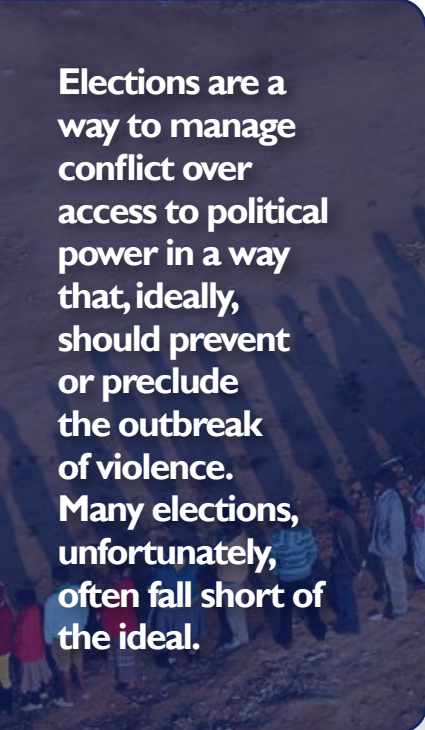


# ELECTION TRENDS IN AFRICA

Stephanie Burchard



Elections are a way to manage conflict over access to political power in a way that, ideally, should prevent or preclude the outbreak of violence. Many elections, unfortunately, often fall short of the ideal.

**B**eginning in the late 1980s, a seismic political shift took place in sub-Saharan Africa. In rapid-fire succession, autocratic regimes fell and were replaced by (at least notionally) democratic regimes. Whereas only a handful of countries in Africa could have been considered democratic in 1990, by 1997 approximately 75 percent of countries set out on a path of democratization by adopting multiparty elections (Adejumobi 2000). Unfortunately, violence has been a regular and persistent feature of many elections held in Africa since 1990. What accounts for this trend and what impact has it had on democratic development in Africa?

Electoral violence is any act of harassment or intimidation that is either intentionally or incidentally meant to affect the outcome of an election. Actors include state security forces, opposition supporters, partisan operatives, youth group militias, and thugs hired by politicians. Violence can occur either before or after the results are announced. Pre-election violence is generally more prevalent, but post-election violence is more deadly. Incidental violence is not planned but rather occurs as the result of heated or emotionally charged elections and happenstance (e.g., protests turn into riots, security forces respond to protesters with excessive force). Strategic violence, on the other hand, is planned in advance. Examples include political assassinations, attacks on an opposition meeting or rally, thugs dispatched through neighborhoods to threaten citizens to vote, people forced to flee communities due to threats or actual violence (arson frequently gets the message across). Violence has the ability to spread quickly and affect citizens and institutions exponentially.

Elections are a way to manage conflict over access to political power in a way that, ideally, should prevent or preclude the outbreak of violence. Many elections, unfortunately, often fall short of the ideal. Globally, roughly 19 percent of elections experience violence (Norris 2012). In sub-Saharan Africa, this number is substantially higher by a magnitude of between two and three orders. Building on previous data collected by colleagues, I compiled information on election violence in all elections held in sub-Saharan Africa between 1990 and 2014—289 elections in total. I estimate that, on average, between 50 and 60 percent of elections held in Africa can be considered violent.

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African experiences are instructive for understanding the how and why of electoral violence more broadly because of the many similarities and differences found across sub-Saharan Africa's 48 countries. Many countries share common colonial histories, and post-colonial trends have tended to come in waves; however, differences across the countries in terms of specific political institutions and democratic trajectories provide analytic leverage that helps identify the causes and consequences of electoral violence.

Several countries have little if any experience with electoral violence. These countries include Benin, Botswana, Cape Verde, and Mauritius. The majority of election violence (65 percent) is of the low-grade variety, characterized by violent harassment and intimidation. Elections in Cameroon, Djibouti, Gabon, Gambia, and Swaziland frequently fit into this category. Targeted assassinations and prolonged imprisonment of opposition members occur in 19 percent of violent elections. Burundi, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Uganda often experience these types of electoral incidents. Widespread generalized violence with numerous fatalities, typically ranging from several dozen to several thousand, occurs in 16 percent of violent elections. Examples include the 2007–2008 post-election violence in Kenya, in which upwards of 1,500 were killed and 660,000 were displaced; Côte d'Ivoire's 2010 election crisis, which resulted in approximately 3,000 deaths in the months after the election; and the 2011 Nigerian election in which more than 800 died. Adding to this

complexity, while there are trends in which countries typically experience violent elections, there is substantial in-country variation from election to election. Kenyan elections are typically violent, but not always, and some elections are more violent than others.

Countries with non-violent elections tend to score better on indices that measure political freedoms, civil liberties, adherence to rule of law, and political accountability. More inclusive electoral institutions, such as proportional representation, are associated with lower rates of electoral violence. Conversely, elections held in less-than-democratic settings—where rule of law is weak, political freedoms are curtailed, and accountability is weak—are generally more violent than not. Presidential elections are typically more violent than legislative elections, but violence is not exclusive to one or the other. It is often obscured by the high-profile nature of presidential elections, but legislative aspirants utilize election violence as well.

Electoral institutions that have a low threshold for victory, such as plurality rules in single member districts, are more prone to violent outbreaks. Finally, electoral fraud and electoral violence are highly correlated and seem to be complementary electoral strategies and fodder for violent protestation of electoral results.

Beyond the obvious concern for human life, electoral violence is problematic for a number of reasons. First, in a worst case scenario, civil war or a deadly political conflict that requires international mediation

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has broken out following a number of contentious elections including Angola in 1992, Republic of Congo in 1994, Togo in 2005, Kenya in 2007, Zimbabwe in 2008, Côte d'Ivoire in 2010, and Nigeria in 2011. However, there are also associated risks with elections that experience even low levels of violence. These types of elections are related to lower levels of satisfaction with democracy, support for democracy, and trust in democratic institutions at the individual level. It is in this way that electoral violence can eat democracy alive from the outside-in by targeting those whose consent democratic development depends heavily upon: the citizens.

What can be done? My research suggests several ways to reduce incidences of electoral violence, all of which work to increase trust

in the electoral process and build consensus among key actors in the electoral arena. First, robust domestic observation that includes critical buy-in from political parties, the press, and civil society can go a long way to decreasing the likelihood of electoral violence. Second, ancillary electoral institutions need to be supported. Independent electoral management bodies and strong judiciaries are related to more peaceful elections. Finally, working to reduce the winner-take-all mentality of elections can also de-escalate electoral tensions and prevent violence. Decentralizing political power, by creating local government bodies and adopting consensus-building electoral rules that require manufactured majorities, can reduce electoral stakes and the incentives for violence.



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***Electoral Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa: Causes and Consequences***

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