Election Violence in Africa: Part of the Campaign?

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July 2020

Executive Summary

Historically, elections across the African continent have been marred with violence before, during and after the actual election days. Be it authoritarian regimes or flawed democracies, many countries do not seem to be able to break that cycle and it appears to be somewhat part of the electoral campaign and strategy to fan the violence. It is rooted in a deep ethnic divide that political parties play on to cement their power and it is manifesting the division even further. Democratisation is not a linear process and we are likely to see continued election violence in the months and years to come.

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Analysis

Africa was expecting a big election year in 2020 with 27 various elections scheduled across 22 countries. As with countless events this year, the global pandemic halted or postponed many to 2021. However, some elections took place before the pandemic and Malawi and Burundi proceeded with elections during the pandemic despite warnings from various health organisations. Regardless of the uncertain circumstances countries find themselves in, one thing that is for certain is that when it comes to elections in most African countries, there will be some form of election violence.

Election violence in Africa can occur before, during or after the elections and takes many different forms - some is spurred on by the candidates, some violence is in reaction to the results of the election or corrupt practices as perceived by the voters and some by the different supporters. In spite or because of the pandemic, elections that have taken place in 2020, have been no different than those in previous years.

Before, during and after

In March, Guinean President Alpha Condé used the confusion around the emerging pandemic to push a controversial referendum and thus influence the fate of the country for years to come. The referendum, which was passed, changed the constitution to allow the President to run for a third term. Election violence spurred on by the opposition had already started in October 2019 and continued until the referendum vote and legislative elections took place in March 2020. The months-long clashes between pro and anti-referendum groups, security forces and the anti-referendum opposition, led to deaths, injuries, and arrests. However, no official numbers to the extent are available. The Presidential election is set to take place in October 2020 and will for certain see another period of election violence.

Cameroon's continued struggle with the Anglophone Crisis[1] in addition to holding elections led to severe violence leading up to the election in February of this year. Over 100 people were kidnapped, properties were burnt, and voters intimidated into not voting. This violence led to multiple opposition parties asking for a boycott of the elections last year already, expressing their concern over security. The election went forward but, in many of the Anglophone regions, intimidation led to less than 10% of voters exercising their right to vote. Unlike other African countries where violent clashes occur between the state and civilians, the violence in Cameroon stems from separatists in the Anglophone regions who believe that there is a prioritization by the government of French citizens over their English-speaking counterparts.

Burundi's election during May 2020 illustrates that violence before an election is not necessarily an indication for the events on election day. The build-up to the election and campaigning by the parties was marred with violence and intimidation. At least 22 people were killed in violence that was linked to the election and multiple members of the opposition party were arrested in the month prior. However, election day showed a different image, with multiple reports on how little disruption there was. Despite this, internet access was still cut off for the day by the government, a popular move by African governments to stifle any resistance.

A prime example of post-election violence can currently be witnessed in Mali with the ongoing protests that started in May. Government officials state that there have been 4 fatalities, but according to the opposition

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[1] The Anglophone Crisis is an ongoing dispute between separatists from the Anglophone regions of northwest and southwest Cameroon and the Cameroonian government. The dispute stems from the unification of two territories, with different colonial legacies, into one. 3000 people have been killed, 530 000 have been internally displaced and 1.3 million need humanitarian aid.

coalition there have been at least 11 fatalities and over 170 injuries. The protests were sparked by anger towards the Constitutional Court after it overturned the provisional election results of a long-delayed parliamentary poll that had been held in March. The court overturned the provisional results for about 30 seats, a move that saw several members of President Keita's party gaining seats. The Constitutional Court decision and the results have been disputed by multiple candidates. Malians perceived this move by the court as one stemmed in corruptive practices. However, it is to be noted that the resentment of the results acted as a catalyst to an already volatile situation that is also anchored in anger towards the government for its poor handling of the economy and jihadist violence.

History repeating itself

Ivory Coast's election history has been tainted significantly by election violence, the Ivorian Crisis[2] from 2010-2011 is still embedded in the memory of many citizens, and recent developments indicate that the upcoming elections might bring about another wave of violence and protests.

Current President Alassane Ouattara was set to step down and allow for a new generation of rule. This changed when Prime Minister Amadou Gon Coulibaly, who was expected to be the successor of Ouattara, died suddenly on 8th July 2020. Despite the constitution, which was promulgated in 2016, only allowing for a President to serve two terms, Ouattara has been asked by his party to run for a third. To add to the increasing political tensions, Vice-President Daniel Kablan Duncan resigned one week after the Prime Minister's death. The vote is set for October 2020 and with a possible power vacuum forming, election violence will most likely occur.

Uganda is another country that has seen election violence leading up to and during its past three general elections, to the degree that it is considered a "normality" by Ugandans. There have been clashes between police and supporters, opposition supporters and supporters of the ruling party, and in 2016 there were 22 fatalities due to violence. The 2018 election was tainted by the alleged kidnapping of two Members of Parliament who claim they were tortured by security agents for their support of the opposition party. This event led to post-election protests even greater than those of 2016. As the build-up to their presidential election in early 2021 falls in the time of an ongoing pandemic, one can only expect that this election will be no different.

The elections scheduled for August 2020 in Ethiopia had to be postponed to 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Having been one of Africa's most repressive states until 2018, when Abiy Ahmed was voted in as Prime Minister, it was hoped that the country could overcome its challenges and transform into a democracy. Ahmed's appointment calmed the ethnic conflicts that had been raging in the country since 2015 and that had led to the implementation of state of emergency and civil unrest. Two years after his election, the honeymoon phase is over and, despite his achievements for the country, the opposition is viewing the postponement as a way for Ahmed to increase his time in office and to try ensure the survival of his government.

As his term would have officially ended on 10th October, the opposition is asking Abiy Ahmed to instate a coalition government that day until elections can be held in 2021. Should the Prime Minister not do so, the opposition is already now threatening with protests and violence on 10th October.

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[2] After the first round of elections did not yield a winner, a second round was held in which then opposition candidate Ouattara won, but the results were declared invalid by a Constitutional Court judge, an ally of the then ruling President Laurent Gbagbo. A political crisis, lasting over a year, emerged with both parties receiving military support from various entities. Approximately 1 000 people died and 94 000 Ivorians fled in fear of violence. Gbagbo was arrested for his role in human rights violations that took place during the crisis and sent to the International Criminal Court. Ouattara was sworn in as President in 2011.

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Many are of the opinion that Ahmed is turning back towards an authoritarian rule, with arrests of the opposition, journalists, and human rights watchdogs. The country has severe ethnic divisions that would make peaceful elections with no violence a challenge, even without threats by the opposition.

Part of the political campaign

Ethiopia is not alone in struggling with an ethnic divide that influences not only the daily lives but politics. And it is certainly not a new phenomenon on the continent.

When Africa was colonised, the West not only divided the continent amongst themselves, but fanned the flames of tribalism. In an attempt to subdue the majority population and cement their power, colonialists created and enforced rifts. And it is this divide amongst ethnic lines that we still see today.

Since then, Africa's history has been riddled with dictatorships and authoritarian regimes. Even today, 15 countries still have authoritarian regimes and many countries have only in recent years emerged from dictatorships. From 44 scored countries, only seven countries were ranked as democracies by the 2019 Democracy Index, six of them as flawed democracies.

Like the colonialists, authoritarian rulers secure popular support by using the old rule of "divide and conquer". Ethnicity is a tool for political persuasion. Dividing societies along ethnic lines was and still is a popular method in Africa for garnering very loyal support. These ethnic divisions seep into and remain in societies for decades, if not centuries. Ethnicity is more than what one looks like, it is values, ethics, a social contract.

The dynamics of governance under authoritarian regimes and dictators have created the space for election violence when transitioning to democracy and holding elections. Votes are cast according to ethnic affiliations, rather than political programs. Majority tribes therefore often dominate a country's politics, whilst minorities do not feel recognised.

In Kenya for example, since the introduction of a multi-party system in 1992, policy has been significantly shaped by only five of the over 40 ethnic groups in the country and dominant political actors belong to the largest tribes.

During their first democratic elections and years to come, Kenya experienced heavy clashes and violence. Zambia on the other hand which held its first democratic elections one year prior in 1991, stayed relatively calm. At the time, Zambia had a more inclusive single-party rule which eased the ethnic tensions. Nearly 30 years later, Zambia is now experiencing a higher volume of violence, proving that democratic transition is not a short linear process.

The hope that once a country has had democratic or free and fair elections, they completed the transition to a full democracy is unfortunately a fallacy. It can take years and even decades before democratic consolidation is reached, if at all.

Elections will remain volatile unless ethnic divisions are not bridged. However, seeing that they have manifested themselves over centuries now, this will be a big task that may take equally long.

Political parties' campaigns play on historical injustice and ethnic divisions. With a sharp ethnic divide, comes a slippery slope of majority rulers being able to disregard the needs of a part of their population and making decisions without having the fear of not being re-elected, like it would be the case in full democracies.

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This dissonance and dissatisfaction manifest itself in the election violence we see ever so often on the African continent.

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Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the authors.

About the Authors of this Issue

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