

Why Are Elections Flashpoints for Violence & Insecurity and Can This Be Avoided?

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Why Have Elections Become Flashpoints for Violence and Insecurity in Post-Conflict States and How Can Such Outcomes Be Avoided?

Introduction

Elections have long been lauded as the pinnacle indicator of a post-conflict state moving towards a more secure democratic future. The ability to elect one's leaders, it is said, is key to moving a state forward after damaging civil or external conflicts. Unfortunately however, the holding of elections is often not as simple as it may first appear, with many practitioners and academics identifying them as flashpoints for violence and insecurity. This study will assess the validity of this claim, primarily through the analysis of the case of Nigeria as a practical base from which to apply theoretical debates.

In determining whether elections have become a flashpoint for violence and insecurity, analysis of both triggers and structural causes is vital. Due to the wording of the question—that is, 'why' as opposed to 'to what extent'—this study will take the fact that elections are a flashpoint for violence as given, and thus base its analysis on this basic assumption.

Determining a framework within which to define electoral violence can prove very difficult given its highly dynamic nature. Current literature examining the issue tends to divide into two key methods of analysis: temporal and ethnographic—that is, to do with distinct social groups. Which of these one chooses determines the way in which we can seek to solve the issue, a dilemma which will be addressed later in the study.

Powell (2009) states that elections come at a lower social cost than engagement in violent conflict. Why then do the two often come in tandem? African states in particular are renowned for both civil conflict and electoral violence; in 2011, eighteen African countries held elections (whether presidential, primary or legislative) and out of these at least eleven were marred by violence (Powell 2009:1477). The potential long term effects of this trend are highly damaging: large scale deterrence of both citizens from voting and candidates from running, a weakened perception of the validity of elections in general society and thus undermining of the perceived legitimacy of a government (Powell 2009:1480). How therefore can one seek to combat electoral violence and thus ensure a peaceful political process? How do we break the nexus between elections and violence? In order to reach an effective resolution, solutions must be aimed at those influencing factors deemed to be the most significant; that is ethnic and social divides, the significance of the electoral timing and the strength of institutional capacity.

Based on the varying ways within which to classify election violence discussed earlier (that is temporal or ethnographic), this discussion will focus around the former approach based on the idea that whilst actors can be specific to their unique case, the electoral cycle is a more commonly applicable concept and thus can be applied more widely in terms of general policy recommendations.

Post-Conflict States

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What then is the significance of a post-conflict state? A 'post-conflict' state is largely considered to be one in which there is an absence of war, but not necessarily real peace. That is, a positive peace has not been achieved. Positive peace is not just the absence of violence, but the foundation for a sustained future including human rights recognition, free and fair electoral process, equal property rights et al. (Grewal 2003:26). This essay will find that it is flawed to attempt to implement fully peaceful elections when positive peace has not yet been achieved.

This is a time of transition for a state, a time in which a multitude of parties are competing for dominance. This is a time in which a state is attempting to reconstruct itself after damaging conflict and thus identifying and attempting to address its basic needs. In fact, Brancati and Snyder go as far as to state that elections held soon after the end of civil wars can often push a country straight back into a state of conflict (Brancati & Snyder 2011:470). This study will consider the term 'post' to refer to any time after a conflict where the direct impacts of that conflict continue to be felt.

Davenport (1997) determines that there is no relationship between elections and the occurrence of political repression in transitional countries, yet this seems to counter the majority of literature on the topic (Davenport 1997:518). Cingranelli and Filippov (2010) reflect the more dominant trend in their work—that is, they find extensive evidence that elections are a key time around which both incumbents and opposition leaders both actively promote and ignore human rights abuses (Cingranelli & Filippov 2010:250). Hyde & Marinov (2012), through extensive data analysis of social trends, have found that between 1960 and 2010 over 350 unique occurrences of electoral violence have been recorded, specifically in terms of post-election protests (Hyde & Marinov 2012:198).

The Case of Nigeria

The choice of Nigeria as a case study was very deliberate, despite the recognition that it is a very unique case. USIP identifies high risk countries as those who have a history of instability, a poor existing system of governance and an existing base of gang related violence. In reference to Nigeria, all of these can be observed. Nigeria exemplifies a vast colonial history and numerous competing interests, especially in terms of energy security and natural resources in the Niger Delta. Furthermore, it's past political system is an interesting one, with it's long standing ethnic based system only recently coming to an end. Of course, in terms of post-conflict definition, the Biafran War of 1967-1970 puts Nigeria squarely in this category (Atofarati 1992:4).

Wallensteen (2002) finds that electoral violence is most likely to occur in states where the prior conflict has been internal in nature; that is, anti-colonial struggles, civil wars, ethnic based grievances at al. (Wallensteen 2002:27). What is interesting about Nigeria as a post-conflict state is that its Biafran War (1967-1970) was an ethnic conflict in itself. Demonstrative of this was the existence of political parties based on ethnic rather than national interest, attempts to promote the economic interests of one faction above another through the control of natural resources, and other such actions. The long cycle of conflict played out through a coup, counter-coup and eventually the escalation into civil war created a breeding ground of political and social tension from which the emergence of electoral violence was largely inevitable. Though the civil conflict may be nearly half a century old, the foundations of Nigerian electoral violence can still be traced back to this origin, and thus it is still pertinent to consider the elections in the theoretical context of a 'post-conflict state.'

A key point of destabilisation, and the crux of the electoral violence that has been observed since can be identified as the death of Muslim President Yar-Adua in 2010, and the subsequent upheaval of the 'zoning' process. Due to the fact that the country is home to around 300 ethnic groups, and is also considered 50% Christian and 40% Muslim led to the long standing unofficial system that leadership would alternate between Christian and Muslim candidates (Brooks 2014:2). The 2011 elections thus marked a point of change. Campbell (2010) submits that no less than 15,000 deaths in Nigeria since the switch from military to civilian rule in 1999 have been as result of conflict drawn along ethnic, religious or regional lines, and a significant number of these have been concentrated around election times (Campbell 2010:9). Divisions based on identity are not hard to find in Nigeria. Disparity between the dominantly Christian South and Muslim North provide clear leverage to manipulate identities for electoral support—a practice which all too often descends into violent clashes. The Niger Delta in itself is a region of significant tension, mainly due to the economic interests concentrated there by the existence of natural resources. Following the 2011 election, days of rioting in the Northern states left almost 1,000 dead and 65,000 displaced, largely orchestrated by the supporters

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of Muslim opposition candidate Muhammadu Buhari following the re-election of Christian Goodluck Johnson. The police and military were also accused of excessive use of force by human rights groups (HRW 2014:2).

How Then Does This Relate to Wider Cases of Electoral Violence?

Electoral Violence

One of the most pertinent underlying conditions for insecurity in post conflict states is social division; that can refer to ethnic, religious or a multitude of other dividing factors. Often exploited through elite political dialogue, these divisions exacerbate conflict around election times and thus can be considered contributing factors towards the 'flashpoints' of violence that emerge at these times. It is important to consider however that these social divisions do not guarantee violence in themselves; instead, it is the manipulation of these divides by those seeking electoral support that can lead to violent ends. As "various powerful figures calculate their best interests and shift their factional alignments [...] the players will likely resort to force" (Sklar et al 2006:108).

Note that although ethnic divisions do commonly exist, this does not automatically mean that they will lead to violent outcomes in elections. This especially applies to African states, which contradicts the negative connotations usually associated with elections in this region. Since its independence in 1966 and despite the presence of ethnic divisions, Botswanan elections have been judged free and fair by the international community (Holm et al 1996:43). What's more, it is noted that Botswanan elections have never been contested by military rule, further removing the prospect of violence and forceful means from the electoral context (Holm et al 1996:44). Charlton (1993) also recognises that the outcomes of Botswanan elections are widely accepted by the electorate, and perceived as fundamental for the development of the state. This reflects the importance of general attitudes towards election outcomes (Charlton 1993:332).

Garfinkel & Skaperdas (2007) put forth 'contest function' as an explanation for electoral violence. That is, violence is less likely when one party holds a marked dominance over the other. It is proposed that groups who enjoy a low level of popular support will favour the lesser opportunity cost of elections over the more damaging violent protest. In theory, there is a high positive correlation between the ability of a group to win an election, and it's ability to win a civil war.

What is important to understand is that electoral violence does not solely occur within the time frame of the elections themselves. It can emerge both before and after elections, especially in cases when results are disputed or concerns over socio-economic conditions have been brought to the fore by aggrieved voters (Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart 2010:4).

It is interesting to note the divergence between violent acts committed with the intent of influencing the election outcome (that is, to increase or damage the popularity of a candidate), and violence applied simply for the purpose of disrupting or halting the electoral process. The actions of Boko Haram in Nigeria reflect the latter case. Boko Haram as a group has created an identity based around the opposition of what they define as the "corruption and incapability of political elites" (Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart 2010:6). Support for these groups who utilise violence as a central method of action has been seen to grow around times of elections, and thus extremism is introduced into the realm of electoral violence. Parallels can be seen within the current Afghan elections, where the Taliban have stated they will use any means possible to disrupt polling. This reflects the events of the 2009 Afghan elections, in which both candidates, voters and electoral officials were targeted by violence (Al Jazeera 2014).

Machado et al. have indicated that incidence of violent movements is negatively related to the strength of institutions; that is, political stability, the perceived effectiveness and impartiality of law enforcement agencies et al. This assessment can further the extent to which we can consider whether violence was solely a result of elections; if it is found that there was a low degree of institutional confidence prior to the elections themselves, then this would indicate that the elections acted as a catalyst as opposed to a cause of the violence.

New Wars and Failed States

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In terms of linking electoral violence to wider theoretical debate, one can draw interesting parallels between the breakdown of social order characterised by 'flashpoints of violence' and Failed State theory. Zartman (1995) asserts that a state has collapsed "when the basic functions of the state are no longer performed" (Zartman 1995:14). Rotburg considered the basic functions of the state to include facilitation of political participation, security and rule of law, and thus the breakdown of institutional order and rule of law identified within the 'flashpoints of violence' can certainly be considered within this category (Rotburg 2003:46). The provision of security in particular is considered to be fundamental. Krasner (2004) adds that a state can be considered to have failed if it cannot maintain its monopoly over the use of violence (Krasner 2004:118).

The link is made yet stronger by the fact that failed states are strongly correlated with those which are considered ex-colonial. Previous control by a colonial ruler often means that a nation has no real sense or common understanding of a unique national identity—they are instead subject to a history built by outsiders. This means that actors tend to turn to more localised loyalties as a source of identity construction—ethnic group, geographical location, local dialect and the like. In times of election, these divisions are then manipulated further, as will be discussed below. Furthermore, the struggle to achieve a free and independent state often develops a sense of entitlement to a country which is 'rightfully theirs', and this can manifest itself in violent protest in response to electoral outcomes that may not be considered 'fair'. New War theory identifies a shift towards conflict based on identities and the pursuit of group interests, as opposed to state-to-state territorial warfare (Kaldor 2013:40). These features of electoral violence can certainly hold weight within this theory.

Solving Electoral Violence

Indeed, violence prevention programs do currently exist, however, based on current outcomes they are largely considered to be outdated and ineffective. What is being increasingly recognised is that attempts to combat electoral violence must be cyclical in nature. Practitioners must situate their work within a clearly defined framework, where the objectives have been developed to suit that particular unique case. This cyclical perspective should aid in better identifying the links between the underlying and more obvious forms of electoral violence. This in turn should facilitate a move away from a state centric approach towards a more thematic method.

This paper recommends a move away from the top-down processes which are often implemented when trying to maintain a post-conflict peace, and instead pursue community based co-operative relations (Bloomfield 2006:25). Galtung (2001) asserts that post-conflict reconciliation, "has deep psychological, sociological, theological, philosophical and profoundly human roots" (Galtung 2001:21). It is key to recognise that the ethnic tension that in part causes electoral violence is not a result of the past conflict of the state, but instead a symptom of it. Pickering (2007) demonstrates how encouraging reconciliation between opposing groups can go hand in hand with institutional reform to minimise the chance of future electoral violence (Pickering 2007:95).

Nigerian culture traditionally promotes a deference to authoritative figures and those considered 'elders'. Based on this observation, it has been suggested that if a system of non violent conflict resolution is to be pursued, it must be a community based approach. As it is now, and as has been discussed earlier, the message from above is largely damaging to this non violent approach. Instead of a manipulation of social divisions, an emphasis on commonalities in order to transcend these divides must be attempted.

"Communities are more peaceful when members value the connectors that bind them over the dividers that separate them" (Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart 2010:9).

This emphasis on community would indicate that the focus for preventing future electoral violence must be on local actors. The media, religious groups and civil society collectives all play crucial internal roles in terms of assuring credibility, monitoring elections, de-escalating rising tensions and presenting an impartial coverage of electoral events to overall promote peaceful coexistence. If groups such as these act as positive role models in terms of electoral conduct, it is likely to reassure those who turn to violence out of dissatisfaction with the credibility and process of elections.

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Firstly, the patterns of electoral violence in both this and other countries that are similar in nature should be identified so that any common factors can be mitigated before the violence is allowed to take place. A risk assessment approach can identify points of tension within the country and thus target these through the community-based approaches detailed above. Arguably the key to minimising electoral violence is to recognise that the closer in proximity the election is to the end of conflict, the more likely actors are to relapse into violent habits. Though potentially less pertinent in the case of Nigeria specifically due to the larger gap between the cessation of conflict and the attempted implementation of elections, we can find links between this factor and the chance of violence by looking at additional case studies. In fact moving away from the African continent, the violence anticipated in current Afghan elections could be linked to the fact that a cease fire has only been in place since March—and it was tentative at best (Al Jazeera 2014). Waiting for positive peace will go some way to removing the structural pre-conditions for violence.

Despite the widely accepted hypothesis that elections do indeed act as a flashpoint for violence, the African Electoral Violence Database has in fact determined that violence is not a ubiquitous outcome of democratisation in Africa (Onwudiwe & Berwind-Dart 2010:11). This view could be flawed in that it conflates elections and democratisation as one and the same, when in fact there is substantial evidence to suggest that this is not the case. Holding elections in itself does not make a country democratic. Whilst elections have been said to encourage wider political engagement and thus increase political accountability in the long run, this does not appear possible unless there is a pre-existing rule of law and faith in institutional capacity that would encourage this initial participation. Moves to strengthen both institutions and the perceptions of these are therefore crucial, and this reform will strengthen the stability of the future state.

Conclusion

In distinguishing between two of the key terms in the hypothesis (that is 'violence' and 'insecurity'), this essay has addressed the issue of why elections can be flashpoints for violence and insecurity, and also to what extent this is the case. What is increasingly evident however is that the two terms have come to mean different things. Elections may well be flashpoints for violence, but insecurity is a much more complex concept altogether. Where violence is the direct way in which grievances may manifest themselves in high pressure situations, such as elections, insecurity is the underlying socio-economic influence that allows these dissatisfactions to develop. This emphasises the relative importance of the factors.

The current framing of electoral violence into three categories following the election cycle, (that is underlying violent influences, escalation factors and outbreak catalysts) has gone some way to facilitating a more focused analysis, however limitations remain. Insurgent groups have a direct and easily observable influence on violence levels. The violent or oppressive actions of a dominant state may have been normalised into public life over a number of years and thus are less easy to distinguish. Even more embedded are the socio-economic and ethnic divisions which are exacerbated by the high pressure situation of an election. These factors create a temporal hierarchy that can be difficult to rank as each factor has its own contributing significance.

It is crucial to ensure that elections are seen not as an opportunity to engage in a hostile takeover of power, but instead to allow a peaceful power transition. This of course can be very challenging in a post-conflict state, where actors are conditioned to seek to gain power by any means necessary. If properly addressed now, voter mobilisation could continue into future electoral campaigns, due to the growth of a sense of actual influence on an outcomes. It must be made clear that there are far more effective ways to influence a political outcome than through violent means. Open dialogue and a greater degree of transparency surrounding the electoral process will allow elections to continue as a valid step on the way to building sustainable peace.

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