

ELECTORAL VIOLENCE: A CHALLENGE TO SECURITY

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Abstract: This paper focuses on electoral violence as a subset of political violence, and analyses this concept by examining the complexity of motives, actors, activities it involves, as well as pointing out contextual characteristics that contribute to the occurrence of violent events. Electoral violence can be observed at all stages of the election process - before the election, on election day and after the election. It can involve state, non-state and international groups, as either perpetrators or targets. Its forms range from various pressures, intimidations to physical and deadly violence against voters, candidates, politicians, government officials, police, military, journalists, or international observers. Electoral violence is usually linked to undemocratic regimes, but even well-established democracies are not immune to it. The prevention of electoral violence functions as an extensive network of programs led by international organizations providing assistance in improving conditions for free and fair elections and changing the attitudes around violence. The results of such prevention remain far from ideal, despite decades of efforts and important funding. Nonetheless, prevention and promotion of election integrity remain indispensable methods in combating electoral violence. Increasingly complete databases (CREV, ECAV, NELDA) allow researchers to gain a better insight into what causes electoral violence, allowing for more effective marking of security risks and prevention activities.

Keywords: Electoral violence, elections, prevention of electoral violence, security threat

INTRODUCTION

In terms of political theory, the notions of violence and elections are antithetical: the former is incompatible with politics as an activity aimed at peaceful government of political communities; the latter is a nonviolent and peaceful means of conquest of power. However, real-life politics show ample proof of connection between the two phenomena. History is rife with examples of use of violence as an integral part of the electoral process, and thus an integral part of politics as a whole. The presence of violence

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can at times be so important that it threatens peace, destroys institutions, or leads to civil war (Birch, Daxecker & Höglund, 2020: 3).

The intensity and forms of electoral violence range from subtle pressures on political rival voters or election administration, to open threats, intimidation, attacks, or even brutal confrontations of political opponents that result in numerous casualties. A survey of relevant datasets indicates that a substantial proportion of elections across the globe witnesses at least some violence. The Countries at Risk of Election Violence (CREV) data estimate that over three quarters (78%) of elections in countries deemed to be at risk of violence experience at least ten violent events (Birch & Muchlinski, 2017), while the Electoral Contention and Violence (ECAV) data report more than three violent events in over 50% of elections, and deadly violence in approximately 30% of elections (Daxecker, Amicarelli & Jung, 2019). Various forms of electoral violence have usually been linked to elections in hybrid regimes and unconsolidated democracies, but in recent years, similar phenomena have also been observed in established democratic systems².

The prevalence of electoral violence has been recognized by security researchers and psephologists alike. Security studies have examined the risks of electoral violence in the process of democratization (Snyder, 2000) and extended their interest to elections as cause of civil war or potential risk in ethnically divided societies (Cederman, Gleditsch & Hug, 2013; Cheibub & Hayes 2017; Matanock, 2017), and connections between political violence and election cycles (Harish & Little, 2017). Psephologists, on the other hand, focused on clientelism, electoral corruption, voter pressure (intimidation and vote buying) (Birch, 2011; Norris, 2014; Goldsmith, 2015; Mares & Young, 2016) and they study violence as a campaigning tool used to influence election results (Norris, Frank & Martínez i Coma, 2015; Daxecker, Amicarelli & Jung, 2019; Birch, 2020).

The intention of this paper is to point out the specificity of electoral violence as a type of political violence, define the elements that make up this concept and the security risks it brings to peace and democracy, and to present existing prevention tactics. The subjects that will be discussed include: the definition of electoral violence, institutional circumstances that can act as triggers, the timing of violent electoral strategies and the motives that provoke it, and how electoral violence can affect the functioning of the political system.

ELECTORAL VIOLENCE AS A POLITICAL VIOLENCE SUI GENERIS

Definition and concept of electoral violence

The social context, the competitive character of elections, the incentives of the electoral system make up the factors that determine the positioning of actors, their motives, and the timing of their activities in the election process. These are the coordinates in which electoral violence is conceptualized as a subtype of political violence (Höglund, 2009), with the notions of violence and influence on election

² To name just a few examples, the violent events that followed the elections in the Ivory Coast in 2010 led to the death of 1,000 people, with one million persons internally displaced, and another 100,000 exiled. In Mexico, the period leading up to the elections in June 2021 (from September 2020 to May 2021) saw 782 different cases of electoral violence across all states and 460 municipalities; 234 people involved in the election lost their lives (89 politicians and candidates) (Banwait, 2021). The 2021 attacks on the US Capitol building point to a troubling trend of increasingly violent behavior surrounding elections. Even if the worst case scenarios of widespread violence projected by political and security analysts were avoided, the public confidence in the democratic process was greatly damaged (Westphal, 2021: 16).



results being two key components in this concept and the basis for different definitions³. Political violence can generally be defined as “direct or indirect - latent use of force in the sphere of politics” against “a real or potential, or presumed political opponent” (Simeunović, 1980: 27). Sarah Birch best sublimates different conceptualizations of electoral violence (Bekoe, 2012; Harish & Toha, 2019; Höglund, 2009; Seeberg, Wahman & Skaaning, 2018; Söderberg Kovacs, 2018; Taylor, Pevehouse & Straus, 2017; Staniland, 2014), providing us with the most complete definition, and one that best determines the complexity of electoral violence in the context of this paper: “Electoral violence is levied by political actors to purposefully influence the process and outcome of elections, and it involves coercive acts against humans, property, and infrastructure [...] It can happen in all parts of the electoral cycle, including at the announcement of elections, party primaries, and voter registration [...], and it can be promoted by both state and non-state actors [...] This conceptualization has the strategic use of violence at its core, but alternative and complementary perspectives exist.” (Birch, Daxecker & Höglund, 2020: 4).

Social divisions on the basis of economic, political, ethnic, or religious factors are an inexhaustible reservoir of potential causes for electoral violence. Societies already facing conflicts in this area, be it those with ongoing civil war which seek to reestablish peace through elections, or recent, unconsolidated, democracies, or hybrid regimes with weak institutions and strong authoritarian legacies and tendencies, are the most suitable environments for the escalation of electoral violence. This has been the case in a number of African, Asian, South American and post-socialist countries (Birch & Muchlinski, 2020: 218). As elections are a competitive political process, various actors within fragile societies may resort to violence in order to gain an advantage. Actors in power, members of the opposition, NGOs and international observers can all influence electoral violence. State law enforcement as well as paramilitary forces, terrorist and criminal groups can all be used to intimidate political rivals, obstruct campaigns, pressure voters, or perpetrate physical attacks on leaders and candidates.

The design of electoral institutions themselves can be another potential generator of violence, as they hold “great potential [...] for influencing political behaviour “because “it can reward particular types of behaviour and place constraints on others”. (Reilly, 2002: 127). Research on the potential of electoral design to polarize societies and encourage or prevent electoral violence has focused on the opposition of integrative and consociational models (Lijphart, 1977; Horowitz, 2000; Reilly & Reynolds, 2000). Some researchers report that majoritarian electoral systems hold higher levels of potential for violence as they present elections as a high stakes game (Fjelde & Höglund, 2016). A number of elements of the electoral system can lead to distorted political representation. Rigid conditions for registration of parties, candidates and voters, gerrymandering, unprofessional and biased electoral administration, non-transparent vote counting and publication of results, lack of judicial protection against electoral abuse, clientelism, electoral corruption, fraud and theft, etc. As we can see from this list the failing of electoral institutions can happen at any stage before the election, on election day, and after election (Norris, 2004), and thus potentially lead to violent events.

3 The UNDP Elections and Violence Prevention Guide (authored by Timothy Sisk and Chris Spies) defines electoral violence as “...Acts or threats of coercion, intimidation, or physical harm perpetrated to affect an electoral process or that arise in the context of electoral competition. When perpetrated to affect an electoral process, violence may be employed to influence the process of elections - such as efforts to delay, disrupt, or derail a poll - and to influence the outcomes: the determining of winners in competitive races for political office or to secure approval or disapproval of referendum questions.” (UNDP, 2009: 4). According to researchers who have dealt with aspects of electoral violence from a security perspective, “Electoral conflict and violence can be defined as any random or organized act or threat to intimidate, physically harm, blackmail, or abuse a political stakeholder in seeking to determine, delay, or otherwise influence an electoral process. Election security can be defined as the process of protecting electoral stakeholders, information, facilities, and events” (Fischer, 2002: 3).



TYPOLOGY OF ELECTORAL VIOLENCE: ACTORS, MOTIVES, TIMING AND ACTIVITIES

The electoral system and the election process are the basic components of electoral violence, and the distinguishing elements that differentiate it from other types of political violence: “elections shape the ways in which violence intervenes in the electoral process” (Birch, Daxecker & Höglund, 2020: 5) and crucially they can result in violence that “would not have occurred or would at least have manifested itself differently in the absence of an electoral contest” (Fjelde & Höglund, 2016: 8). Electoral violence as a subtype of political violence was first identified in a series of studies of ethnic conflicts in divided societies, and then in research examining electoral fraud, electoral system manipulation and the electoral process designed to favor certain groups (Höglund, 2009: 415).

The social context in which electoral violence takes place always depends on national specificities. One common type of circumstances is reflected in societies where electoral violence occurs in the midst of wider armed conflicts: civil war, rifts between ethnic and religious groups, armed secessionist rebellions, terrorist actions against the government. In such circumstances, elections can be, and as a rule are, part of peace agreements, the goal being for opposing sides to move from armed conflict to voting stations, if only temporarily (Dunning, 2011). At times, armed violence and elections take place simultaneously - military wings of rebel groups conduct military actions, and political battles are fought in the electoral arena (Heger, 2015; Matanock & Staniland, 2018). Electoral violence in such environments is directed towards all election actors (parties, candidates, voters and political institutions) and can encourage authorities to defend their positions by means other than political; in turn, the opposition can come to consider elections as a whole as a form of violence (Birnie & Gohdes, 2018; Condra, Long, Shaver & Wright, 2018). Such environments can turn violence into a permanent pattern of behavior in subsequent election cycles (Harish & Toha, 2019). Another kind of context that can escalate in violence occurs in societies in which political elites use divisions to manipulate the distribution of resources and win over voters. Electoral violence often correlates with crime, whether because state actors collaborate with crime organizations to persecute and intimidate political rivals and their voters, or because non-state actors embrace crime groups and protect them from government persecution (Harish & Little, 2017; Trejo & Ley, 2018).

The general goal of electoral violence is influencing the outcome of the electoral process; more specific motives, however, can be multi-layered. Certain actors may have a negative attitude towards elections and reject them as a method of constituting government. In other cases, violent opposition against elections comes from actors opposing the legitimacy of the government and distrusting that the existing institutional environment allows for acceptable conditions for elections. In such situations, even if elections are not outright rejected by the groups resorting to violence, they are clouded by serious doubts about the government's intentions and ability to conduct free and fair elections. The most common motive for electoral violence lies in the effort to gain an advantage in electoral competition and obstruct the work of other participants in the electoral process. All these motives exist concurrently in divided societies. The latter two are more common in unconsolidated democracies, electoral democracies, and hybrid systems. It is clear that these motives can manifest in all phases of the electoral process, mobilize different actors, manifest in different activities and produce different effects (Höglund, 2009: 415–6)

Electoral violence occurs in the pre-election phase, on election day and in the post-election period, that is to say, in virtually all phases of the election process. In the pre-election period, competitors and voters who support them can be disfavored by various forms of organized violence. This is usually a lead-up to further violent actions once voting day is officially announced, and during the election campaign phase. As a rule, violent events then continue on the day of voting and extend in the



post-election period. The timing of these events is chosen by the actors so as to produce the greatest desired effect. Some studies show that governments most often resort to violence against the opposition before and after elections. Authoritarian governments unsure of electoral victory and unbound by serious institutional constraints use violence as part of an electoral strategy, and in return such situations increase the likelihood of post-election violence due to anti-regime protests (Hafner-Burton, Hyde, & Jablonski, 2014: 158). The chronology of the election process indicates five possible moments of violence initiation. The first is the pre-election period when actors are fighting for recognition in the political system and entering the electoral arena. Party registration, political activity and candidacy opportunities are the most common domains where violence is used to either prevent or force actors to participate in elections. The second step when actors practice election violence is during the campaign: every effort is made to disrupt rival campaigns, through intimidation, threats, and attacks on candidates to reduce visibility and to discourage and prevent voters from going to the polls. Election Day is the third step in the chronology of electoral violence: at this stage it is pointed at voters and the election administration. Violence among actors can also occur during the determination and announcement of results due to election fraud and the inability and the unwillingness of institutions to resolve election disputes. Finally, the fifth step occurs after the election, if the losing side lashes out for being left out of government, or the election winners decide to defend their position in power by using force (Fischer, 2002: 3).

The main actors in electoral violence are the political parties of the government and the opposition. Of course, political parties never admit to resorting to violence, but as they can be galvanizers, perpetrators and targets at the same time, their role cannot be hidden. It is understood that the actors in power use state resources, the army and the police against opposition actors who rely on insurgent armed formations, terrorist groups for violence against the government (Burchard, 2015: 12–13). Both sides often have overt or covert organized groups within party structures in charge of carrying out attacks. These most often include party branches that bring together youth and/or some types of party militias. Both state and non-state actors do not hesitate to use the “services” of organized crime organizations to commit violent acts during elections. This list of actors is not exhaustive. It also includes international organizations involved in election observation, either by providing support to election administration or assessing compliance with standards of free and fair elections. The actions of these organizations can, for example, encourage state violence if irregularities pointed out by the opposition are minimized and ignored. Their actions to detect and prove electoral irregularities committed by government actors can also incite opposition actors and citizens to rise up against government officials, especially if electoral fraud is perceived as key to the election result (Daxecker, 2012: 504; Birch & Muchlinski, 2020: 220). The perpetrators and victims of violence are individuals even if they work for collective actors: party activists, members of the police, soldiers, and individuals from the criminal milieu are often known to the public. Victims are party leaders, activists, candidates and voters who are also individually known even when it comes to mass actions.

Electoral violence involves a wide range of activities: harassment, intimidation and attacks, rioting, destruction of property and election material, political assassinations. “The fear created by such tactics can substantially influence not only if people vote, but also who they will vote for.” (Höglund, 2009: 417). That is why election actors use violence as part of a strategy to win votes. The choice of activities to use from this arsenal and the timing of their implementation depends on what will ensure the desired result - a greater number of votes and seats in the representative bodies - with as little drawbacks as possible - avoiding condemnation for electoral violence, the possibility of masking it, relativizing it, etc.

Different typologies have been elaborated by focusing on motives, actors, timing or activities. Distinguishing between state and non-state actors and monitoring their activities through the pre-election



phase, voting and the post-election period is a good methodological tool for researchers in systematizing electoral violence (Höglund, 2009: 418 and 423). Newer typologies are based on collecting data around the world follow and classify occurrences of threats and attacks committed during the election process. These databases do not insist on acts of property destruction, but rather focus on the position of international organizations, intergovernmental and transnational elections observers. Government actors, politicians and institutions such as the police and the army are marked as state actors, while opposition parties, ethnic and religious groups, non-governmental organizations, and ordinary citizens are considered as non-state actors. This typology differentiates between perpetrators and victims of violence: government against non-governmental actors, non-governmental actors against government, non-governmental actors against each other, and international actors against any actor and vice versa (Birch & Muchlinski, 2020: 221).

ELECTORAL VIOLENCE - SECURITY CHALLENGES AND PREVENTION

The government resorts to abuse of political power more often than the opposition. Since it is a matter of politically motivated actions, such acts of political violence “represent politically positioned crimes and ideologically motivated crimes” and “can also be considered political crime in the broad sense of the word” (Mijalković, 2018: 271). Electoral violence presents a threat to security, as does any other type of violence. Even if, as previously mentioned, the security apparatus and its individual parts can at times be a part of violent events in the election arena, it is tasked with the challenge of preventing electoral violence, detecting its actors, and mitigating the consequences. Different contexts require different security approaches: societies facing electoral violence as part of a wider conflict, those where elections are a way to build peace, or those that control other forms of organized violence still use violence as an electoral strategy- all these cases need separate approaches. The work of security institutions in delicate and incendiary conditions is always related to the issues of respect of human rights and freedoms, functioning of democracy, respect for procedures. In the abuse of political power, the government “usually relies on the police and secret services that massively exceed and unjustifiably exercise their official powers”; they do not hesitate to “assign military powers to police units” and abuse private investigative agencies, former members of the security sector, etc. (Mijalković, 2018: 274). Involvement in electoral violence, exceeding authority, inadequate treatment of situations can make the security sector part of the problem, not a mechanism for preventing electoral violence.

Prevention of electoral violence is “[...] defined as any type of electoral assistance activity that aims to prevent or mitigate some form of electoral violence” (Birch & Muchlinski, 2018: 387), that is, a special type of international electoral assistance to countries that are estimated to have a high level of risk of electoral violence. A number of projects and programs initially treated the prevention of electoral violence as a police issue (Birch & Muchlinski, 2018: 386). This approach was replaced by electoral integrity programs, such as UNDP, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) and the United States Institute for Peace (USIP), based on assessments and experiences gathered in sub-Saharan and North Africa, Asia, the Middle East and the liberalization of post-socialist countries where electoral violence was particularly intense. The fear of certain actors that they will remain excluded from politics and decision-making due to ethnic discrimination, electoral fraud, manipulation of the electoral system and the absence of conditions for free and fair elections increases the importance of elections. In these cases, actors are more likely to



resort to electoral violence. Therefore, prevention organizations believe that equal involvement of all actors in decision-making processes should be ensured, and trust in the elections and non-violent conquest of power should be strengthened. The two primary aims are to improve the work of electoral institutions, and to change the attitudes of election actors so as to promote a rejection of electoral violence. The first goal is relatively simple to implement, while the change of opinions and attitudes remains much more challenging and uncertain (Birch & Muchlinski, 2018: 387).

The guides created to implement such programs advise a combination of technical assistance in strengthening electoral institutions and political engagement with electoral actors so as to promote non-violent approaches to elections. The experiences of these organizations show that the *hardware* (the technical, financial and logistics support), must go hand in hand with appropriate the *software* (political action and conflict resolution policies) (UNDP, 2009: 30). Unregulated electoral procedures, insufficient organizing, lack of planning and education of election actors - these are the most common shortcomings of elections; problems arise when they are perceived as being politically motivated. Operational assistance in raising the capacity of electoral actors and bodies conducting elections should eliminate these weaknesses and increase the credibility of elections as a mechanism for gaining power and establishing government, and thus reduce tensions that risk escalating in electoral violence. The second approach considers that prevention should change the contextual and structural elements that are the drivers of electoral violence. Approaches based on mediation through round tables, debates, development of codes of conduct, fostering peace through the media, cultural institutions, dialogue, and understanding of the positions and interests of opposing electoral actors are encouraged. Proponents of this approach believe that it has long-term effects and discourages actors from using violence as part of electoral action (Kehailia, 2014).

Analyses that have measured the impact of these two approaches to the prevention of electoral violence draw contradictory conclusions. Some studies that have analyzed the prevention effects of UN missions in Africa and Latin America in the period 1990-2008 show that technical assistance reduces electoral violence, especially when state bodies participate in such activities, sending a signal to the opposition that they want free and fair elections, which encourages electoral actors to give up violence as a strategy (von Borzyskowski, 2015). Some analyses particularly emphasize the success of technical assistance aimed at optimizing the work of state actors, primarily security structures and election administration bodies, and the benefits of long-term voter education backed by state actors (Claes & Macdonald, 2016). In contrast, the effect of attitude-transformation prevention through civil society actions, various forms of dialogue, messages of peace, voter counseling, youth programs, etc. “remains small or unclear” (Claes & Macdonald, 2016: 192). Studies that have explored similar approaches in individual African countries, however, claim that they have had more success in motivating voters to resist pressure and violence (Collier & Vicente, 2014).

The most recent research on the impact of prevention strategies in diminishing electoral violence shows that both approaches, the first aimed at raising the capacity of actors and institutions and the second aimed at changing the attitudes of actors, show positive results and even greater control of various factors related to electoral violence. The empirical findings show that “attitude-transforming interventions are associated with a reduction in violence by state actors, whereas capacity building appears to reduce violence by non-state actors.” (Birch & Muchlinski, 2020: 397). This confirms the importance of electoral violence prevention in reducing security risks and paving the way for permanent improvement. The research indicates funding, technical support, logistics, international, regional and national organizations implementing prevention programs are in no way a wasted effort, even though they have not yet achieved the desired effects on all levels.



CONCLUSION

As a subtype of political violence, electoral violence has long remained out of the focus of research despite being widespread. Elections are a competitive political process in which a large number of opposing political groups and candidates fight for power. In such an environment, electoral violence easily becomes an acceptable element of the electoral strategy of political leaders, parties, state and non-state actors, as well as for non-democratic societies, hybrid regimes, unconsolidated democracies, which is an unfortunate reality. But democratic societies are not exempt either. The consequences of electoral violence can have a devastating effect on maintaining security, peace and consolidating democracy.

The striking absence of a systematic theoretical and methodological framework for researching this phenomenon is largely disproportionate to the number of case studies that have analyzed certain aspects of violence in the electoral process. In the last two decades, researchers have made significant progress in conceptualizing and studying the phenomenon of electoral violence and the wide range of actors, motives and forms of violence encountered in elections. They of course have national peculiarities. But researchers, based on case studies and series of data on violence in a large number of election cycles, try to conceptualize theoretical paradigms (where, when and what kind of violence is present) and develop prevention mechanisms. Increasingly precise and complete databases on electoral violence - CREV, ECAV, NELDA - enable researchers to analyze in more depth and systematize the motives, actors and forms of violence.

The goal, to predict situations that have a high potential for escalation of electoral violence, is still far. But there are more and more known elements in the mosaic that enable election violence to be prevented. Although decades-long programs based on improving technical capacities for free and fair elections and reframing attitudes around the use of violence in election strategies have not yet met all projected expectations, prevention strategies remain an indispensable mechanism in reducing electoral violence.

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