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By Dr. Ashley N. Bybee

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West Africa and the Gulf of Guinea. (Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna, "Transnational Organized Crime in the West African Region" (New York: United Nations 2005, ii), <http://tinyurl.com/yb58tfml>.)

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A Kenyan goes through the names of registered voters posted on the wall at a polling station, in Nairobi, Kenya, Friday, August 4, 2017. (Source: AP Photo/Sayyid Abdul Azim.)

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Background

Piracy (defined broadly as an attack by a nonstate actor occurring on the high seas) and armed robbery (an attack occurring within a country's territorial waters) have been major security threats for East and West Africa since the [2000s](#). In 2008, the number of attacks in Somali waters doubled, focusing the world's attention on a region that plays an important role in the international shipping industry. The attacks by pirates were primarily kidnappings for ransom of ships and crews. Meanwhile, oil theft in the GOG was relatively common—so often that much of it went [unreported](#). In 2016, however, kidnappings for ransom in the GOG [increased dramatically](#), representing a departure from the standard behavior of criminals in that region. The reason for this shift is most commonly attributed to the [declining price of oil](#) at that time, making oil theft a less lucrative option than kidnappings for ransom. More generally, the interaction of a number of economic, social, political, and technological factors has produced an environment in which criminal networks now have the means to pursue new options.

Piracy in the GOG—An Increasingly Sophisticated Pastime

Piracy in the GOG differs in some significant ways from piracy in the HOA. In the HOA, the foreign vessels transiting the Indian Ocean and Gulf of Aden are not targeted for their freight, but for their crews, whose nationalities are considered to be wealthy and whose governments are likely to pay ransoms. In the GOG, Nigeria's criminal networks have focused on oil theft, targeting vessels exporting crude or importing refined petroleum products, which they then sell on the black market. These incidents tend to occur within 12 miles of a country's shores, qualifying them legally as armed robbery rather than piracy, and warrant a different type of response due to legal definitions. Attacks in the GOG also tend to be [quicker](#) operations and more violent, since preserving the life of the crew is not the same priority as it is for kidnappings in the HOA.

Most significantly, the level of [sophistication](#) of criminal networks operating in the GOG is growing. The region, and Nigeria in particular, is home to a multitude of [criminal networks](#) that operate in many illicit sectors, ranging from trafficking (of drugs, arms, humans, minerals, counterfeit goods) to illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing. According to [David Luna](#), an expert in transnational organized crime, these maritime criminals take advantage of the presence of fishing vessels and other legitimate trades to provide a [cover](#) for their illicit activities. They employ modern technology, have honed their skills, improved their [intelligence](#), increased the degree of their collaboration, and enhanced their understanding of international maritime laws. The enabling power of endemic [corruption](#) in the region, manifested by [collusion](#) of some government officials with criminal networks, undermines law enforcement efforts to counter West African organized crime.

An International Solution to an International Problem

The legal differentiation between piracy on the high seas (as in Somalia) and armed robbery in national waters (as in the GOG) affects the type of response appropriate to each environment. Piracy is considered to be an international crime, warranting an [internationally sanctioned response](#) such as that coordinated among the EU, NATO, and several national navies in the Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean. Armed robbery, on the other hand, occurs within a state's territorial waters, where most countries [prohibit](#) the use of private armed guards. The use of armed guards and the presence of foreign navies, which proved to be an [effective deterrent](#) in the HOA, are therefore not options for the GOG. Instead, ship owners operating in the GOG must take responsibility for the security of their own vessels and therefore are focusing increasingly on physical security enhancements, such as [fortified engine rooms](#) where crew members can barricade themselves in the event of a hijacking.

The private sector appears to have identified a niche in this regard. The Swedish car manufacturer [Saab](#) has presented itself as a provider of technology for African countries to monitor and protect their maritime assets, producing vessel-to-vessel secure communication systems, vessel traffic management systems, vessel detection systems, and maritime surveillance aircraft. The ability of African maritime forces to effectively employ and maintain such potentially useful equipment remains to be seen.

A Regional Solution to a Regional Problem

The countries in the region should be commended for their commitment to the "Yaounde Code of Conduct," a political agreement for all countries affected by maritime insecurity in the GOG to work together strategically and operationally. This agreement provides the basis for enhanced intelligence sharing and joint counterpiracy operations. In [2016](#), ten navies in the region participated in some capacity in the successful recapture of a hijacked vessel 70 nautical miles south of Côte d'Ivoire. Although the operation was aided by the unplanned but fortunate presence of an American naval vessel, it represents the vision for regional maritime cooperation in the GOG.

Conclusion

Somali piracy, though on a downward trajectory, will continue to pose a threat as long as Somalia remains a [failed state](#) where poverty motivates individuals to resort to criminality. Likewise, the resilience and entrepreneurial spirit of West African organized crime networks, enabled by corruption and undeterred by weak law enforcement institutions, suggests that armed robbery in the GOG will be a persistent threat for the foreseeable future. In addition, unique developments in each region are certain to affect the situation. In the HOA, some analysts have noted that a resurgence in piracy may be [imminent](#) as a result of decreased foreign presence and the cost-cutting measures some ship owners have adopted recently that increase their vulnerability, such as sailing closer to the coast, at slower speeds and with fewer armed guards. In the GOG, the proliferation of illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing and the subsequent depletion of fish stocks have left many West African [fishermen](#) frustrated and [vulnerable to recruitment](#) by criminal gangs.

While enhanced physical security measures may protect the lives of crew members, addressing oil-related corruption, strengthening national law enforcement and naval institutions, and increasing the capabilities and cooperation of navies in the region would provide the best means for deterring criminality in the GOG and punishing it when it occurs.

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Overview: Trends of Election Violence in Africa

In 2015, IDA Research Staff Member Stephanie Burchard [published](#) a book on election violence in Africa. She found that during the 1990-to-2015 period, roughly 50 percent of elections in Africa featured some form of violence. The severity of the violence ranged from harassment and intimidation, to targeted assassinations, to, in a few cases, significant numbers of deaths. Whereas most election-related violence did not go beyond intimidation or harassment, 20 percent of all elections held in Africa featured politically motivated assassinations, widespread violence (20 or more deaths), or both. Most of the violence occurred before elections, but rare cases of post-election violence were the most intense and deadly, as in Kenya in 2008 and Ivory Coast in 2011. Burchard found that some violence is strategic (planned), and some is incidental (spontaneous). She estimated that roughly 40 percent of all election violence in Africa is strategic, and 60 percent is incidental.

Election Violence Factors

What factors put a country at risk for election violence? The existing academic research has identified a number of triggers and conditions that contribute to and correlate with election violence in Africa. These factors include [close](#) elections, a history of electoral violence, a declining economy, weak institutions and weak adherence to the rule of law, tensions over [land](#) rights, economic and ethnic marginalization, certain [types](#) of electoral systems (namely “winner takes all”), biased electoral management bodies, and electoral fraud. The last is especially highly correlated with election violence. Indeed, more than 50 percent of African elections deemed to be fraudulent [experienced](#) election violence as well.

What Countries Are at Risk Over the Next 18 Months?

Eight or nine presidential [elections](#) are expected to be held from now through 2018 in sub-Saharan Africa. Two are scheduled in 2017: Angola (later in August) and Liberia (October). A December 2016 political agreement in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) stipulated that elections should be held by the end of 2017, but they have not yet been scheduled and are highly [unlikely](#) to be held before the end of the year. Six or seven elections are expected to be held in 2018: Sierra Leone (February), Madagascar (May), Mali (July), Zimbabwe (July), Cameroon (October), DRC (not yet scheduled), and South Sudan (scheduled for July but [unlikely](#) to take place on time due to the ongoing civil war).

If past trends hold, given that half of African elections have been violent since 1990, electoral violence might occur in the next 18 months in about four of these countries. The questions are where will violence occur and at what level of severity. While a handful of these countries feature a number of the risk factors outlined above (including Mali, Angola, and Cameroon), the upcoming presidential contests in Zimbabwe and the DRC are particularly at risk of large-scale electoral violence.

Zimbabwe

A handful of factors present in Zimbabwe put the country at significant risk of election-related violence: an extended [history](#) of widespread election violence (more than 200 killed in the 2008 election), a potentially close poll, a history of land-based conflict, a deteriorating economy (GDP growth has [contracted](#) every year since 2013 in Zimbabwe), and partisan institutions (the [security sector](#) in particular). If 93-year-old President Robert Mugabe manages to stay alive and in office, and if a relatively [united](#) opposition alliance appears to be a real threat to his rule, Mugabe is likely to again use the security sector and informal party militias to clamp down on the opposition. On the other hand, if Mugabe departs the scene through death or retirement, his departure will make the race more competitive, as none of his potential successors enjoy his level of [popularity](#).

DRC

A number of conditions in the DRC also put the country at risk of significant election-related violence. Like Zimbabwe, the DRC has a history of election violence (dozens were [killed](#) in both the 2011 and 2006 polls) and a slumping economy (GDP growth has been generally high until 2016, when it [dropped](#) to 2.4 percent). The country also has generally weak institutions and a history of electoral [fraud](#). Compounding these risk factors is the refusal of incumbent President Joseph Kabila, in office since 2001, to step down. Kabila's final term finished at the end of 2016, but after the deaths of at least [56](#) demonstrators, Kabila negotiated an agreement in late 2016 that allowed him to stay in office until elections were held (by the end of 2017). In July 2017, however, Kabila [said](#) that he "promised nothing" in the 2016 political agreement, and the country's electoral commission [claimed](#) that it will be unable to hold elections in 2017 due to a lack of funds and ongoing [unrest](#).

Conclusion

While election violence is common in Africa, the severity of post-election violence seen in Kenya (at present and in 2008) is fortunately quite rare. Given past patterns, varying levels of electoral violence are likely to occur in Africa over the next 18 months, with Zimbabwe and the DRC particularly at risk of election-related violence.

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