Liberian society, growing feelings of exclusion, and the weakness of opposition political parties.[6] In the lead up to the October 2017 national elections, it is crucial that these issues are considered and addressed if Liberia is to achieve a strong multiparty democracy and long-term political stability.

2. Patterns of election violence

Election violence refers to "physical violence and coercive intimidation directly tied to an impeding electoral contest or to an announced electoral result."[7] Violence may occur before, during, or after an election, and levels of severity vary from threats and intimidation to targeted disappearances and killings.

A study of African national elections between 1990 and 2007 by Strauss & Taylor revealed some valuable insights into prevalence and severity of election violence, and identified predominant perpetrators of such violence. The study showed that serious election violence (measured by repression and campaigns of violence) occurred in about 19% of African elections during this time, while 39% of elections had less severe forms of violence (primarily harassment) and 42% had no reported election violence.[8] These findings indicated that the occurrence of serious election violence is not that frequent, but doubtlessly frequent enough to warrant significant concern.[9]

Elections pit incumbents against challengers and both sides are known to use violence, although often at different times and under different circumstances.[10] Strauss & Taylor found that incumbents tend to be the primary perpetrators of election violence before or during elections that they engage in violence in order to influence voting preferences to maintain power, and that incumbents often use the coercive power of the state to this end.[11] Challengers, on the other hand, tend to engage in violence after the election, usually to protest the election outcome, and do so without using state means for violence.[12] Most violence takes place either during the pre-election/campaign phase or post-election, rarely does it occur throughout the election cycle.[13]

Few studies have been able to rigorously evaluate the causes of election violence or the effectiveness of mitigation strategies as these topics do not feasibly lend themselves to experimentation. Therefore, observational research and qualitative analysis have been relied upon to identify causes, trends and effective election violence mitigation strategies in sub-Saharan Africa.

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[6] Ibid, 6.
[7] Strauss & Taylor, "Democratisation and electoral violence in sub-Saharan Africa, 1990-2007," 8.
[8] Ibid, 13.
[9] Ibid, 4.
[10] Ibid, 8.
[11] Ibid, 8-9.
[12] Ibid, 8.
[13] Frazer and Gyimah-Boadi, eds. *Preventing Electoral Violence in Africa*, 17.

3. Causes of election violence

Introducing contestation into previously closed political systems has increased the likelihood of election violence.[14] The post-1990s shift to multiparty democracy in Africa has triggered greater competition in elections, raising the stakes of winning and increasing rivalry between contending parties. Where election violence has taken place, pre-election politics were frequently characterised by rising regional, ethnic, and/or religious polarisation.[15]

Incumbents are more likely to engage in violence when their position is threatened and their grip on power appears to be slipping.[16] Where electoral races are close, the incentives for use of violence are the greatest.[17] Stakes can be especially high in post-conflict contexts, where the electoral outcome may determine whether a group is included or excluded in the country's newly emerging post-conflict power structures.[18] Patronage politics amplifies rivals' interest in winning elections and can raise the risk of violence.[19]

Election violence arising out of competitive elections has been particularly prevalent in countries with weak institutions, indicating that democratisation may in fact increase nationalism and armed conflict.[20] Where institutions are malleable and corruptible and power can override property (and other) rights, electoral contests offer an opportunity to redistribute access to resources, especially land, but also marketplace rights and trade routes.[21] Political parties may harness local grievances over access to resources to garner votes, igniting rivalry between different groups and making violence more likely.[22]

The risk of election violence can be exacerbated in countries with notable societal and cultural diversity, as is the case with most African countries.[23] Poor post-independence management of diversity in many African countries has contributed to marginalisation, exclusion, political instability and incidents of conflict.[24]

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[14] Strauss & Taylor, "Democratisation and electoral violence in sub-Saharan Africa, 1990-2007," 2.
[15] Frazer and Gyimah-Boadi, eds. *Preventing Electoral Violence in Africa*, 17.
[16] Hafner-Burton, Hyde & Jablonski, "When do Governments Resort to Election Violence?" 4.
[17] Khan, "Violence and the Vote," 13.
[18] Ibid, 13.
[19] Sisk, "Evaluating election-related violence: Nigeria and Sudan in comparative perspective," in *Voting in Fear*.
[20] Strauss & Taylor, "Democratisation and electoral violence in sub-Saharan Africa, 1990-2007," 3.
[21] Ibid, 6.
[22] Ibid, 6.
[23] Frazer and Gyimah-Boadi, eds. *Preventing Electoral Violence in Africa*, 15.
[24] Ibid,18.

4. Strategies to mitigate election violence

As with the causes of election violence, few rigorous evaluations of mitigation strategies have been possible, but experience has shown some interventions to be more effective than others. USIP recently undertook a study to assess whether interventions implemented in Bangladesh, Malawi, Moldova, Thailand and Honduras demonstrate a measurable impact on electoral violence. They found that well-trained and disciplined security forces and legitimate and effective electoral administration bodies achieve the greatest reductions in election violence.[25] The importance of a transparent, accountable, efficient, and independent election management body that acts in compliance with national laws and international obligations on preventing election violence cannot be understated.[26] To achieve this, adequate and timely funding of the election management body must be a key priority.[27]

Community policing interventions in Liberia have been found to be an effective way to mitigate crime and conflict generally, and may result in reduced violence and increased trust in the police during elections. The Liberia National Police (LNP) instituted 'confidence patrols', which saw members of the Police Support Unit undertake repeated visits to randomly selected villages to share information on the newly launched Regional Justice and Security Hubs and navigating Liberia's security and justice sectors. An evaluation of the confidence patrols found that they increased citizens' knowledge of the police and the Hubs, and had a strong impact on strengthening the security of property rights.[28] They were also associated with a reduced incidence of simple assault and raised (self-reported) usage of the police and courts for some types of serious crimes.[29] Since lack of trust in the police may be a potential trigger for election violence, efforts such as confidence patrols that build citizen-police trust and show police support of communities are vital.

Well-trained election officials at polling stations play a crucial role in ensuring orderly voting, and can be on hand to address issues before they escalate to violence.[30] Dialogue between election stakeholders is needed to establish codes of conduct ahead of elections, and to facilitate sharing of information, regular meetings, and contingency planning.[31] Fast and effective dispute resolution mechanisms should also be in place to hear complaints as they arise, before suspicion and anger develops into violence.[32] These dispute resolution processes should be affordable and accessible, likely involving initial lodging of grievances with the national election management body, and further recourse to arbitration committees and, possibly, the domestic judicial system.

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[25] Claes, blog on USIP, "Electing Peace: What Works in Preventing Election Violence."
[26] The Carter Centre International Election Observation in Liberia Pre-Election Statement.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Blair et al, "Building trust in a reformed security sector."
[29] Ibid.
[30] Discussion on UNDP guidelines on prevention of election violence.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid.

At the same time, official conflict resolution processes have been criticised for their inaccessibility to the average citizen, particularly to youth. Election monitoring and civic education appear to be the most effective prevention tools available to civil society and international actors.[33] However, it is important that election monitoring goes beyond assessing the technical quality of the electoral process to also cover outbreaks of violence and other irregularities on polling day.[34] Observation should also begin well ahead of the elections to ensure identification of potential problems early enough to enable them to be addressed before polling day.[35] Organisations such as the National Initiative for Peaceful Elections, which deals objectively with election matters and conflict resolution, may play a valuable role in facilitating dialogue between the NEC and political parties, for example, thereby mitigating election violence.

Peace messaging, voter consultations, and youth programming have small or unclear impacts on reducing election violence, but have positive effects nonetheless.[36] There is some support for peer mediation, particularly led by youth leaders of political parties who tend to be more accessible and relatable to youth than national party leaders are. Peer mediation may be assisted by civil society, such as Mediators Beyond Borders International, which works to promote mediation and enhance local mediation capacity. Further research remains to be done to evaluate the successes of these interventions in managing election violence.

5. Final remarks

Although Africa's transition towards multiparty democracy has often been accompanied by violence, particularly around elections, significant progress has nevertheless been achieved within a notably short period of time. This is evidenced by greater freedom of media, regular multi-party elections becoming more common and more competitive, civil society gaining in strength, and judiciaries securing increased independence.[37] Liberia, too, has come a very long way in a short period of time. The NEC has proven itself to be capable of effectively administering national elections and the LNP has taken concrete steps towards building citizen-police trust and reducing conflict and crime through community policing.

The October 2017 election will see the first handover of power from a democratically elected president to a new regime. Investing adequate resources into the NEC and local judicial forums, training and preparing the security forces to preserve peace around the elections, and allowing the international community and civil society engage unhindered in election monitoring, voter education, peace messaging, and other interventions will be crucial to ensuring that the election is free and fair.

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[33] Claes, blog on USIP, "Electing Peace: What Works in Preventing Election Violence."
[34] Ibid.
[35] The Carter Centre International Election Observation in Liberia Pre-Election Statement.
[36] Claes, blog on USIP, "Electing Peace: What Works in Preventing Election Violence."
[37] Strauss & Taylor, "Democratisation and electoral violence in sub-Saharan Africa, 1990-2007," 2.

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