

Infrastructure for Peace: A Way Forward to Peaceful Elections **New Routes, 1, 2012**

Authors: Kai Brand-Jacobsen and Paul van Tongeren

“Elections are a major catalyst for democratic change but have an intrinsically conflictual nature. Elections make deeply rooted social conflicts more visible and thus have great potential for triggering violence. If such violence is ignited by the electoral process, or perceived to have been, the effects may have grave implications for human rights and local economies, and may create an inherent distrust in the credibility of democracy.”

International Institute for Democratic and Electoral Assistance (IDEA)ⁱ

Preventing Electoral Violence is Possible and Necessary

Following violent elections in Kenya (2007) and the Ivory Coast (2010), and peaceful elections in Ghana (2008), the international community and national governments and civil society actors are becoming increasingly aware of the need to place a greater emphasis on *prevention* of electoral violence. It is an issue that until recently has fallen through the cracks. Electoral support has focused more on strengthening of Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs), voter registration, and electoral monitoring, while peacebuilding and conflict transformation programmes have focused more on large-scale armed conflict or addressing the violence around elections after it's broken out. This is beginning to change. An increasing number of publications from major agencies and organizations are making visible the spectrum of what can be done to prevent electoral violence, and highlighting both successful and unsuccessful experiences. What is becoming clear: prevention of electoral violence is both possible and necessary. Some ingredients, such as an extended governance and electoral cycle approach, development of infrastructure for peace and strengthening local and national capacities, and joint planning for prevention, can play a significant role in preventing and reducing electoral violence – and thereby strengthening democratic processes. Increasing awareness and understanding amongst local, national, regional and international actors on how this can be done, and strengthening synergies between those working in democratization, electoral support, development programming, peacebuilding and conflict transformation can help. This article looks at how, and presents an overview of key issues and experiences from the field.

Elections: Hallmarks of Democracy, Catalysts of Violence

Elections have long been heralded as a hallmark of representative democracy but the other side can also be true. At their best they can be a mechanism enabling a population input into choices of elected representatives and policies. In many cases, however, elections can also serve as ‘triggers’ for violence and widespread instability. A growing number of agencies and organizations – including the United Nations, the African Union, International IDEA, ACE, IFES, the Department of Peace Operations of PATRIR and others – have begun to draw attention to the fact that elections have an intrinsically conflictual nature. They are structured processes of competition for control of political power. In many countries, a key challenge to the governance and political process is that electoral competitions are zero-sum, winner

takes all. Election to public office offers livelihoods and privileges not just for the elected leaders, but also their party supporters, constituencies, clan, faction or ethnic group. Losing carries unacceptable costs for both government and opposition. The incentives to resort to electoral fraud and violence are therefore high. The style of campaigning and rhetoric used by political party leaders and their supporters – as well as the media – can often fuel tensions, demonize opponents, and contribute to an environment in which violence becomes more likely – or is itself part of electoral campaigning strategies.

Elections may also make deeply rooted social conflicts visible and provide the opportunity for people to express other grievances – ranging from disputes over control of political power to control and use of resources, social justice, marginalization, ethnic rivalry and many other possible grievances. Histories of past electoral violence, or low levels of trust in the electoral process and electoral management bodies (EMBs), are also strong factors increasing the likelihood of electoral violence. In areas where state security institutions have limited authority or where militias, separation movements, non-state armed groups, or criminal gangs may be strong, the likelihood for violence around elections increases. Security forces which are not properly trained, or which may use excessive force in responding to demonstrations or acts of violence, can also contribute to escalating or triggering violence around elections.

The Failure to Prevent: What are the Costs?

Election-related violence can have severe immediate and long-term costs, from death and injury to destruction of infrastructure and loss of investment. Deep rooted social conflicts, polarization and demonization (along ethnic, regional, religious and other societal fault lines) may be deepened. People's faith in the democratic and electoral process may also be seriously challenged, and an environment of impunity and abusive leadership strengthened. Regional countries and economies are also affected as violence within a country negatively impacts upon neighbours.

A Focus on Prevention: What Can be Done?

Kenya's leading business association assessed economic losses from post-election violence in 2008 as US \$ 3.6 billion. In contrast, the 2010 constitutional referendum, plagued by similar inter-ethnic tensions, did not see any violence. A violence prevention effort identified and pre-empted nearly 150 incidents of violence. This effort cost only \$ 5 million in comparison.

According to the Ghana Investment Promotion Council, foreign direct investment in the country jumped 90% between mid-2008 and mid-2009. The intervening variable was the peaceful national poll in December 2008. The National Peace Council, supported by UNDP for approximately US \$ 2 million, played a crucial mediation role in averting expected turbulence. Expectations of violence had depressed investment prior to the poll. The prevention of electoral violence is both *possible* and *cost effective*.

The cost of elections in countries transitioning from war can also be expensive – often in the dozens of millions, costing between US\$ 10 – 20 per voter. The cost of a

possible return to violence, however, is much higher, and with smart, targeted measures, small efforts – including strengthening local and national infrastructure for peace – can often have significant impact on preventing the return of violence.

The rest of this article will focus briefly on 4 case studies and then provide a list of practical steps that can help improve prevention of electoral violence.

Four Case Studies: South Africa, Kenya, Ghana, Guyana

In *South Africa*, prior to the elections of 1994, the establishment of Peace Councils helped prevent civil war. South Africa was one of the first countries to begin constructing an Infrastructure for Peace (*I4P*). This was a product of the National Peace Accord, signed in 1991 between the principal protagonists in South Africa's conflict. Their main objectives were to create trust and reconciliation between community leaders, to prevent violence and to resolve disputes. The violence in the country was escalating and without this Peace Accord between all main stakeholders, the fear was a further escalation of violence, leading to civil war, and no peaceful elections. The hope was that the Peace Councils would reduce the violence. In all 11 regions of the country, Regional Peace Committees were established and oversaw the establishment of Local Peace Committees in the towns and villages in their region. All relevant stakeholders could cooperate at national, regional and local level in those Councils in preventing violent conflict and building peace.

Observers agree that the Peace Councils significantly contributed to containing the spiral of violence. While they were unable to prevent all violent incidents, it is widely agreed that the situation would have been far graver if those Peace Councils had not existed.

In Guyana 2006 Guyana conducted its first ever 'violence free' election. This followed a challenging period in which political tensions were seen to escalate. Key factors in contributing to the prevention of electoral violence included the establishment of a Media Monitoring Centre and Code of Conduct for Media (supported by the Commonwealth Secretariat) and a broad-based Social Cohesion Programme (supported by UNDP) which included the creation of a national dialogue process, networks of mediators to help deal with local conflicts and ease tensions within communities both before and during the elections, and agreements among political parties. Both international and domestic assessments after the elections pointed to the key role these interventions had played in contributing to violence-free elections.

At the end of 2007 and start of 2008, post-election violence broke out in *Kenya*. While the voting and counting of votes were peaceful, violence spread to many parts of the country, following the announcement of the elections result by the Electoral Commission. The violence claimed 1.300 lives and displaced hundreds of thousands. Far less violence was recorded in the districts where there was a District Peace Council than in those districts without such a council. The Peace Committees demonstrated their ability to manage inter-community conflict and to contain or prevent violence. Therefore, the National Accord and Reconciliation Act of

2008, following the post-election violence, recommended the establishment of District Peace Committees in all of Kenya's districts.

In *Ghana*, the National Peace Council played a major role at national and local levels in ensuring peaceful elections in 2008 and a smooth transfer of power through discreet meetings with stakeholders that defused considerable tension. The fact that the main religious leaders were part of the National Peace Council contributed to this result. The creation of dialogue fora between the peace councils and the Ghanaian society-including political parties- supported the practice of peaceful management of disputes in the country, which helped appease tensions during the 2008 elections.

These four cases are only glimpses, but they highlight the fact that prevention is possible. More in-depth study and analysis – both of successful and unsuccessful cases – is necessary. The following section draws from a *Handbook on Prevention of Electoral Violence* now being developed by the Department of Peace Operations (DPO) of PATRIR. It presents 'good practice' steps that can help strengthen programming for prevention of electoral violence.

Preventing Electoral Violence: Towards a Handbook of Good Practice

Every election is unique, as is the context in each country. Policies and programmes for preventing electoral violence should be customized for the needs and context of each country – and different regions and communities *within* a country. The following, however, are some *good practice* measures that can help prevent violence ahead of, during, and after elections:

1. Start Early

The most important lesson highlighted by almost all practitioners and experts is *start early*. The context 12, 24, or even 36 – 48+ months *before* an election is often more conducive than the politically charged environment of an electoral period. Analysis, planning and measures for prevention of electoral violence should begin at least 24 – 48+ months or more before elections.

Note: If this is not possible and elections are coming up in 2 weeks to 6 months, there are still many things that can be done, but experience shows that it is both wise and more effective to start early.

2. Use a Governance and Electoral Cycle Approach (24 – 48+ Months)

Elections are not separate from the broader context of politics and governance in a country. Indeed they are central to them. In many countries, elections for different offices (President, Parliament, Local Government) may also take place at different times. Early and *standing* preparation which engages with the overall governance process and strengthening of conflict handling capabilities is important – and preparations for one election can have benefits for the next, if reforms are followed through and sustained.

Reducing the likelihood of electoral violence can also be affected by measures such as electoral system reform, political party reform, constitutional reform, legal

reform, etc. Going together with recommendation 1 (above), using a *Governance and Electoral Cycle* approach has 3 major benefits for those working to prevent electoral violence:

- i. it starts earlier;
- ii. it opens up for a broader range of measures – not only focusing on *election-specific*, but dealing with the critical institutional and governance context in which elections occur;
- iii. it increases the likelihood of national ownership and development of *whole-of-government* and *national strategies* for preventing electoral violence

3. *Effective, Early and Joint Analysis is Critical; Scenario Planning Can Help*

Many of the factors which may contribute to electoral violence in a community / country can be identified months or years in advance. Root causes which give rise to grievances and triggers which may lead to the outbreak of violence can be mapped, identified and addressed / prepared for ahead of time. At least four key categories should be identified:

- i. *Structural Cause of Instability & Root Causes of Conflict*: eg. State capture by single ethnic groups, deep seeded inequalities between ethnic groups, regions, etc
- ii. *Drivers of Conflict & Instability / Violence*: eg. hate speech (by political leaders, media), wide-spread access to weapons
- iii. *Election-Specific Causes*: eg. Lack of trust in EMBs, delays in release of results, discrepancies between expectations or early returns and final results
- iv. *Conflict Handling Capabilities*: eg. What existing capacities and competencies exist within a community / country to constructively handle these conflicts and prevent violence from breaking out or handle / mitigate it if it does? Is there a national / state level strategy for peacebuilding and prevention? Are local peace committees in place? Does an effective *early warning system* linked to *effective response capabilities* exist?

Analysis should be carried out *early* and can even begin immediately after the last election – analyzing the last election, what happened, where did violence occur, how and why did it occur, how effective was response, and what can be learned to help prevent violence in the next elections. It is just as important to include analysis of *peacebuilding* and *conflict-handling capabilities* (point iv) as of what can contribute to conflict and violence. Using scenarios to map out different possibilities for what might happen *before*, *during* and *after* elections can also help stakeholders prepare and act *proactively* to reduce risk factors that can contribute to or increase likelihood of violence, while improving and strengthening effective measures and capabilities

for peacebuilding and prevention.

4. *Infrastructure for Peace (I4P)*

Infrastructure for Peace refers to building standing, trained and prepared capabilities *within* a community / country - the same way we have standing armies, standing health systems, standing school systems. One of the most consistent lessons in prevention and peacebuilding is that *having standing and effective capabilities* within a country significantly increases likelihood of success. In South Africa, Guyana, Kenya and Ghana, standing capabilities in the form of peace committees, Joint Operating Centers, trained mediators, etc. all helped to address tensions and reduce or prevent cases of violence. Mechanisms such as *joint operating centers* and *peace forums / committees* at the district, county/state and national levels can also help by bringing together key actors *trusted, respected* and *mandated* or seen as legitimate within a community to address tensions and conflict factors. A new global partnership between governments, the UN and civil society organizations is placing increasing focus on the importance of developing I4P. Another major benefit of this approach is that it roots effective conflict handling capabilities *within* communities, countries and cultures, and reduces dependence on external intervention and externally owned and driven approaches. This also increases the likelihood of *early* measures that are culturally appropriate.

Many more measures and lessons exist, including:

5. Development of *national strategies* helps, and should include all relevant ministries and state and non-state actors with mandates for elections, peacebuilding, or dealing with possible violence;
6. Use of *social media* and *media campaigns* to raise people's awareness about the costs of violence, the impact it can have, and to promote national campaigns for violence free elections can help reduce the space and likelihood for violence and mobilize actors for peaceful elections;
7. A superb report on preventing and managing post-electoral violence in Kenya by George Wachira shows the value of engaging 'unexpected actors'. There is a broad constituency in any country that benefits more from peaceful elections than violence. This broad majority should be mobilized, empowered and activated for peaceful elections.
8. Training and preparation of police and security forces for nonviolent responses and responsible policing is essential. Escalation by security forces is a major factor in electoral violence.
9. There is now extensive experience in setting up effective *early warning* and *critical incident mapping systems*. These can help to identify possible drivers or risks of violence *before* violence breaks out – enabling effective peacebuilding and proactive prevention – and to map *developing / unfolding* situations, where conflicts and tensions are escalating, allowing rapid and appropriate response.
10. *Prepare state and civilian peace capacities*: from local peace teams to networks of mediators, prepare state and civil society capacities to engage both before and *in case of* violence.
11. *Coordinate*: Too often work of different actors in peacebuilding and electoral support is disjointed and uncoordinated. Both national and international actors

are placing increasing focus on improving coordination. Where this is done it has often contributed importantly to prevention.

Making Prevention of Electoral Violence Work

While it may not be possible to prevent all violence all the time, good planning, coordination preparation, and development of effective peacebuilding capabilities helps. Those working with electoral processes and those working with peacebuilding and prevention need to do more to *integrate prevention and peacebuilding* into support for good governance and electoral processes. Preparation of electoral observers (domestic and international) should be complemented with preparation for prevention and peacebuilding capabilities. Guides and Handbooks for elections should include sections on *preventing electoral violence*, while pre-elections analysis should always include analysis for risks of violence and what can be done. This is a growing field and many actors – governments, UN, national and international organizations, donors – have an important role to play. The good news: we know that it's possible. The task is now to do it.

BIO Paul van Tongeren

Established the European Centre for Conflict Prevention. Was convener of the Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) and their Secretary-General till 2010. Organised large conference at the HQ of UN in New York on the role of civil society in peacebuilding. Is now focusing on 'Infrastructures for Peace'.

Kai Brand-Jacobsen

President and Co-Founder of the Romanian Peace Institute (PATRIR). Director of the Department of Peace Operations (DPO). International expert and trainer in prevention, infrastructure for peace and peace processes. Advisor to governments, UN agencies and country missions, and national and international organizations, and Associate Faculty at the United Nations University for Peace (UPeace).

ⁱ International IDEA, *Towards a Global Framework for Managing and Mitigating Election related Conflict and Violence*, Workshop report, IDEA, 27 – 30 October 2009, p. 8.