Post-Election Violence in Africa: The Case of the CEMAC Sub-Region

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Abstract

Since 1990 contested elections have again become a regular fixture of the political systems of sub-Saharan Africa. But what do they mean? In this issue of post-election violence in Africa, we shall consider some elections within the African continent, most especially within the CEMAC Region and the lessons that can be drawn from them, both for democracy and for best electoral practice. None of these elections was 'typical' for the continent. All were fiercely contested. Those in Cameroon, Gabon, Chad, Central Africa Republic and the Republic of Congo. Each has something important to say about the meaning of elections in Africa and the challenges that arise in running them well. From across the continent, election-related violence has imposed itself as a full component of Africa's political landscape in the past two decades. The prevalence of such violence in Africa has led to the production of abundant literature dedicated to the matter. This research seeks to contribute to the existing academic literature by focusing specifically on the patterns, causes and consequences of post-election-related violence within the CEMAC sub-region. The central argument of the article is that, although the patterns, causes and consequences of election-related violence do not necessarily follow the same trends in different African countries (due to, among other factors, inter-country historical, socio-economic and political differences), there are similarities in the types, causes and consequences of such violence on the continent. While a thorough understanding of the patterns and causes of election-related violence in Africa constitutes an important point of departure in addressing the problem, an effective prevention strategy should embrace a multi-level approach targeting all significant stakeholders in any electoral process, including the political leadership, the electoral management body, civil society organizations, the general public and external partners.

Introduction

The changes brought about by the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s resulted in virtually all African countries gradually opening up their political systems to some principles, values and practices of liberal democracy. Innovations introduced to this effect included, among others, the adoption of multiparty political systems and the liberalization of the media sector.

The adoption of liberal democracy brought about the logic of periodic renewal of government leadership (at local, provincial and national levels) through elections. In this regard, two important observations

need to be made in order to grasp the context of the emergence of liberal democracy in many African countries.

Firstly, the advent of liberal democracy in Africa took place against the backdrop of the single-party system that had prevailed in many countries for at least two decades. The quick change between these two almost opposing political models meant that virtually all African citizens (both the political elite and the populace) moved into liberal democratic practices with political attitudes and mindsets reminiscent of the single-party monolithic regime and conflicting with the emerging pluralist political model.

Secondly, the new liberal democratic model in almost all countries was ushered in by the very dictators who had been the architects of the repressive and dictatorial single-party state model, the very people Carothers[1] considers ill-equipped to undertake this momentous task. Given the poor political and socio-economic record of the single-party state in most countries it was not an exaggeration to argue that the liberal political model adopted was in apparent conflict with the interests of those expected to work towards its entrenchment in society.

One of the consequences of this state of affairs has been the resort to violence by both political leaders and ordinary citizens as a medium of political engagement and interaction. The situation is compounded by the perception of elections held by both the political elite and ordinary citizens in many African countries. Elections are generally regarded as a zero-sum game in which loss amounts not only to political exclusion but to marginalization from the socio-economic benefits expected to accrue to those in charge of the political system.

However, it appears that the most virtuous path with regard to the issue of post-election-related violence in African countries with specificity on the CEMAC region does not need to be explored through the essence of democracy and multiparty politics for Africa and its people. Rather, attention should be paid to devising a comprehensive understanding of the root causes behind each instance of election-related violence, to be followed by the formulation of holistic strategies to address them.

there has been little academic research on the subject of election violence, especially post-election violence within the CEMAC sub-region. Research gaps that have been generally identified include work on causes and effects of election violence, cross-national studies, efforts to understand the specific forms or variations of violence, work that is both theoretical and case-oriented, and research on the scope, gravity and timing of election violence.

This research seeks to contribute to filling some of these gaps as far as Africa is concerned by focusing specifically on the patterns, the causes and the consequences of post-election-related violence on the continent. Grounded in a problem-solving approach, the study further proposes a framework conducive to preventing post-election-related conflicts and disputes from degenerating into violence. The central argument of the research is that, although post-election-related violence is a widespread phenomenon on the African continent, its patterns, causes and consequences do not necessarily follow the same trends in different countries. Such inter-country differences are, to a large extent, dictated by the

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[1] Carothers, T. 2007. 'The "sequencing" fallacy'. Journal of Democracy 18(1).

historical, socio-economic and political conditions specific to a given polity. Yet there are commonalities cutting across different countries insofar as the types, causes and consequences of election-related violence on the continent are concerned.

Before delving into the discussion of the main patterns, causes and consequences it appears essential to set the background and context to the research by discussing the democratic **OVERVIEW OF DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENTS IN AFRICA SINCE 1990**

With very few exceptions, the vast majority of African states remained under single-party rule until 1990,[2] when the impact of political liberalization in Eastern Europe and Western donors' newly-crafted aid conditionality model compelled African leaders to embrace multiparty politics.[2]developments that have unfolded in Africa since 1990.

To date, virtually all African countries have embraced multiparty democracy and have subsequently been able to hold regular competitive elections. However, while the quantitative aspect of democracy in Africa has frequently been praised, its qualitative dimension still leaves much to be desired.

The most visible quantitative manifestation of democratic practice on the African continent remains, undoubtedly, the regular elections being held in African countries. According to data from the Electoral Institute for the Sustainability of Democracy in Africa (EISA), there have been elections in at least 20 African countries every year between 2005 to 2022. In 2023, Africa had a number of elections. Africa rounded off a depressing string of problematic yet crucial elections in 2023, with Madagascar on November 16 and Liberia on November 14, 2023. The other elections held on the continent were in Nigeria, Gabon, Sierra Leone, and Zimbabwe. Except for Liberia, the five other elections were troubling for the continent and its democratic outlook.

Although elections are an important component of democratic practice in individual African countries, the holding of elections does not represent the exclusive medium for measuring the consolidation of democracy. In fact, 'elections can be instruments of political control rather than devices of liberalization'[3] or be used as a process aimed at 'the legitimization of autocracy through the ballot box'[4].

Post-election violence in Cameroon

Cameroon is considered as one of the power houses in Africa, and before 2016 was considered the heaven of peace and democracy within the CEMAC sub-region. The emergence of the Anglophone conflict in 2016 turned the story upside down.

2018 was an election year in Cameroon as it saw president Paul Biya seeking another seven years' term in office. The elections took place despite the country facing conflict on three front; the north west and south west regions in what is termed the world's most neglected conflict, the Boko Haram insurgency in the far north and the spilled over effect of the conflict in the Central Africa Republic in the east.

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[2] Sadiki, T. 'Understanding Elections-Related Violence in Africa. Patterns, causes, consequences and a framework for preventive Action'. (2013) *Journal of African Election*. Vol.12, No.3

[3] Aalen, L & K Tronvoll. 2009. 'The end of democracy? Curtailing political and civil rights in Ethiopia'. Review of African Political Economy 36(120)

[4] Good, K. 2002. The Liberal Model and Africa: Elites Against Democracy. New York: Palgrave.

On the 23rd of October 2018, the Constitutional Council declared incumbent Paul Biya as winner of the elections with 71.28% of the vote, followed by his stiff rival Professor Maurice Kamto. Prior to this declaration, Professor Maurice Kamto had earlier declared that he won the elections, causing tension across the national territory.

After the declaration, there were several petitions at the constitutional council which were all dismissed either for lack of merit or non-respect of procedure. The country was then thrown into serious chaos between supporter of Maurice Kamto and the forces of law and order, resulting in several arrest and detentions. This was not the first time the nation of Cameroon was being involved in post-election violence. A similar situation was experienced in first multiparty organized elections in 1992 when the Social Democratic Front of John Fru Ndi was presumed to have won the elections.

Post-election violence in Chad

The Republic of Chad is a landlocked country in north central Africa and a home to over 150 different ethnic and linguistic groups. Besides its rich ethnic and linguistic diversity, French and Arabic are the two official languages of the country, with the most popular religion being Islam (at 53-58%), followed by Christianity (at 35-40%).2 Chad has been in a state of almost constant instability and protracted conflict since achieving independence in 1960. The legitimacy of President Idriss Déby Itno's government is being strongly contested on both political and socio-economic fronts. It experiences recurrent political violence which revolves around contestation for power during and after elections and recurrent attempted coups. Ethnic and religious rivalries, as well as socio-economic crisis, further intensify the ongoing political grievances throughout the country. In addition, Chad is surrounded by conflicts from neighboring countries. Conflict dynamics in these neighboring countries exacerbates internal crises in Chad, making the conflict-prone country vulnerable to both national and regional instabilities.

Elections in Chad have traditionally taken place every five years. However, the Constitution of the Republic of Chad, which was adopted on 4 May 2018 (replacing that of 1996) and further amended on 14 December 2020, introduced several changes to both presidential and legislative elections. These changes were to come into effect from the elections in 2021: the presidential election on 11 April and the legislative elections scheduled for 24 October. As a result of the death of Idriss Deby immediately after the presidential elections made it impossible for the nation to organize the legislative elections in October.

On 20 April President Déby died of injuries sustained following clashes with the rebel group Front for Political Change and Concord in Chad (FACT). This came a day after provisional election results projected he had won a sixth term in office. The FACT group had established a base in the Tibesti mountains, which straddle northern Chad and part of southern Libya. On election day the group had mounted an attack on a border post and started an advance on the capital, N'Djamena.

President Déby subsequently went to the front line to visit his troops, as further clashes erupted. The Chadian Army reported 300 insurgents killed and 150 captured. Five government soldiers were also killed and 36 injured[5]. These figures have not been verified.

On 19 April the FACT group issued a statement on its Facebook page, saying it had killed and injured 15 senior military officials, including President Déby, following fighting in Kanem Province from 17-19 April. President Déby was listed as "wounded and on the run".

The next day Chadian Army Spokesman Brig Gen Azem Bermandoa confirmed that President Déby had died, saying he "took his last breath while defending the integrity of the country in the battlefield".

Following the announcement of President Déby's death, a Transitional Military Council (CMT) seized power. This military-appointed council pledged to govern for the next 18 months, to oversee a transition period until new elections can take place.

Post-election violence in Gabon

Gabon is a republic with a presidential form of government dominated by the Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG), which has held power since 1968. On August 31st 2016, the National Electoral Commission announced incumbent president Ali Bongo Ondimba defeated opponent Jean Ping in the August 27 election by a margin of less than 2 percent of the vote. Observers noted numerous irregularities, including a highly questionable vote count in Bongo's home province. Armed clashes erupted as Ping claims victory. The was killings, disappearance, torture and other cruel inhumane treatment that preceded the elections.

A similar situation was observed in the 2023 presidential elections. Ali Bongo's victory was accompanied by serious clashes that eventually ended with a coup. Ali Bongo was declared winner with 64% of the votes against Albert Ondo Ossa who according to Michel Stephane Bonda, the President of the Gabonese Center of Elections scores 30.77%.

On 30 August, Gabon's senior military officials through national media, Gabon24, announced a coup citing improper elections. They stated: "Today the country is undergoing a severe institutional, political, economic, and social crisis; In the name of the Gabonese people, we have decided to defend the peace by putting an end to the current regime." The coup announcement came hours after incumbent President Ali Bongo was declared the winner of presidential elections held on 26 August. The officers informed that all the state institutions such as "the government, the Senate, the National Assembly, the Constitutional Court, the Economic, Social and Environmental Council and the Gabonese Elections Centre" are dissolved.

Post-election violence Central Africa Republic

Touadera promised a return to normality after years of devastating conflict offering hope of the restoration of peace, stability and reconciliation in the Central African Republic. In the last 6 months, clashes between new coalitions of armed groups have displaced 100,000 and Oxfam warns that there is a risk of the whole situation returning to the square one.

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[5] 'Chad's President Idriss Déby dies after clashes with rebels', BBC News Online, 20 April 2021

As of 20 January 2021, over 84,000 individuals are thought to have fled from the Central African Republic (CAR), where the situation continues to deteriorate since violence erupted amid the 27 December 2020 presidential election.

The escalating violence surrounding the presidential and legislative elections held on 27 December 2020 in CAR has triggered a growing refugee influx into neighboring countries. As of 19 January 2020, over 84,000 individuals are thought to have fled CAR into Cameroon (4,891), Chad (4,858) and the Republic of Congo (388) and the DRC (an estimated 74,179). The figures reported for DRC are based on estimates provided by local authorities and UNHCR teams are currently planning a registration exercise to have a more accurate count of the new arrivals and to better assess their protection needs[6].

A bird's eye-view Causes of Post-election violence

Like political violence, of which it is but one form, the reasons for post-election-related violence are complex. Its causes are multifaceted and require a multilevel analytical approach in order to be well understood. Although instances of post-election-related violence are generally triggered by factors specific to a particular electoral process there can be no doubt that, in most cases, these triggers thrive on conditions and predicaments laid down in a particular society over a long period.

From the moment colonial empires left the African continent and the new republics celebrated their first democratic elections, the issue of election violence has been present in the majority of the countries. It is a problem that has not changed and that keeps disturbing national and international supporters of a peaceful democratization of the African continent. It is not the first time in history we know about election violence in democratic states, such as France during the nineteenth century; nevertheless, the African dynamics are quite peculiar.

Violence, in general terms, has become a political instrument in the African democratic dynamics[7]. Depending on the actor making use of it, the motivation behind it is different. It is also important to take into account the historical, political, socio-cultural and economic context of each country to understand the purposes of the usage of this controversial mechanism. The spur is not the same for the ruling party or the opposition party, or other groups like the youth. Hence the use of violence has a lot of influence in the outcomes of an election process as it is an effective means that shapes the democratic dynamics when it comes to the election of the representatives at all stages of the electoral processes. For example, the ruling parties use it to avoid being removed from their powerful positions and all the benefits that come from them[8].

Furthermore, the electoral system chosen by each country will also have a direct effect on the violence because of the interests behind the election. The plurality voting is the most used system among African states. These kinds of systems are also known as winner-takes-all, because the winner gets all the power.

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[6] EMERGENCY UPDATE > Central African Republic Situation / 21 January 2021

[7] Laakso, L. (2007). Insights into Electoral Violence in Africa. En M. Basedau, G. Erdmann, & A. Mehler, *Votes, Money and Violence: Political Parties and Elections in Sub-Saharan Africa* (págs. 224-252). South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

[8] Mehler, A. (2007). Political Parties and Violence in Africa: Systematic Reflections against Empirical Background. In M. Basedau, G. Erdmann, & A. Mehler, *Votes, Money and Violence: Political Parties and Elections in Sub-Saharan Africa* (pp. 194-223). South Africa: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

Even if it is not necessarily a negative system, as successful countries such as France or Brazil also use them, the difference of power between a common citizen and a politician is so big in Africa that the interest of getting those posts is higher (Reynolds, 2009). This will cause that any means justified to get there, including the use of violence.

Finally, issues like constitutional changes and poor electoral commissions are all contributory factors to post-election violence. When incumbent constantly change constitutions to enable them clink to power, it gives room for distrust in the process. When electoral commission bodies are not as independent as they ought to be, it gives room for oppositions to question the veracity of their declared results. As it is often said, 'He who pays the piper determines the tune', this is the situation in most African countries when it comes to elections and a strong justification for post-election violence.

Patterns of election-related violence after the vote

The period following the vote represents the most uncertain moment in many African countries. As argued above, although instances of violence occur before and during the voting, it is generally after the announcement of the results that much election-related violence takes place. Some of the different factors that may trigger the violence at this stage are:

- ➢ Clashes between the losing camp and the security forces: It is common in Africa for the losing side (generally the opposition) in an election to call for public demonstrations by its supporters in order to express its disapproval of the official election results. Such demonstrations are generally held without prior permission from public officials in charge of matters relating to public gatherings as the losing side regards such officials as biased in favour of the winners (generally the incumbents). As a result, these demonstrations generally end in violent clashes between state security forces and the protesting group. This scenario was evident in Gabon in 2016 between supporters of Jean Ping and security forces, and in Cameroon in 2018 between supporters of Maurice Kamto and security forces.
- ➢ Maltreatment of those suspected of having voted for the opposing side: The announcement of the results and the disappointment it brings can also lead supporters of the losing side to target neighbors and localities believed to be sympathetic to the winning camp. This trend was prevalent in the 2007-2008 post-election violence in Kenya. In both the Rift Valley and Kisumu areas (more favourable to presidential candidate Raila Odinga), members of the Kikuyu ethnic group were targeted for sharing an ethnic identity with President Mwai Kibaki and on the general assumption that they might have voted for Kibaki.
- ➢ Clashes between supporters of opposing camps: In these instances, violence can be triggered by the winning camp taking its celebrations into an opposition stronghold. Violence can also erupt in the street as cheering victors come across supporters of the losing side who intend to protest against the results. In most of these cases state security forces become involved as they seek to separate the two sides. Such intervention by the security forces may aggravate the matter, as they are perceived, rightly or wrongly, as favouring one particular group (generally the one close to the regime).

- ➢ Attacks on the offices of the electoral commission, government buildings and other infrastructure: Violence following the announcement of the election results can also be aimed at property. Sometimes the violence turns into random destruction, targeting anything the protestors come across. Such uncontrolled violence generally drags in criminal networks and other elements, who view the violence as an opportunity to loot shops, businesses and even private property.

- ➢ Coup d'état, armed confrontation and/or resumption of civil war: Persistent disagreements over election results in electoral processes perceived to be unfair can trigger the direct intervention of the military in politics in the form of a coup d'état. This scenario remains rare in Africa, although it materialised in Madagascar after the 2001 presidential elections. Following an inconclusive first round, opposition candidate Marc Ravalomanana succeeded in forcing the hand of the country's High Constitutional Court to proclaim him the outright winner, thanks to a favourable switch of allegiance within the national army command. In countries attempting to emerge from protracted civil war the violence can take the form of military confrontations between soldiers loyal to the two major candidates (generally former leaders of armed factions), or even degenerate into the resumption of the civil war. In Angola the rejection by opposition candidate Jonas Savimbi of the 1992 presidential election results signalled the resumption of the country's civil war. In Côte d'Ivoire the stalemate brought about by the disagreement over the 2010 election results led to widespread violence, culminating in the arrest of outgoing president Laurent Gbagbo in April 2011. In the DRC after the 2006 election there was a direct military confrontation in Kinshasa in March 2007 between troops loyal to the two presidential candidates. Most recently in Gabon, the declaration of Ali Bongo as winner of the presidential elections in 2023 and the denial of the opposition and some parts of the country culminated into a coup.

As stated in the previous section, experience in Africa in the last two decades shows that no country, whatever the level of its 'democratic development', is totally spared from election-related violence. Yet it should be admitted that these instances of election-related violence, as well as their extent, vary according to the specific conditions (historical, political and socio-economic) of a state and the nature of its electoral system[9].

Consequences of Post-election violence

Death, injury and population displacement

As a form of political violence, post-election-related violence causes death and injury to human beings and also leads to population displacement, both within and outside the country in which it takes place.

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[9] Sadiki, T. 'Understanding Elections-Related Violence in Africa. Patterns, causes, consequences and a framework for preventive Action'. (2013) *Journal of African Election*. Vol.12, No.3

The case of Kenya after the December 2007 elections stands out as the deadliest instance of post-election violence in Africa in recent years[10].

But it must be acknowledged that deaths caused by election-related violence may be the result of clashes between supporters of different candidates or parties or clashes between specific supporters and the security forces. Given its generally random nature and the responsibility often borne by government for its eruption, election-related violence seldom leads to prosecutions, leaving its victims to bear the resulting frustration for a long time.

Destruction of infrastructure

Post-Election-related violence also destroys socio-economic infrastructure. In most cases, infrastructure may be directly targeted by demonstrators as it is perceived as the extension of the contested order. Government buildings, offices of the ruling party and property linked to the security forces are included in this scenario.

However, infrastructure can also be targeted randomly as uncontrolled mobs use destruction simply as a means of making a statement. During post-election violence in Gabon, mobs set ablaze the National Assembly building in Libreville.

Economic decline and withdrawal of foreign investment

Post-Election-related violence has a net negative impact on the economic activity of the societies in which it takes place. It disrupts economic activity, delaying import and export processes. The post-election violence in Côte d'Ivoire in 2010-2011 prevented the exportation of cocoa, the country's largest foreign-currency earner.

Similarly, the uncertainty brought about by post-election violence – depending on its intensity – may lead to the withdrawal of established foreign investment or delay future investment. It also causes many foreign partners to withdraw as well as financial institutions and global groupings to withdraw support.

Undermining of democratic institutions and processes and of government legitimacy

Post-Election-related violence represents, first and foremost, a challenge to the process of establishing democracy, especially in countries emerging from autocratic systems. As Adolfo, Kovacs, Nyström & Utas[11] argue, post-election-related violence 'not only poses a threat to peace and security on the continent, but also risks undermining the long-term sustainability of … democratization processes'. It diminishes the credibility of institutions entrusted with entrenching democracy. It even serves as a barometer of the inadequate entrenchment of democracy within the society in which it takes place. But above all, it undermines the legitimacy of the government, either because it is perceived as the perpetrator of the violence or because it is unable to address it effectively.

CONCLUSION

The last decade of the twentieth century saw democratic rule embraced in virtually all African countries. Although this new trend was first and foremost a consequence of dramatic changes in international

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[10] Maina, G. 2011. 'Mediating to governments of national unity – a conflict transformation approach'. ACCORD Policy & Practice Brief 2

[11] Adolfo, E V, M S Kovacs, D Nyström and M Utas 2012. 'Electoral violence in Africa'. Policy Notes 3. Nordic Africa Institute.

politics after the end of the Cold War and the re-alignment of the policies of Western powers in relation to Africa, the path to liberal democracy has emerged as an irreversible journey African people are committed to undertake.

But, as might have been anticipated, the road to democratization has not always been smooth. This is partly because of the long-term legacy of the singleparty system that prevailed in much of Africa for decades prior to the advent of democracy as well as the drive by incumbents to stay in power in spite of the changing political environment.

In as much as efforts have been made to resolve cases of post-election-related disputes and violence throughout Africa, including by adopting power-sharing models, prevention is the most cost-effective tool for dealing effectively with the challenges posed by the violence. Such preventive action should espouse a multi-level approach, focusing on elections as a long-term cycle and targeting all significant stakeholders in any electoral process, including the political leadership, the electoral management body, civil society organizations and the general public, as well as external partners.

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