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**Ballots or Bullets:  
Potentials and Limitations  
of Elections in Conflict Contexts**

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## 4 Elections, Violence and Peace

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### 4.1 Introduction

Elections, while representing an essential feature of representative democracy, are also intrinsically conflictual. Election-related violence causes death and suffering, destroys communities and cripples local economies and development prospects. Moreover, it harms credibility and faith in democratic processes and institutions. Recent outbreaks of election-related violence in Kenya, Mongolia, Pakistan, Iran, Cote d'Ivoire and elsewhere are stark reminders of such destruction.

Philip Alston's UN report (2010) states that there is a lack of academic research on this subject and points to the fact that there is no commonly accepted terminology or definition on 'election-related killings'. Furthermore, it finds that research gaps include work on the causes and effects of election-related violence.

The objective of this paper is to point to the multiplicity of factors behind election-related violence, explore dynamics between them and suggest some practical approaches to election-related violence.

The paper will first provide a general introduction on the phenomenon of election-related violence. In doing so, it will address terminological issues, examine motives of different actors for resorting to violent means and point to some consequences of election-related violence. The paper will next present a wider conceptual framework to help our understanding of the dynamics between process related factors (internal or endogenous to electoral processes) and structural factors (external or exogenous to electoral processes). In this context, the potential of peacebuilding efforts in preventing and mitigating election-related violence will be explored. The concept is then translated into a wider analytical framework.

In conclusion, the paper will suggest a set of overarching principles for addressing election-related violence. It will argue that efforts to address election-related violence must be country and election specific. They must be designed to bring onboard expertise from multiple arenas, elections and conflict in particular, and include both short and long term strategies.

### 4.2 Definition

There is no single definition of election-related violence or a commonly accepted terminology on this topic. Philip Alston's report (2010) constitutes the most comprehensive mapping of academic research on election-related violence thus far. Alston (2010: 5) finds that many definitions focus on intent or motive elements. This paper will address different motives for resorting to violence separately in the next section and will instead point to definitions which focus on acts, manifestations and timing of election-related violence. Some popular definitions such as those offered by Fischer (2002) and Sisk (2009) describe electoral violence as acts of threat, coercion, intimidation, blackmail, physical harm including assassinations and killing directed against electoral actors, events and materials. Höglund (2009) distinguishes election-related violence from other forms of political violence because it is carried out during the election period with the objective to influence the process and its outcomes. However, Alston (2010: 6) points to prosecution and execution of individuals convicted for involvement in the post-election protests against the Government of Iran and argues that although these killings did not take place during the election period, they can still be characterised as election-related violence.

Accordingly, election-related violence can be defined as acts of violence directed against electoral actors, facilities, events and materials in the context of electoral processes or its outcomes.



### 4.3 Motives for Election-Related Violence

Election-related violence may occur spontaneously, but researchers point to numerous cases where election-related violence was organized to influence electoral outcomes (Alston 2010: 9). Hence, one possible way to obtain better insights into the phenomenon of election-related violence may involve analyzing perpetrators' motives to resort to violent means. The perpetrators' position in elections may help understanding their incentives for resorting to violent tactics. These incentives include:

*Seeking electoral advantages* – is usually an incentive for those who compete in elections or their supporters. Violent acts are directed against political competitors and their supporters. Such acts include threats, coercion, intimidation, assassinations, etc. This type of violence has been seen in the context of many African elections.

*Disrupting elections* – is often an incentive of those who do not compete in elections. They may be excluded from the electoral processes (disfranchised groups), or have particular interests in elections being spoiled or not taking place at all. Violent tactics may include terrorist acts targeting electoral actors, events and materials. This type of violence was seen in the context of the Afghan, Iraq and Colombian elections.

*Preventing election manipulations* – is an incentive of those who share perceptions that elections are manipulated or rigged. Electoral processes may be designed and implemented in a way which will favour one electoral contestant over another. Party and individuals who feel that the process is manipulated in their disadvantage may take action to bring an end to such practices, even through violent means. Election rigging usually takes place in the later stages of electoral processes and may cause violent reactions. In addition to opposition parties, protesters may include civil society organizations and other social groups and individuals who feel that they are pursuing their legitimate rights. Violent acts are often directed against government buildings and offices. Such protests and violent outbreaks were witnessed in Iran (2009), Guyana (1992, 1997, 2001), Serbia (2000) and elsewhere. However, recent elections in Kenya (2007), Zimbabwe (2008) and Cote-d'Ivoire (2010) have seen rejections of election results, claims of rigged elections and violent threats or actions by loosing incumbent parties. These strategies have worked well in securing power-sharing agreements favourable to the loosing parties.

*Violence as a response to initial violence* – is also a likely development in all of the above scenarios. Even the most righteous protests may involve violent episodes. However, governments' responses, such as in Iran (2009), may escalate violence.

### 4.4 Consequences of Election-Related Violence

There is no cross-national research that explains or measures the full magnitude of negative consequences of election-related violence. In broad terms, the consequences of election-related violence may include the following:

*Human rights violations* – These may include disfranchisement through deprivation of citizens' or groups' right to vote and compete. Moreover, election-related violence often causes human suffering and deaths.

*Economic implications* – Elections are the largest administrative undertakings in democratic societies, and consequently the costs associated with elections may represent a major financial burden. In some cases, governments are unable to finance elections and depend on international electoral assistance. In addition, electoral competition and election monitoring involve significant expenditures for political parties, and domestic and international monitoring groups. Election-related violence will not only squander those resources, but will further cause destruction of local communi-



ties and infrastructure with numerous negative economic and developmental consequences, both direct and indirect.

*Diminished trust in democratic processes and institutions* – In conflict prone societies in particular, electoral processes have become strongly associated with suffering and death, destruction and economic downturns. The inability of the international community to effectively support the organization of elections in some countries has led to disputes, paralysis and even humiliation of the international actors. In some contexts, elections have already become synonymous with trouble and danger. Such associations have devastating effects on trust in democratic processes and institutions.

## 4.5 Conceptual Framework – Dynamics of Factors of Election-Related Violence

One way to gain insights into, and understandings of, the occurrences of election-related violence is to understand the multiplicity of factors which generate, trigger, or contribute to triggering, election-related violence. Scholarly research about causes and triggers of election-related violence is mainly focused on national studies with few cross-national research efforts. In some cases, researchers will focus on mismanaged electoral processes and how they triggered violence (Suberu, 2007; Bamfo, 2008). Other studies include more elaborate analysis of structural factors of conflict in a given social context and point to how these conflicts escalate during the electoral period (Höglund, 2006; Basedau et al., 2007; Kaya, 2007; Laakso, 2007; Uno, 2007).

Accordingly, a wider conceptual framework for mapping factors of election-related violence should make a distinction between process (election-related) and structural (societal) factors. Such a distinction will help our understanding of the dynamics between the factors and causes that generate conflict.

### Process factors – internal (endogenous) to electoral processes

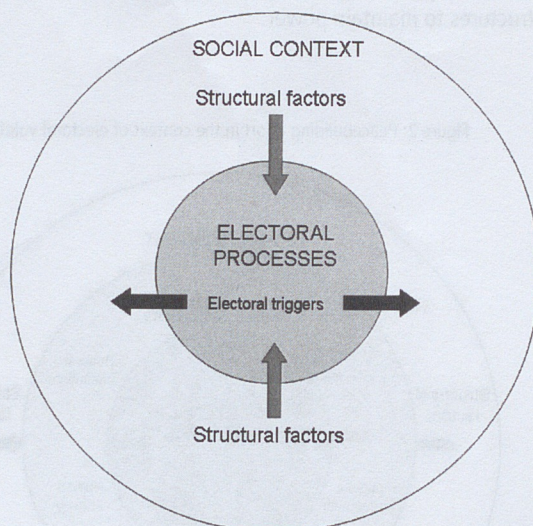
It is well established that elections can trigger violence in conflict prone societies. Different factors within the electoral processes may trigger or contribute to triggering of election-related violence in virtually any phase of the electoral cycle. Combinations of risk factors may be different for different elections, and also the ways in which they correlate. Examples of process factors include a) contested and unfit legal frameworks for elections; b) ineffective and mistrusted dispute resolution mechanisms, c) lack of trust in electoral management bodies; d) technical problems, which as a consequence may disfavour particular political actors; e) hate speeches during election campaigns; f) mismanagement of appeals, etc.

### Structural factors – external (exogenous) to electoral processes

Elections do not take place in a vacuum. There is always an underlying social context in which elections take place and it may include existing violence (ethnic, religious, organized crime, violence against women, terrorism, guerrilla fighting, etc.), tensions in society (latent conflicts including segregation, discrimination, etc.) and structural factors (unemployment, corruption, poverty, etc.). The organization of electoral processes in violent and volatile surroundings always entails risks for electoral actors, events and materials.



Figure 1: Occurrence of Election-related Violence – Endogenous and Exogenous Factors



Election-related violence is best understood by focusing on the dynamics between process factors and structural factors (see Figure 1). Elections are instinctually conflictual processes involving heated political contestations. The design and technical management of electoral processes may create an unlevelled playing field for electoral contestants. This may undermine the prospects of particular electoral actors to win elections while at the same time creating a favourable environment for rival political camps. Given the high stakes of electoral outcomes, in particular in conflict prone societies and transitional democracies, weak electoral engineering, including technical mistakes, may trigger violence. However, even when electoral processes are implemented with the highest standards and able to facilitate a levelled playing field for all competitors, they may not be immune to election-related violence. This is true e.g. in situations when the incumbent president decides to use violent tactics to oppress political opponents and their supporters. Also, the design and technical management of electoral processes may face very different challenges in environments which already experience high levels of violence. Organized crime groups, terrorists groups and guerrilla fighters may use violent tactics to disrupt electoral processes by perpetrating violent acts directed against electoral actors, including candidates, voters, officials, election facilities and election materials. In such scenarios, the quality of electoral processes will be measured in relation to how well it is designed to protect actors, events and materials from violence.

In reality, there may be no clear divide between factors of conflict which are internal and external to electoral processes. In fact, a single electoral process may face multiple challenges, including technical complexities in the planning and implementation of the election which in turn may impact the credibility of the electoral process, political pressures, social volatility and high violence rates. These factors will differ from country to country and even from election to election.

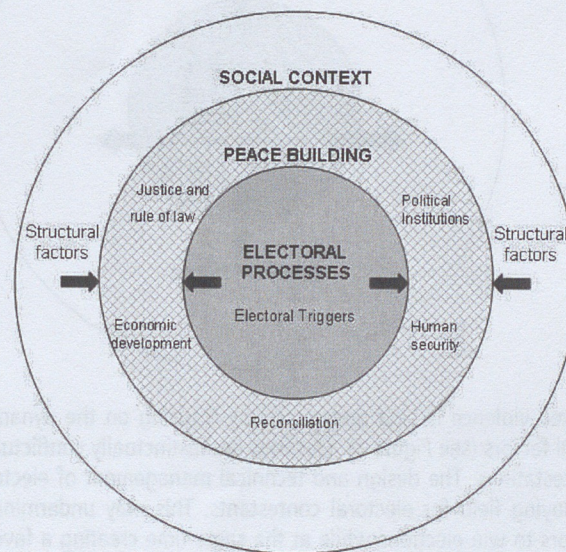
#### 4.6 Elections, Violence and Peacebuilding

One way to address election-related violence may be through state and peacebuilding efforts. Peacebuilding efforts include issues like capacity building, reconciliation and societal transformation (Boutros, 1995). As such, peacebuilding encompasses an array of efforts focused on capacity building of political institutions, economic development initiatives, human security, reconciliation processes, promotion of justice and rule of law etc. These processes can help channelling deeply rooted social conflicts into institutional frameworks, thus making electoral processes less exposed to external (exogenous) influences. In particular, it may be important to establish trusted and effective justice mechanisms, an inclusive political system, transparent governance practices, and to limit the



extent to which holders of political power are able to establish control over economical resources and use security structures to maintain power.

Figure 2: Peacebuilding effort in the context of electoral volatility



The importance of effective state institutions and a democratic culture for preventing and mitigating election-related conflicts and violence is shown by many well established democracies. Examples can be found in the USA, India and many countries in Europe, as well as some transitional democracies, such as Ghana.

Indeed, one of the best examples showing how democracies are able to prevent outbreaks of election-related violence after contested elections comes from the USA where contested 2000 presidential elections delayed the announcement of the final election results for over a month. George Bush was declared as the President of USA only after a recount of controversial butterfly ballots<sup>3</sup> in Florida, controversies with overseas' ballots and a fierce judicial battle between the Republicans and the Democrats. However, strong democratic institutions and the democratic culture in the country were powerful guarantors that the USA election would remain peaceful. Conflict prone societies across the world have seen election-related violence in less contested situations.

State building is a long term process which may take decades to complete. Elections however, can not be put on hold indefinitely and must be organized, even if it entails certain risks.

## 4.7 Analytical Framework

Elections are very complex, dynamic and high-stake processes. Election-related violence is a moving target for researchers and practitioners trying to develop an understanding and strategies to address the problem effectively. To help focusing violence prevention and mitigation efforts, the conceptual framework presented earlier may be translated into practical analytical framework.

<sup>3</sup> Requires voter to punch a hole beside their candidate's name in a strip between two facing pages that listed the presidential contenders.



The table below presents a list of factors compiled from different research papers, election reports and other relevant publications. These documents suggest links between a particular factor, or combination of factors, resulting in an increase of election-related tensions and outbreaks of election-related violence. Following the concept presented in the paper, the table organizes factors into internal and external columns. The list of internal factors is ordered to reflect the chronology of the electoral process. The list of external factors distinguishes between existing forms of violence which can impact electoral processes and those factors that could potentially spark election-related violence.

Figure 3 – Analytical framework: List of factors of election-related violence internal and external to electoral processes

Internal Factors	External Factors
<p><b>Electoral Legislation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contested Electoral Law</li> <li>• Unfit electoral system</li> <li>• Lack of adequate administrative regulations</li> </ul> <p><b>Planning and Implementation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inadequate operational planning</li> <li>• Inadequate funding, financing and budgeting</li> <li>• Inadequate security arrangements</li> <li>• Inadequate timeline planning</li> <li>• Poor performance of the Electoral Management Bodies</li> <li>• Inadequate system for the resolution of electoral conflicts</li> </ul> <p><b>Training and Education</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor or no training for electoral officials</li> <li>• Poor or no training for political parties, civil society organizations and media</li> <li>• Poor or no training for law enforcement officials</li> <li>• Poor or no civic education</li> <li>• Poor or no voter information</li> </ul> <p><b>Registration process</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problematic voter registration</li> <li>• Problematic registration of political parties and independent candidates</li> <li>• Problematic accreditation of election observers</li> </ul> <p><b>Electoral campaign</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited media access</li> <li>• Public incitement to violence through the media</li> <li>• Intimidation/violence against media</li> <li>• Public incitement to violence at political party rallies</li> <li>• Provocative and violent actions by political parties</li> </ul> <p><b>Voting operations and election day</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problems with provisional voter registers</li> <li>• Deficit/destruction/loss of sensitive and non sensitive materials</li> <li>• Lack of transparency of special and external voting</li> <li>• Election Day problems</li> <li>• Problematic ballot and result tallying</li> <li>• Lost/destroyed tabulation forms</li> <li>• Fraud suspected</li> </ul> <p><b>Election results</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mishandling a final round of complaints and appeals</li> <li>• Delay in announcing the official results</li> <li>• Rejection of results</li> </ul>	<p><b>Existing Violence</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intimidation/harassment</li> <li>• Kidnapping/extortion</li> <li>• Assassination/homicide</li> <li>• Gender based violence</li> <li>• Violence against property</li> </ul> <p><b>Risk Factors for Violence</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Security sector actors</li> <li>• Regional weak state presence and control</li> <li>• Neighbouring violence spilling over borders</li> <li>• Poverty and socio-economic conditions</li> <li>• Increased unemployment</li> <li>• Increased ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic related tensions</li> <li>• Changes in power dynamics among actors</li> <li>• Violation of human rights</li> <li>• Sensitive processes involving fear and/or expectations</li> <li>• Arbitrary arrests and lack of due process</li> <li>• Impunity</li> <li>• Forced displacement</li> <li>• Presence of non-state armed actors</li> <li>• Organized crime</li> <li>• Access to small arms</li> <li>• Natural hazards</li> <li>• Unfit political system</li> <li>• Spoiler political parties and organizations</li> <li>• Lack of democratic culture</li> <li>• Manipulative media</li> </ul>



There are two divides for clustering particular factors into internal and external columns. The first divide relates to the extent to which given factors exist outside of the electoral context. External factors exist outside of electoral processes but play an important role in elections or can influence electoral processes. E.g. the role of political parties and media is very important during elections but their purpose is not only election specific. Similarly, internal factors are those that do not exist or have any relevance outside of the electoral process.

The second divide relates to factor dynamics. Internal factors are triggers. A single hate speech during an electoral campaign can create trigger violent reactions. Some internal factors will be relevant only during a particular phase of the electoral cycle. On the other hand, external factors are structural and more resilient. They include deeply rooted conflicts and social structures which can change only in the long run but can be triggered at any point of time. Accordingly, it is very likely that structural factors of concern in one electoral cycle will maintain the same level of risk in the next electoral cycle. It should be noted that elections may be seen as structural factor of social conflict and violence, but such paradigm is out of the paper's scope.

The list is not exclusive and can grow to include additional factors or proxies. Also, the way in which the list is organized can be changed and improved. For example, more extensive efforts can be invested in analysing the significance and power of factors in relation to election-related violence. Also, correlations between different factors can be investigated. However, such cross-national research would require a set of quantitative data which may not be available at the moment.

Nevertheless, despite the fact that more thorough analysis may help identifying statistical significance and measuring explanatory powers of different factors, narrowing the analytical framework described in this paper would not bring any practical value. Numerous studies point to the particular importance of the electoral system design and the level of trust in electoral management bodies as well as the role of media and political parties in triggering election-related violence. There are however violent contexts in which these factors have not been relevant or most prominent. If less important factors are omitted from the analytical framework, its flexibility and adaptability would decrease which consequently could impact its relevance. Furthermore, factors which are less prominent, such as voter education, observer registration, unemployment and poverty are very important in creating enabling conditions for violence to take place and therefore need to be included.



## 4.8 Toward Conclusions – Preventing and Mitigating Election-Related Violence

This paper has provided a wider introduction to the phenomenon of election-related violence by addressing some terminological issues, motives and consequences of election-related violence. Furthermore, it presented a way to conceptualize and understand election-related violence. The concept distinguishes between the process factors internal to electoral processes and structural factors which are external to electoral processes. This concept was then placed in the context of peacebuilding initiatives. Finally, the concept was translated into a more comprehensive analytical framework for addressing the problem.

In line with the concepts and argumentation presented above, this paper suggests the following overarching principles for addressing election-related violence:

Election-related violence is country and election specific. Efforts undertaken to prevent occurrences of election-related violence must be focused on critical factors, critical geographic areas and be manageable with the resources available. This comprehensive analytical framework can assist with tailoring country and election specific models for focusing and designing preventive strategies.

Factors of election-related violence, internal and external, have different characteristics. Electoral experts have a good understanding of electoral processes, critical phases, electoral events and actors and are able to understand how deficiencies in one phase may affect the credibility of electoral processes and risks associated with the process. However, their understanding of election-related conflicts and violence may be limited to electoral perspectives. Conflict and security practitioners on the other hand have a good understanding of structural factors, deeply rooted conflicts, security issues and how these affect elections. They may however lack an understanding of the electoral process. In reality, these communities do not always collaborate and share knowledge and expertise to maximise their understanding of election-related violence. Strategies for prevention and mitigation of election-related conflict and violence need to draw on expertise from multiple arenas.

Comprehensive strategies for prevention and mitigation of election-related violence must encompass short term electoral management strategies but also extend beyond electoral cycle to include long-term actions and social transformation. Peacebuilding efforts make up a solid framework for pursuing these changes.



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