

VIOLENCE IN AFRICAN ELECTIONS

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FRONT: Riot police move through the streets of Sierra Leone's capital Freetown, September 17, 2007, when opposition leader Ernest Bai Koroma was sworn in as Sierra Leone's president after winning polls marked by violence and some fraud. Photo: Katrina Manson, Reuters.

BACK: (In the background) Campaign posters from the 2012 General Elections in Sierra Leone. Photo by author Mimmi Söderberg-Kovacs.

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Violence in African Elections

The benefits of winning elections, and the disadvantages of losing them, must be reduced to avoid the violence that a winner-takes-all situation can trigger. Election observers should pay more attention to subtle forms of violence, intra-party tensions and incumbents playing the security card to justify increased use of force. This policy note considers how to curb the increase of violence in African elections.

JESPER BJARNESEN, the Nordic Africa Institute, and MIMMI SÖDERBERG KOVACS, Folke Bernadotte Academy

There is a seeming paradox at work on the African continent. Democracy has established itself as the dominant political system; and as an integral part of this process, multi-party elections have emerged as the most legitimate route to political office. Yet, in recent years violence has increased in such elections. Based on findings from our recently published book *Violence in African Elections*, this policy note reflects on how to explain this trend and the considerable variations in when and where electoral violence occurs in specific countries.

Between democracy and 'Big Man' politics

Although the formal institutional make-up of many African states has changed, the underlying logic of

politics has not. Power and resources are still largely concentrated at the centre, raising the stakes of elections. The winner literally takes it all, while the loser is left 'standing small'. In a strongly politicised 'Big Man' system, individuals must be sure they have backed the right horse in the lead-up to elections to protect their own interests.

What has drastically changed in many countries, however, is the emergence of real political competition for power and more efficient restraints on electoral fraud, such as ballot stuffing. As democracy slowly becomes entrenched, and electoral competition grows stronger, the risk of election-related violence may increase.

Not only are there significant benefits to be gained from the control over the executive office, high costs are



Bujumbura, Burundi, April 2015. Protests on the street against incumbent president Nkurunziza's drive for a third consecutive term in office.

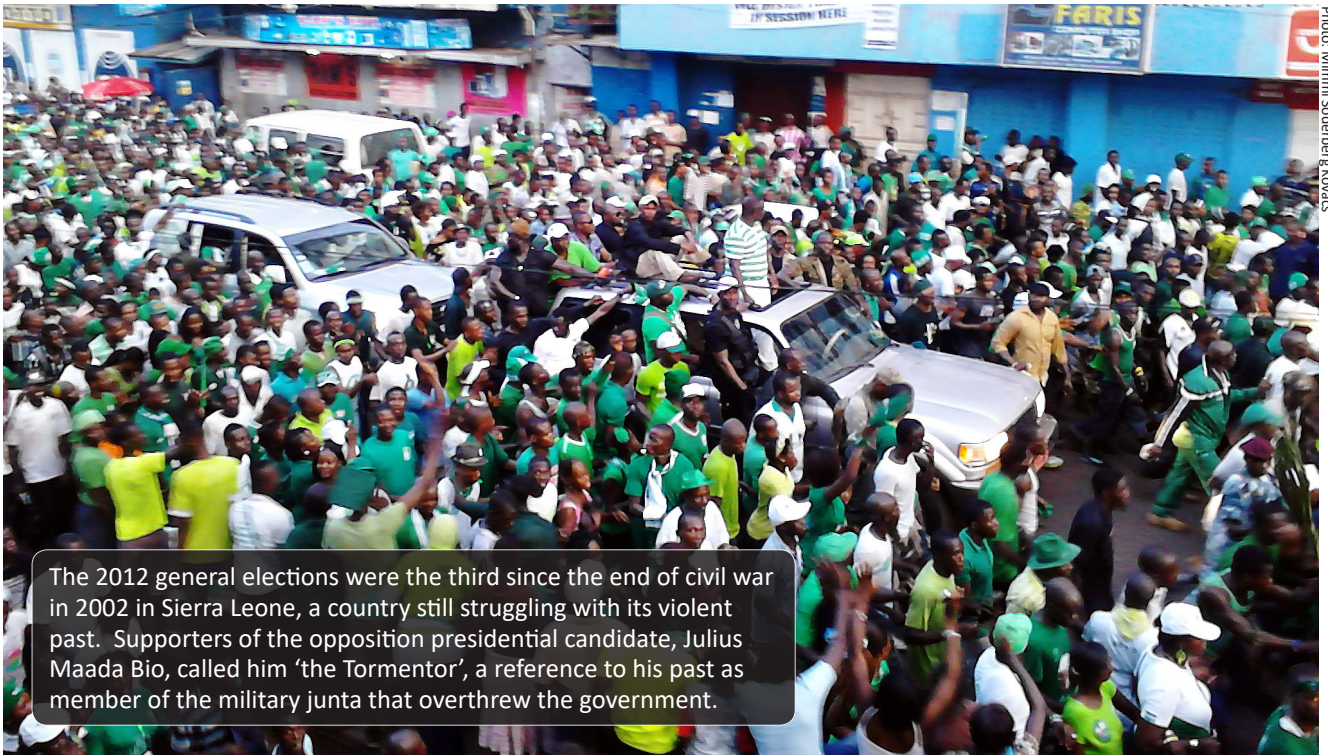


Photo: Miriam Scherberg Kovacs

The 2012 general elections were the third since the end of civil war in 2002 in Sierra Leone, a country still struggling with its violent past. Supporters of the opposition presidential candidate, Julius Maada Bio, called him 'the Tormentor', a reference to his past as member of the military junta that overthrew the government.

also often associated with an electoral loss. Some costs may even have increased as democracy has gained ground, such as those associated with human rights abuses committed while in power. Consequently, the ways in which political actors seek to influence electoral outcomes and processes have become more varied and, sometimes, subtler.

Beyond the headlines

Over the past few years, large-scale violence has been reported during elections in Africa. A recent study using data from more than 50 African elections from 2011 to 2017, showed that almost all these elections had cases of electoral violence at some stage of the poll (Kewir et Gabriel 2018). The risk of violence is especially evident when incumbents propose referenda or parliamentary votes to change the constitution in a bid to extend their presidential terms, as was the case in Burkina Faso 2014 and Burundi 2015. Beyond the relatively few cases that make it to the international headlines, many countries experience an 'everyday' kind of electoral violence: low-scale but pervasive and typically occurring long before election day, between electoral cycles, and in local elections far away from the international spotlight.

Electoral violence is not limited to general and national elections. In Sierra Leone, for example, several parliamentary by-elections at constituency level have generated high levels of violence, intimidation and insecurity, as the main political parties compete to hold ground and make territorial in-roads in preparation for

the next round of national elections.

Another arena for electoral violence, not usually depicted in scholarly literature, is intra-party politics. Party members are involved in a constant struggle to create and maintain the connections that will ensure their progress up the party ladder. This struggle often intensifies around transition times. In the absence of clear succession plans, this can result in vicious intimidation and violent attacks. For instance, in Burundi, violence that broke out in connection to elections in 2015 was preceded by a longer period of intra-party tensions and attacks on individuals within the ruling party.

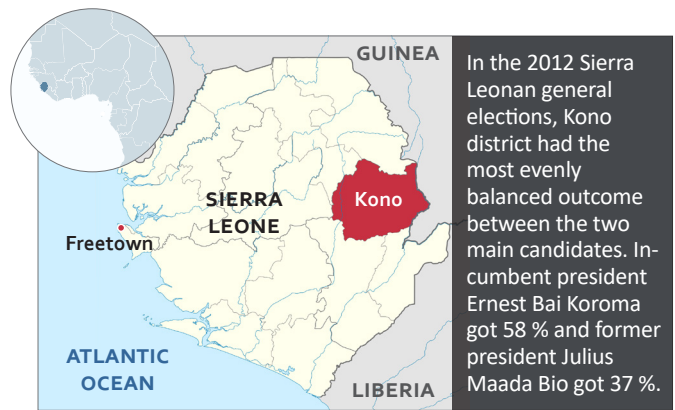
Popping balloons can also be violent

Beyond physical violence, violent discourse can be effective in mobilising political campaigns, especially in political environments coloured by ethnic and regional stereotypes and a previous history of conflict. In the 2012 general election campaign in Sierra Leone, supporters of the opposition presidential candidate, Julius Maada Bio, called him 'the Tormentor', a reference to his past as member of the military junta that overthrew the government. Sometimes, words are unnecessary to evoke memories of a violent past. During protests in 2015 in Burundi, members of the ruling party's youth militia were heard outside public radio station Radio Publique Africaine (RPA), widely known for its critical opinions of the government, popping balloons to resemble the sounds of gunshots.

The geography of violence

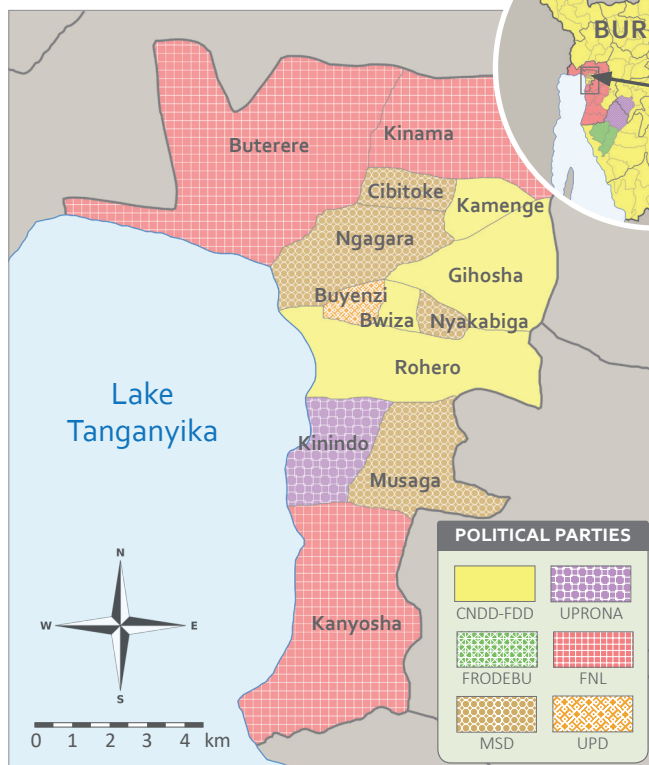
To understand the specific patterns and character of violence within a country, it is useful to apply a sub-national perspective that links macro-level events and processes to micro-level dynamics. For example, the Eastern district of Kono in Sierra Leone has experienced high levels of electoral violence since the outset of competitive party politics. This is linked to its unique role as an electoral swing district in a country otherwise driven by a predictable regional and ethnic logic, splitting it into two equally sized strongholds between the major political parties. However, Kono is ethnically diverse and cosmopolitan. Its electorate may swing in either direction, potentially determining the outcome of national elections. This means that Kono finds itself courted by all political parties, who resort to a wide range of violent or coercive strategies to mobilise voters and prevent potential supporters of other parties from casting their votes.

Likewise, to understand the geography of violence in Burundi's capital Bujumbura in the 2015 elections, we need to look to the legacy of ethno-political loyalties and socio-economic inequalities in the city. This explains why some neighbourhoods became the epicentre for clashes between protesters and security forces, while others remained largely peaceful. If we compare the geographic distribution of violence in Bujumbura during April–November

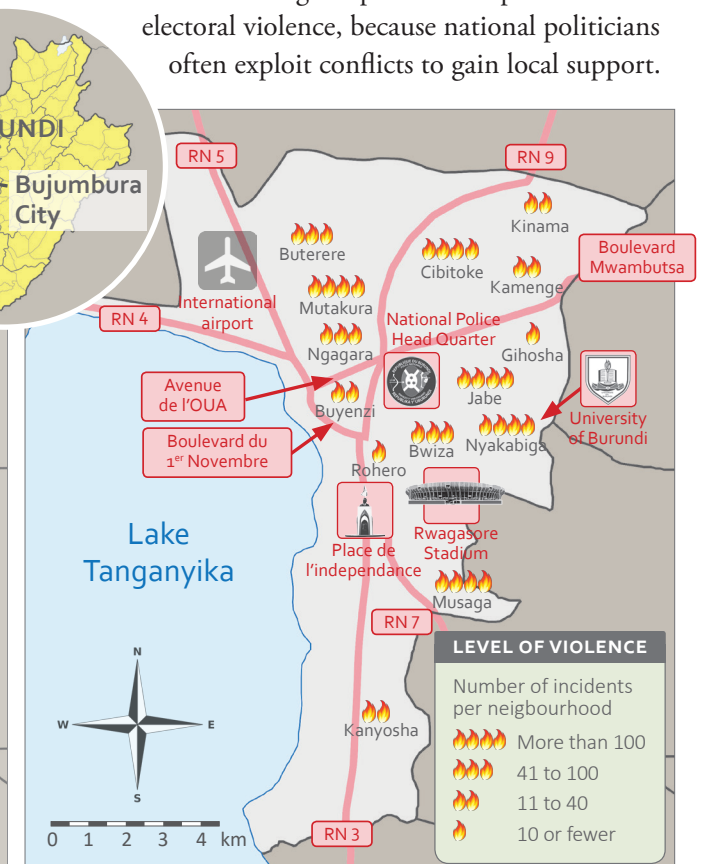


2015 (Map 1) with the results of the 2010 municipal elections (Map 2), it is evident that most people in the capital voted for the joint opposition in 2010. The comparison also shows that the neighbourhoods where opposition parties won in 2010 correspond closely to those most affected by violence in 2015. This also helps us understand the excessively violent response by the security forces, since the clampdown on what were initially peaceful protests must be understood in relation to the reputation of particular neighbourhoods as opposition strongholds.

In other countries on the continent – for example, Kenya and Côte d'Ivoire – unresolved land disputes at local level are a good predictor of patterns of electoral violence, because national politicians often exploit conflicts to gain local support.



Map 1. Bujumbura city. National distribution of votes in Burundi's municipal elections 2010. Based on the results announced by the National Independent Electoral Commission (CENI).



Map 2. Bujumbura city. Distribution of violent incidents, April–November 2015, based on data provided by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED).

The usual – and not so usual – suspects

The strategic motives of the actors involved are a fundamental feature of electoral violence. The main culprit is usually the incumbent party. Sometimes the pattern of violent mobilisation around elections was established in colonial times or during the days of single-party rule, as competing elites struggled to control patronage resources. The legacies of injustice created through this practice went on to shape the pattern of elite competition and mass electoral support during the era of competitive party politics.

Because patron-client networks are commonly organised along ethnic lines or regional constellations, multi-party elections are often characterised by direct or indirect mobilisation of ethnic or regional votes. However, our research shows that elites are affected by the presence or absence of institutional constraints. Constitutional or electoral reforms and policies can significantly influence the incentives and opportunities for elites to mobilise electoral violence.

The important role elites play in processes of electoral violence does not exclude the fact that, behind and beyond this picture, we find a range of additional actors and a diversity of motives. One factor in particular that favours the elite in many African countries is the large number of unemployed young people – mostly men – who provide a useful and replaceable workforce as ‘foot soldiers’ of electoral violence.

In Sierra Leone, former armed combatants from the civil war and other urban youths are often approached by Big Men who want to engage their violent services around elections in exchange for short-term benefits. In Burundi, the ruling party trained and armed its youth

militia and used it as a paramilitary force to terrorise all those who were perceived to oppose President Pierre Nkurunziza’s bid for a third term in office during the 2015 elections.

Individuals sometimes have their own motives for engaging in electoral violence, such as private score settling against rival groups. They may also engage in violent activities without any prior contact with, or encouragement or instructions from Big Men, hoping that their sacrifice will be noticed and rewarded. However, their violent behaviour can only be understood if we recognise that they are instruments of the political elite.

Other actors also play vital roles in local trajectories of electoral violence. In Sierra Leone, traditional authorities are one of the most important political intermediaries between the political elites and people in rural areas. Many local chiefs hold great influence in the countryside. Political elites depend on them to mobilise voters. Most chiefs also have a vested interest in maintaining favourable connections with the government to fulfil their duties to secure contracts for development projects in their chiefdoms.

They participate actively in election campaigns, providing carrots and sticks to convince their populations to vote for certain candidates, and put pressure on section chiefs to follow their lead. In this way, complex alliances and mutual dependencies are shaped and formed, where vulnerability runs in both directions. The political elites are acutely aware of the potential benefits of involving local actors in their electoral campaigns, but also of the debts they owe their dependants if they are to sustain their support.

VIOLENCE IN AFRICAN ELECTIONS BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND BIG MAN POLITICS

This policy note is based on the book *Violence in African Elections*, edited by Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs and Jesper Bjarnesen. It is a collection of eleven case studies from different Sub-Saharan countries, offering a comprehensive examination of the causes of Africa’s violent electoral clashes, and the consequences for African democratisation and peace-keeping.

By mapping, analysing and comparing instances of election violence across Africa, this collection sheds light on the underlying dynamics and sub-national causes behind electoral violence, revealing them to be the result of a complex interplay between democratisation and the patronage-based system of ‘Big Man’ politics.

Violence in African Elections: Between Democracy and Big Man Politics

Edited by Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs and Jesper Bjarnesen

The Nordic Africa Institute and Zed Books, 2018

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nai.uu.se/electoralviolence



Policy recommendations

In light of these challenges, we suggest investing more attention and resources in the following long-term measures:

Lower the stakes of elections

The benefits of winning elections must be reduced. Political and economic power should be fundamentally decentralised and redistributed in a meaningful way. Institutions that serve as checks and balances on executive power need to be strengthened. Holding political office should not be a guaranteed route to impunity for life for violence and human rights abuses. The choice of electoral systems is also important in this respect. Electoral reform can play a key role in circumventing winner-take-all elections and encourage more broad-based political solutions. There must also be a role in the system for electoral losers.

The role of parliaments must be strengthened; the political opposition must have access to expression, influence and resources; and local governance structures must become more independent and self-sufficient. The problem is not patronage politics per se. It is that all networks are organised in such a way that they are ultimately tied to the top office.

Support democratisation beyond elections

Democracy must extend beyond formal electoral institutions. It is important to acknowledge that while elections may have emerged as the only game in town, democracy has not. And it may be precisely because multi-party elections are gaining ground that we see a rise in election-related violence. As genuine political competition emerges and becomes an integral part of the political system, the outcome of elections matters more than ever. At the same time, political tolerance for divergence of opinion is often low, institutions weak or manipulated, the rule of law largely absent, and large parts of civil society politicised.

Impunity for political violence is often widespread. Hence, one of the most important and fundamental remedies for addressing electoral violence is to support the democratisation of the political landscape beyond elections. Considering the large number of armed groups that converge on political parties and the multitude of individuals in many post-war African settings who lay down their arms to pursue electoral politics, more effort should go into supporting such transformative processes to move in a peaceful and democratic direction.

Expand election monitoring

More time and resources should be devoted to the periods between general elections. Many instances of electoral violence take place long before election day and within political parties. One way is to support domestic election observation missions that have the capacity to remain in place for extended periods of time and ensure their presence in remote locations.

More attention should also be paid to subtle forms of election-related violence. Verbal threats and belligerent narratives may play an instrumental role in securitising social processes, especially in the context of elections in new and fragile democracies and post-conflict societies. More support should be devoted to institutions and processes that aim to strengthen intra-party democracy, such as codes of conduct for political parties and intra-party mediation; and not only at the time of general elections, but as permanent institutions.

Rethink electoral security

One of the cards incumbents often play to control and manipulate electoral processes to their advantage is to deliberately securitise them to justify the need for increased security measures. Such measures may consist of arming security forces and other actors, declaring a state of emergency to enable the unconstitutional use of force, banning public protests and demonstrations, or changing media laws. While upholding law and order is the duty of the government in power, such measures also carry critical risks in countries where the government is often accused of conflating the party with the state. International actors involved in electoral assistance and support need to be aware of these dynamics and ensure that civil liberties and rights are not circumvented under the guise of security measures.

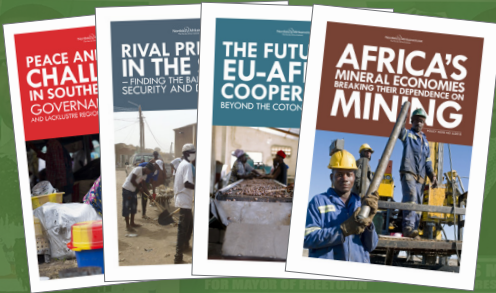
Address unresolved conflicts at local level

Lingering conflicts over land, social exclusion or unresolved post-conflict resentments often feed into and reinforce electoral violence at local level. Localised conflicts amplify the possibilities for elites to recruit and mobilise people for electoral violence. Specifically, strengthening and supporting land reforms may be one of the most important factors for the prevention of electoral violence. Issues concerning origin and hereditary rights are among the most crucial and contested in political life in Africa. At the same time, unresolved land disputes are often an integral component of a greater pattern of political, social and economic inequalities, and may be difficult to address in isolation.



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About the authors



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