

Election-Related Violence in Urban Spaces: Implications for Monitoring and Mitigation

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Turbulent processes of democratization, together with the rapid growth of urban areas, have led to a dramatic increase in city-level, election-related violence worldwide. Underlying tensions emanating from factors such as scarcity and inequality, poorly planned urban spaces, social discrimination and exclusion often escalate during hard-fought elections or in their immediate aftermath. Cities can be crucibles of violence during national and local elections since the potential for unrest is amplified in politically heterogeneous urban settings, and competing parties' rallies and media reports present visible challenges to group power relations.

Most urban violence goes unrecorded in global databases on 'wars' because of the strict construction of definitions that these studies use; the result is a stark limit on knowledge of the precise extent of urban political violence *per se*.¹ Yet there is good reason to believe – from Baghdad to Cairo, Lagos, Guatemala City and Nairobi – much 'political violence' in the 21st century unfolds in urban settings and that upsurges in violence are closely linked to electoral processes. For example, the 2008 election violence in Kenya left devastation in its wake in Nairobi and displaced thousands from the sprawling informal settlements of Kibera and Mathare.² The human security consequences of the election-related violence were clear. According to the Jesuit Refugee Service,

"In Kibera, a shanty area in Nairobi, kiosks and small food stalls owned by many locals and refugees were destroyed in arson attacks. Moreover, rising prices and unemployment, as well as disintegrating community structures, have made it hard for refugees to survive in the city. Shortages of housing in safe areas have also had a negative impact on refugees in vulnerable situations. In parts of Nairobi, refugees have been refused accommodation or even told to leave because houses have been 'reserved' for members of certain ethnic groups. One of the groups seriously affected by this violence has been children, many of whom have been subsequently unable to attend school."³

Understanding Drivers and Patterns

While no single theory can account for all the drivers of election violence, there is consensus around three critical aspects: the context of democratization or political change in which violence occurs, the effects of electoral system choice and electoral administration on conflict dynamics, and the nature and patterns of political mobilization.⁴ While small-scale acts of violence may be perpetrated by lone individuals, endemic or chronic election violence is usually the consequence of extensive organization and purposeful mobilization. Literature on political violence suggests that extensive or instrumental use of violence requires no small amount of leadership, organization, and resources.⁵

While much focus on violence is placed on national elections as high-stakes contests, in weak state environments much election violence is localized because the premium on winning local offices (such as mayoral contests) is also high. Research on local elections in such situations indicates that access to government power at the municipal level is a strong driver of election-related violence. A significant aspect of local-level election violence is the capacity of mid-level political (and criminal) elites to create collective action incentives and sanctions and to field paramilitaries with loyalty to them or their faction, rather than to

the state. These paramilitaries are often involved in the use of violence as an instrument of, or a reaction to, electoral fraud.⁶

Two weeks before the Philippines' congressional and local elections in May 2007, the country's Chief of Police Operations reported that 22 politicians had been killed and about 80 election-related violent events had occurred within the previous four months.⁷ Observers attributed election-related violence in the country to several factors, such as a history of intense rivalry among political clans, stark competition for government posts that carry the potential for power and access to resources and state largesse, and a broader culture of violence in which small arms are plentiful and often in use.⁸ According to the police, powerful politicians often have their own private armies and some members of the security forces were also acting to protect or serve political bosses. Additionally, armed insurgencies in parts of the country stepped up attacks during the election process.⁹ The patterns in the Philippines are reflective of a common set of conditions in which decentralization has increased the stakes of local-level politics, and in turn incentivized violence as a way to gain and preserve power.

Such violence undermines the putatively conflict-mitigating features of electoral competition and diminishes the legitimacy of elected governments, thereby undermining governance capacities. For example, in Nigeria's elections of 2007, widespread political violence – much of which occurred in the urban epicentres of Lagos, Karuna, and Port Harcourt – together with allegations of electoral fraud, severely undermined the legitimacy of the state.¹⁰ Additionally, city-level election violence is often accompanied by direct human security challenges such as internal displacement, loss of life and property, increased business risk, and enhanced vulnerabilities to crimes (such as kidnapping to raise campaign coffers). In sum, like armed conflict, election-related political violence often leads to “development in reverse.”¹¹

In fragile societies at risk of or recovering from violent conflict among contending social groups, electoral processes are like two sides of a coin: on one side, electoral processes are about a set of regular rules for choosing among candidates and parties seeking to form a government; the other side is that elections are conflict-inducing. Thus, ironically, efforts to achieve more responsive and effective governance through the decentralization of power may also raise the stakes of local contests and increase the incentives for election-related violence. This challenge raises serious questions about the extent to which local democracy can succeed in fragile states without the concomitant, deliberate management of national- and city-level public policy for increasing conflict resilience.

¹ An example of a global database on war is found in the Human Security Report Project, *Human Security Brief 2007* (Vancouver: Simon Fraser University, 2007).

² The UN officially estimates 180,000 Kenyans were internally displaced by post-election violence. “Kenya: Review of elections needed to end violence,” *Human Rights Watch*, 3 Jan 2008, 7 Aug 2010, <http://www.hrw.org/de/news/2008/01/03/kenya-review-elections-needed-end-violence>. IRIN suggests 350,000 people were displaced into temporary camps while an equal number sought refuge with friends or relatives. “In-Depth: Kenya's post election crisis,” *IRIN*, 8 Aug 2010, <http://www.irinnews.org/IndepthMain.aspx?IndepthId=68&ReportId=76116>.

³ Jesuit Refugee Service, “Kenya refugees in urban areas affected by election violence,” *Dispatches* 231 (15 February 2008).

⁴ UNDP, *Elections and Conflict Prevention: A Guide to Analysis, Planning and Programming* (New York: UNDP, 2009) 7.

⁵ Donald Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001).

⁶ David Anderson, “Vigilantes, Violence and the Politics of Public Order in Kenya,” *African Affairs* 101.405 (2002).

⁷ In the elections some 12 Senate seats, 235 House of Representatives, and 18,000 local government offices were contested. In prior elections, such as the 2004 presidential race, some 140 died in election-related violence. Manny Magato, “Philippine Police Warn of Rising Poll Violence,” *Reuters*, 24 April 2007.

⁸ Patrick Patino and Djorina Velasco, “Election violence in the Philippines,” *Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Philippine Office*, Online Papers (2004)10 Aug 2010, <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/philippinen/50071.pdf>; UNDP (2009) 7.

⁹ A bomb blast in Tucarong on 9 May 2007, on the island of Mindanao, which killed 4 and wounded 29, was attributed to the insurgents and related to the pre-election process. "Philippines bomb kills four, army blames Islamists," *Reuters*, 8 May 2007, 10 Aug 2010, <http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/MAN242861.htm>.

¹⁰ "Nigeria: Failed Elections, Failing State?" *International Crisis Group Report No. 126*, 30 May 2007.

¹¹ The notion that civil war and armed conflict creates "development in reverse" is argued in Paul Collier, *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy* (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank and Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003).