Elections and Violent Political Conflicts in Africa

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Editorial

Pre- and post-election violence on the continent has been a recurring phenomenon since the re-introduction of multi-party politics in 1990. However, democracy and elections theorists on the continent understand that democracy consists of considerably more than just multi-party elections. They hold that first, there must be a willingness to lose elections and not to win them by any means, including killing one's opponents. The 2007/08 and 2009 violence in Kenya and Zimbabwe, respectively, serve as a lesson for African political elites not to take challenges associated with free, fair, and transparent elections lightly. As Mueller[1] notes, democracy has characteristically produced societies that have been humane, flexible, productive, and rigorous, and under democracy, leaders have emerged who, at least in comparison with kings and czars, have generally been responsive, responsible, able, and dedicated. Fundamentally, democracy and the democratic process believe in the integrity of the rule of law and institutions and that laws and institutions must match. Muller[2] further opines that where this does not occur, democracy is in danger. As the examples of Kenya and Zimbabwe show, democracy on the continent is in danger: it is in danger of being usurped by gullible politicians yet to master the political terrain on the continent. It is worth noting that the democratic process that accompanied the decolonial process on the continent is far from what is being seen today. While the decolonial democratic process preoccupied itself with racial and inequality prejudices, which the majority black population was confronted with, the new challenges after 1990 relate to under-development, gender imbalances, ethnicity and ethnicism, regionalism, poverty, inequality, and religious fundamentalism. Elections in this age should be able to solve these challenges. Anything far from these new post-one-party states on the continent would result in political contestations, and unfortunately, some of these political contestations have turned violent. Given the current political dispensations on the continent and considering the new challenges on the continent, the articles in this special volume seek to investigate why pre- and post-election processes in some key countries on the continent have been characterised by violence and how the political elites in those countries, acting in collusion with international partners, avoid such a recurring political phenomenon.

While some elections have been peaceful, free and fair, others have been marked by violent altercations between opposing parties. Using a functional theoretical assessment

methodological approach, the proposal would use qualitative and quantitative cross-national data to generate a causal variable and to, therefore, propose how such causes could be addressed. While most political parties on the continent still have ethnic, religious, and clan favour, access to vital resources such as land is the central issue in cases of high electoral violence. Critical to access to vital resources, claims of indigeneity in states with significant migrant populations have equally been a major trigger of conflicts on the continent. Migrants are generally seen to influence the political trajectory of a particular area where the relationship between autochthon and allogene is frosty. The long-standing political challenges in Cote d'Ivoire between the migrant-dominated *Rassemblement des Republicains* (RDR) and the mainly indigenous *Parti Democratique de la Cote d'Ivoire* (PDCI) and *Front Populaire Ivoirien* (FPI) is a case in point. While the RDR succeeded in wrestling political power from the FPI in April 2011, relations between the autochthon and allogene in the country are far from cordial. While the Cote d'Ivoire scenario represents a reasonably religious and ethnic jostling for political power, the Kenya and Zimbabwe cases of 2007/08 and 2008, respectively, prove that access to political power and clan-based politics is still a significant impediment to democratic consolidation on the continent.

Straus maintains that electoral violence and political conflicts in Africa south of the Sahara are not exceptional. He notes that while electoral violence, political conflict, and even mass killings have characterised Africa's post-colonial democratic experience more than in other regions of the world, sub-Sahara Africa is not the leader in either the frequency or duration of such forms of political violence. Straus further quotes UCDP/PRIO database findings, which indicate that Asia is by far the region with the most prolonged and sustained violent political conflicts.[3] The challenge, Straus notes, is how electoral violence is reported in Africa, which gives the impression that Africans are yet to understand the intricacies associated with democracy and political pluralism.[4] The post-election violence in Kenya in 2007/08 shows a marked emphasis on the ethnic background of the victims and perpetrators. Less attention was paid to the processes leading to the elections, the conduct of electoral officials, and the role of international observer missions. The ruling by the Kenyan High Court that the 2017 elections be cancelled and the elections re-run after 90 days points to a fundamental challenge in the way the electoral laws are managed on the continent and to the role played by electoral officials to ensure that elections are conducted fairly and freely.

While the role of local actors in precipitating violent political actions before and after elections has been emphasised, the role of international actors has been ignored or ambiguous. Daxecker[5] holds that because of greater international emphasis on democratisation, international organisations increasingly play a meaningful role in promoting democracy on the continent. Although the role of these international organisations in exacerbating pre- and post-election violence has not been adequately determined, their unsolicited presence in several countries on the continent during elections has been questioned. Daxecker[6] further opines that, since the mid-1990s, more than half of all elections held in unconsolidated democracies have been observed by international organisations such as the European Union (EU), the Carter Centre, and the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Objectives of this Special Volume

This special volume examines the following:

1. The fundamental causes of pre- and post-election violence on the continent and how such violence can be addressed.
2. What is the purpose of international election observation? How successful are these missions and, above all, are the reports/recommendations emanating from these missions ever acted upon?
3. What exactly is the impact of voter apathy and democratic deficiency in terms of consolidating a democratic culture on the continent?

The special volume also notes the outcome of the high-stakes general elections in South Africa and Senegal in 2024 and how special attention was paid to how election management boards (EMBs) organised these elections and what role they played in reinforcing democratic traditions on the continent. Our task as the Africa Institute of South Africa, which is a research institute within the Human Sciences Research Council, is to conduct pre-and post-election assessments in these countries, focusing on how the elections are prepared, managed, and conducted in order to identify challenges that may lead to pre- and post-election violence.

In popular literature, and as Meredith[7] opines, the challenge of organising peaceful, fair, and free elections on the African continent in the post-colonial era has preoccupied researchers for a long time. Efforts have been applied to post-conflict reconstruction endeavours, largely because most African states are either in a situation of perpetual conflict or recovering from one. The collapse of Somalia as a functioning state and the peace-building challenges the new state of South Sudan is currently facing urge us to look at new ways of building peace on the continent. Central to this new theoretical paradigm would be to suggest how new states on the continent could be conceptualised and what state structures should be prioritised in the formulation of these new states. Strategically, elections in all states on the continent have always been marred by violence and heavy casualties. This research investigates why such a scenario prevails and what can be done to ensure that elections in all states on the continent are peaceful, free, and fair. However, many scholars have created seminal works to justify why elections have always resulted in violent altercations. Few such works have looked at the assumption from a constructivist and peace-building point of view. Thus, this research is a new approach to assessing or identifying variables that governments and international communities should watch for when countries go for high-stakes elections.

The paper by Straus & Taylor[8] stands out from the few that have linked elections and violence. Entitled *Democratisation and Electoral Violence in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1990-2007*, the paper investigates two principal questions that are under-explored in the existing literature on democratisation and African politics. Straus & Taylor[9] analysed the frequency of electoral violence in sub-Saharan Africa since 1990 and explained why some elections are violent but others are not. Fundamental to their findings, and crucial to this special volume, is that electoral violence has occurred in 19 per cent of elections on the continent; most violence occurs before the vote and is perpetrated by incumbents; if violence breaks out after an election, it

tends to be more severe and involves challengers. The paper thus delineates the links between elections and violence. However, it fails to indicate why people, incumbents and challengers alike engage in violent protests before or after an election.

This is where this research comes in. The focus was on investigating the variables that undermine unity and development in a country. Fundamental to the variables that underscore strong state institutions is one important book that readily comes to mind, Francis Fukuyama's[10] *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalisation of Democracy*. The book provides a comprehensive and robust conceptual understanding of state-building and nation-building worldwide. It looks at political order and political decay from a historical perspective and gives a succinct account of the genesis of nation-building and national identity. This study intends to build on Fukuyama's concept of nation-building to develop an African nation-building barometer. Although a nation-building barometer was not part of Fukuyama's theoretical disposition, it does provide a framework through which the barometer was built.

The Nordic Africa Institute has been at the forefront of analysing some of the complex electoral challenges on the continent. In an edited book by Matthias, Gero, & Andreas,[11] entitled *Votes, Money and Violence: Political Parties and Elections in sub-Saharan Africa*, they argue that the political landscape on the continent is still dominated by weak political organisation, informal relationships dominated by 'big men', and clientelism within a neopatrimonialism setting. They also note the crucial question of representation regarding ethnicity, civil society, and gender – fundamentally looking at the relationship between party systems and democracy. Although critical questions about the causes of electoral violence were not raised in the book, it provides some perspectives and links between elections and violence on the continent.

In *Dying to Win: Elections, Political Violence and Institutional Decay in Kenya*, Mueller[12] examines the lessons learned from Kenya's 2007 post-election violence and what has happened since then. He contends that the root causes of the violence persist, as they have not been addressed and could easily be reignited. Although the paper highlights some of the causes of the violence associated with the 2007 presidential elections, which touches on the main thrust of this research, it does not utilise the peace-building constructivist approach on which this research is based. It superficially describes some of the challenges of Kenya's post-colonial and post-authoritarian variables, which could have ignited the 2007 violence, without paying particular attention to the challenges associated with the peace-building agenda of the Mwai Kibaki administration.

A historical narrative of the challenges of nation-building in Africa is presented in *Africa's Long Road since Independence: The many Histories of a Continent* by Keith Somerville.[13] The book is a study of the interplay of pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial structures and how they affected and were, in turn, refashioned by the exercise of agency, particularly regarding boundaries, states and institutions, elite formation, and the development of extroverted economic systems. Although no nation-building conceptual treatises are presented, the author details the trials of post-colonial states, arguing that most of the nation-building attempts on the continent were foreign to the continent and lacked any contextual base. He

notes that because these nation-building trajectories did not have a distinctly African flavour, they crumbled as they faced challenges. The book, however, fails to articulate the views of ordinary people and how their knowledge of nation-building could be harnessed for the advancement of humanity on the continent.

In *The State of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence*, Martin Meredith[14] argues that the colonial enterprise in Africa was merely a status symbol among European powers and had little to do with civilising the people on the continent. He notes that the maps used to divide the African continent were mostly inaccurate. Because post-colonial states do not change much from what the colonisers did, this posed a significant challenge to the new political elites on the continent in the 1960s to develop nation-building programmes that address the specific challenges of African states.[15] Because of the arbitrary partition of the continent, people with similar cultural affinities find themselves in different countries across the continent. He argues that because the Bakongo were partitioned into French Congo, Belgian Congo, and Portuguese Angola, nation-building in the Great Lakes Region of Africa was difficult for the new political elites who emerged on the continent in the early 1960s. Although the book does not explicitly suggest how the challenges could have been addressed, the present study has taken up the challenge. It presents an alternative perspective on how resilient communities could be built on the continent and stability reinforced.

The above is not exhaustive of the literature on elections and violence on the continent. However, it provides some perspectives on the causes of violence during and after electoral processes on the continent. Without being presumptuous about the study findings, the authors believe that the study greatly benefited from the literature reviewed.

Outline of this Special Volume

The contributions in this special volume employed a cross-qualitative and quantitative research approach to the causes of electoral violence in Africa. The articles reveal and analyse the social, cultural, and historical assumptions regarding present-day contexts to empower individuals and institutions and enable change for a better Africa. The articles attempt to challenge current power dynamics instead of merely revealing meaning. Fundamentally, this special volume notes that one of our time's most enduring philosophical questions, and during the Athenian period, is: What form of governance is considered appropriate for effectively administrating people? Socrates and many others of his time, including Plato and Aristotle, philosophised on the best form of human management. To them, the best form of government was democracy – a form of control of an organisation or group by most of its members. While Athens (then a vital city-state in Greece) practised democracy between 492 and 449 BC, other city-states, such as Persia, still operated under a solid feudal system. Although Persia invaded Athens to 'address the lawlessness' in the city-state, the defeat of Persia signalled the triumph of Western liberal democracy as we know it today.[16] Although the Athenian-Persian wars did not bring long-term benefits to Athens, they did help to consolidate liberal democracy as a form of governance in Western democracies.

In Africa, especially after 9/11, governance challenges have been likened to the rivalry between Athens (which was a lively democratic society) and Persia (which was a despotic feudal system with an autocratic, powerful political elite). However, the lines between the two concepts are now not as straightforward as during the Athenian period. While Kenya, Senegal, Botswana, Namibia, Malawi, and Zambia showed signs of a re-emergence of the decolonial political mass democratic culture, democratic dividends continue to dwindle in Sudan, Eritrea, South Sudan, Rwanda, Cameroon, Egypt, and Zimbabwe.

The mass casualties caused by the degradation of democratic dividends on the continent are the people the political elites purport to help. The most common reaction of the people is to look for alternative political voices. The response of the incumbent has always been brutal: ethnic and regional politics are re-imagined, and, in some cases, religion has become a tool for mass political mobilisation. The military gets involved in extreme cases, as we have seen in Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Sudan.

The recently concluded elections in Kenya constitute an essential element in consolidating democracy in Kenya. Elections constitute a critical component in any liberal democracy. They are a viable means of ensuring the orderly process of leadership succession and change and an instrument of political authority and legitimation. The orderly transition in which the process unfolded necessitated some form of debate about whether democratic consolidation was entrenched in the country. The answer to this can be viewed from two angles.

First, the regularity of election processes does not necessarily mean the entrenchment of democracy, nor does it mean that the elections are free, fair, and legitimate. For example, during the one-party political system, there was regularity in the election process, but the polls were neither free, fair, nor legitimate. Secondly, the orderly transition in Kenya could equally be regarded as a rejection of 'strong man' politics in the country and, more importantly, a rejection of regional and ethnic politics. Many have similarly argued that the peaceful transfer of power after the 8 August election was primarily due to Kenyans' trust in their democratic institutions, particularly the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) and the Supreme Court. However, the action of the chairperson of the IEBC during the counting process and the declaration of the results caused many to question the role of EMBs in the consolidation of democratic gains in the country. Of further concern was the action of four IEBC commissioners who distanced themselves from the results that the IEBC proclaimed. So, although the Supreme Court of Kenya eventually validated the election results, the process leading up to the declaration of the results was questioned.

Besides what happened in Kenya recently, concerns about how elections are conducted on the continent are not new. Popular wisdom suggests that, in many countries on the African continent, the only free elections and without taint of vote rigging or unfair electoral practices within multi-party systems have been the elections that ushered in the first post-independence governments on the continent. In many instances, subsequent elections have been manipulated to produce results favourable to incumbent regimes. While there have been some exceptions, such as the peaceful power transfer in Zambia between the Kaunda and the Chiluba administrations and between the Rawlings and Kuffour governments in Ghana, the power of incumbency has generally prevailed.

However, one of the concerns in the decolonial debate on the continent is not necessarily the regularity of elections but perhaps the logistical nightmare that the process entails. The new political elites worry about the structure entrusted to carry out this critical function of the post-colonial political process. This concern was also expressed by the departing colonial elites who were afraid of their diminishing standing in society. It so conferred the management of elections on government departments responsible for the country's internal affairs. Meanwhile, the new political elites who came to power on the continent after 1960 were concerned about the consolidation of the state on the continent and instituted a one-party system, which eroded most of the democratic gains that the decolonial state achieved at independence. Thus, the management of elections in most African countries became the prerogative of government departments.

Nevertheless, the collapse of most African economies in the late 1980s and the re-introduction of multi-party politics in most countries on the continent required the intervention of the World Bank to stabilise these economies through the famous structural adjustment programmes (SAPs). These interventions were predicated on a series of conditionalities, prominent among which were electoral system reforms. In this regard, the EMBs became the focus area that needed special attention. The composition of the boards and the appointment of executive officers became a source of discord between funding agencies, civil society, and the government.

This special volume asks the critical question: Have these EMBs consolidated democratic traditions on the continent? The answer is as complex as the electoral process in Africa itself.

The fact is that the evolution of the electoral processes in Africa in the last few decades has tended to focus on the voting processes on election day and, more particularly, on the outcome of elections, without paying much attention to who organised the polls and how they were conducted, or the structure and processes put in place for doing this. The centrality of elections to the model of liberal democratic politics (to which many African countries today aspire) presupposes the existence of electoral institutions that will guarantee a free and fair contest. The type of EMB chosen must be recognised as one of the most important institutional structures for shaping the nature and extent of political competition, not only because it is one of the most manipulable instruments of politics but also because it may decisively influence the outcome of elections. The great potential for EMBs to influence electoral outcomes is the reason for the tremendous growth in election monitoring and observer missions. This is not to underestimate the potential effects of other factors, such as the electoral system adopted and the electoral laws in place. In many respects, EMBs are merely one cog in the wheel of a broader framework of institutional arrangements needed to pave the way for liberal constitutional democracy to flourish.

Thus, EMBs on the continent have not been structured in a way that negates processes and systems that negatively impact a fair outcome. Ethnic and regional politics also need to be factored into the equation. Although board appointments are undertaken through a competitive and open process, in some cases, once appointed, members are influenced by political incumbents to influence the outcome of any electoral process. Many countries on the continent are still grappling with how members of the EMBs should be appointed.

Governments insist it is their prerogative, while Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and political parties opine that they should have a say regarding who is selected for the board. In countries such as South Africa and Kenya, where the appointment of members of the EMBs is a constitutional prerogative, most members of the board of EMBs are appointed by the government in place.

In this regard, EMBs on the continent are still a work in progress. They have not reached a stage where entrenched and consolidated democratic traditions could exist. Instead, they are seen as agent provocateurs on the continent in some cases. Thus, the process of strengthening these institutions should be speeded up. While organising free, fair, and credible elections should concern everyone, the fundamental challenge of owning the process is critical. Such processes should be initiated to ensure that the people own the election process so that the outcome of elections on the continent is neither challenged nor doubted.

Notes and References

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2   Ibid.

3   Ibid.

4   Ibid.

5   Daxecker, U. 2012. The cost of exposing cheating: International election monitoring, fraud, and post-election violence in Africa. *Journal of Peace Research*, p. 504.

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