



Ballots and Bloodshed

Trends of electoral violence in Africa

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Abstract: In 2020, as much as election was the main political event in the African countries like Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Uganda, Tanzania, and Burundi, so were the incidents of electoral violence. The elections were characterised by constitutional amendments, widespread clampdown on dissent, and in some instances, violence. However, neither is electoral violence a unidimensional outcome nor is it unique to 2020. This issue brief looks at the various trends in electoral violence across Africa and the factors leading up to physical violence. The brief takes a critical look at the deep-rooted ethnic politics sustained through a client-patron system and the political culture shaping democratic institutions to locate the answers behind electoral violence in these countries.

Introduction

In 2020, Africa witnessed some volatile elections right from Burundi in the east to Guinea in the west. Some common factors and trends, despite their geographical distance, could be seen in these countries which went to polls this year. However, it is also worth noting that the countries that held elections this year have the least democratic structures, except for Ghana, which is one of the most stable democracies in the region. However, Ghana too experienced a minimal degree of violence in its latest polls.

On 9 December, the Ghana police announced that five people had been killed in election-related violence. According to the police, at least 60 incidents of violence had taken place when Ghana conducted its polls on 7 December. After the results were announced, the opposition accused the re-elected incumbent President of using the military to sway the votes. However, election observers remarked that the polls were fairly peaceful. Surprisingly, the statement stands true when compared to other African countries which went to polls this year. The reason is that Ghana has had regular democratic elections since 1992.

Other countries which conducted or are set to conduct elections tell a different story.

On 11 December, Ugandan police allegedly attacked several journalists who were covering Bobi Wine's campaign. Wine is one of the strongest opposition voices against the incumbent

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President Yoweri Museveni who has been in power since 1986; Uganda is gearing up to hold its elections in January 2021. Wine was arrested twice in November. After his second arrest, clashes erupted across the capital city, Kampala, which resulted in the death of at least 50 civilians.

Similarly, in the same month, clashes broke out in Cote d'Ivoire after President Alassane Ouattara was re-elected for a third term; the opposition claimed that the violence left at least a dozen dead.

Defining electoral violence

Electoral violence is a multi-dimensional concept. While the outcome of electoral violence is usually physical, there are psychological and structural attributes to it. It can be defined as "all forms of organized acts or threats – physical, psychological, and structural – aimed at intimidating, harming, blackmailing a political stakeholder before, during and after an election." Electoral violence is carried out with an aim to influence elections in order to achieve a pre-planned outcome.

Physical electoral violence include assassination, riots, use of force at rallies, polling booths, snatching ballots, etc. On the other hand, psychological electoral violence include intimidation, threats; this can also be a by-product of physical violence. Structural violence is a broader concept which covers officials forcing citizens to register to vote, lack of level playing field for political rivals, interfering in the operations of electoral bodies, bribery, abuse of power of incumbency, and the like.²

Trends in electoral violence

First, constitutional coups. Constitutional coups are a classic example of structural violence. A constitutional coup is interpreted as an attempt "to eliminate term and/or age limits for presidents and allow the incumbent president to unconstitutionally extend his mandate."³

The above was evident in Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire in 2020. The incumbent Presidents of these countries amended the constitutions or pushed through new constitutions to turn the electoral processes in their favour. President Alpha Condé of Guinea and Alassane Ouattara of Cote d'Ivoire had approved new constitutions when they were in power. Both the leaders justified their candidacy by saying that a new Constitution meant that the clock had been reset and that they could run for Presidency again.

However, amendments and referendums of this nature are not new. Previously, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, etc have either attempted to amend the constitution or leaders of these countries have continued to rule despite the two-term limit.

² J Shola Omotola, "Explaining electoral violence in Africa's 'new' democracies," *The African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes*, 2010

³ John Mukum Mbaku, "Threats to democracy in Africa: The rise of the constitutional coup," *The Brookings Institution*, 30 October 2020

African Centre for Strategic Studies says that since 2015, “leaders of 13 countries have evaded or overseen the further weakening of term limit restrictions that had been in place.”⁴

Second, disputed results and clampdown on the opposition. The opposition in Burundi, Tanzania, Guinea, Côte d’Ivoire, cried foul in their respective elections. They alleged that the elections were carried out by massive fraud and intimidation. In Burkina Faso, elections were not held for one-fifth of the population because of security threats from extremist elements. During the Tanzanian elections, opposition leader Tundu Lissu, who previously survived an assassination attempt, fled to Belgium claiming he received threats to his life after he challenged the election results. Other leaders, mostly belonging to the main opposition party, Chadema, were arrested on various grounds before the polls. In Côte d’Ivoire, the opposition went a step ahead and created a rival government under the leadership of former Prime Minister Pascal Affi N’Guessan. He, and several others were later arrested and charged with ‘terrorism.’

Third, silencing dissent. The governments in the countries going to polls also clamped down on media and civil society workers. For example, in Uganda and Tanzania, several journalists were arrested; opposing politicians were also restricted from accessing the state-owned media. According to Amnesty International, the security forces in Tanzania arrested rival candidates, suspended media houses and placed restrictions on NGOs.⁵ In Burundi, the scenario was no different. A researcher at Amnesty International said, “On election day itself, Burundians woke up to find all major social media sites blocked in a blatant violation of their rights to freedom of expression and access to information.”⁶ Similarly, on the other side of the continent, in Guinea, the government restricted access to the internet and international calls. These are basic necessities that have helped the opposition mobilise support and gain international attention.⁷

Factors contributing to electoral violence

A background of the political landscape of African countries.

Democracy was introduced to newly independent African countries by exiting Western powers in the 1960s. However, several of these countries bore the brunt of Cold War politics wherein either the US or the USSR supported dictators in Africa. This reduced democracy to a two-party rivalry until the end of the Cold War in the 1990s. Though there has been a transition to multiparty politics, the system does not have strong roots. Leaders in power today and their opposition are still in a phase of ‘Big Man’ politics.

Big Man politics, ethnic politics, and client-patron system.

With the weak foundations of democracy, African leaders also inherited the colonial urge to control access to resources. While ethnic politics is a common tactic to secure vote banks

⁴ Joseph Siegle and Candace Cook, “[Circumvention of Term Limits Weakens Governance in Africa](#),” *African Center for Strategic Studies*, 14 September 2020

⁵ “[Amnesty accuses Tanzania gov’t of stifling dissent ahead of polls](#),” *Aljazeera*, 12 October 2020

⁶ Hamza Mohamed, “[Burundi election results: What next?](#)” *Aljazeera*, 26 May 2020

⁷ Bintu Zahara Sakor and Vamo Soko, “[Protests, Elections, and Ethnic Tensions in West Africa: What are the Driving Forces?](#)” *Peace Research Institute Oslo*, 24 November 2020

across the world, it plays a huge role in African politics. Till date, leaders in power control the resources, natural and monetary; people who belong to the leader's ethnic group or alliance have access to these, including government jobs. This manifests into a culture of "winner literally takes it all, while the loser is left 'standing small'."⁸ Therefore, there is a client-patron system. According to the PRIO article cited previously, "This leaves many of the ethnic polarized countries within the region at risk of witnessing high ethnic tension during the election period."

The opposition parties and the public's attitude towards democracy.

There is a trust deficit between the public and political parties. Given a history of the client-patron system, it is rare to find the public trust parties they were not previously supporting. According to a study by *Afrobarometer* in 35 countries, only 14 per cent of the respondents trusted opposition parties 'a lot'; 34 per cent said they do not trust the opposition parties 'at all.' One reason behind this is the fear of protests spearheaded by the opposition parties. In the latest survey in Uganda, 88 per cent of the people believed that "losing parties should accept the elections results," despite the fact that only 34 per cent believed that the elections were conducted in a "completely free and fair" manner.⁹

Elections and the justice system.

The countries with a strong, independent judiciary experience minimal to no electoral violence. This is because the opposition trusts the judiciary to be impartial. For example, in the 2012 Ghana elections, when the present President Nana Akufo Addo lost to the then-incumbent John Mahama, he filed a petition in the Supreme Court alleging electoral fraud. However, when the SC ruled against his case, he accepted the result.

On the other hand, if the judiciary is quasi-independent as one finds in Cote d'Ivoire, opposition leaders tend to resort to violence. Further and interestingly, when the judiciary is weak and heavily dependent on the leadership, it is unlikely to use violence because "there is no expectation that the judiciary will ever rule against a sitting president."¹⁰

Role of electoral monitoring bodies (EMBs).

The institutions need to imbibe transparency in their operations in order to avoid suspicion among rival parties. In this sense, EMBs can mediate between parties and "create the foundation for free and competitive elections." However, in some countries, the election commissions have been formed with the funding of the ruling party. For example, in Guinea, the executive controls EMB funding; here, there is a higher risk of delay in release of funds, in order to interfere with the EMBs performance. Such practices restrict the institutions from conducting free and fair elections.¹¹

⁸ Jesper Bjarnesen and Mimmi Söderberg Kovacs, "[Violence In African Elections](#)," *The Nordic Africa Institute*, November 2018

⁹ Nic Cheeseman, "[How opposition parties in Africa can make friends and influence people](#)," *Mail & Guardian*, 3 March 2020

¹⁰ Meshack Simati, "[Why do some elections in Africa turn violent?](#)" *The Washington Post*, 22 November 2017

¹¹ Christian Opitz, Hanne Fjelde and Kristine Höglund, "[Including peace: the influence of electoral management bodies on electoral violence](#)," *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 15 Oct 2013

In perspective

Democracies have not brought major changes in Africa. Despite having introduced multiparty politics, there has been a deterioration of the system over the years. This has instilled a sense of resentment and mistrust among the public towards the leaderships as well institutions of democracy. However, electoral violence is not limited to national elections. According to *ReliefWeb*, by-elections at constituency level have also witnessed “high levels of violence, intimidation and insecurity.”

One reason behind the mistrust and sense of insecurity is poverty in African countries. This is however, largely a vicious cycle than a cause and this is where the ethnic client-patron system keeps the people under a trap. “Ethnicity, sectarianism and religion have become the emotional hypnotizers which the unscrupulous political elites have used to befuddle the languishing citizenry.”¹² Likewise, all major anti-government protests in Africa in 2020, have stemmed from demands related to poverty - unemployment, corruption, rising prices. Accordingly, the opposition parties made this their rallying cry.

Therefore, to address the above, African leaders seem to have opted for bringing in economic and social control; resulting in a tighter noose around the opposition parties. The outcome of this is evident in Tanzania, and Cote d’Ivoire, and the like wherein economic indicators had been improving under the incumbents. In an opinion in *Aljazeera*, the author calls this form of governance authoritarian developmentalism. He says this style is on the rise in Africa.¹³

Therefore, in order to witness violence-free elections in African countries, it is important to ensure democracy in every institution of the State. Further, opposition parties and civil society too have to be given the space to criticise and express dissent, in order to contribute to a democracy.

¹² Ugoji Egujo, “[Democracy and Africa: Trouble is brewing](#),” *Vanguard*, 7 November 2020

¹³ Manu Lekunze, “[What is behind Tanzania’s authoritarian turn?](#)” *Aljazeera*, 2 December 2020

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