



**MONITORING AND
MITIGATING**

**ELECTORAL
VIOLENCE**

**THROUGH NONPARTISAN
CITIZEN ELECTION
OBSERVATION**

INTRODUCTION

Electoral violence subverts basic standards for democratic elections. Violence against candidates, activists, journalists, voters, election officials and observers can reduce voters' choices and suppress the vote. Violence can be used to intimidate individuals and communities to vote against their will for a candidate. Assassinations of candidates can even change electoral outcomes. Armed groups seeking to overthrow a government often resort to violence during elections. In other cases, violence can break out when large numbers of people protested official election results. The effects of violence or the threat of violence can undermine the legitimacy of electoral results and broader political process.

Because in many contexts electoral violence plays such a central role in the integrity of elections, local, national and international stakeholders have sought not only to determine the causes and triggers of violence but also to assess strategies and methods that can help mitigate violence and encourage peace. For nearly three decades, local nonpartisan citizen observers around the world have risked their lives to promote accountability among democratic institutions and to build confidence in the electoral process through impartial, accurate information and assessments. As nonpartisan community leaders and professional watchdogs, these observers play a crucial role in forecasting, monitoring, mitigating and mediating political conflict.

This guidance document aims to help nonpartisan citizen election observer groups develop and carry out electoral violence monitoring and/or mitigation strategies and methodologies that take into account the underlying sources of tension, the potential triggers, and the anticipated types of electoral violence. The document is divided into six sections.

Section 1 outlines an approach that groups can use to develop an overall electoral violence monitoring and/or mitigation strategy.

Sections 2 – 5 examine four key areas in which citizen election observers can contribute to monitoring and mitigating electoral violence. These four areas, which are not intended to be exhaustive, include:

- **Section 2:** long-term observation to monitor and mitigate electoral violence;
- **Section 3:** promoting media accountability;
- **Section 4:** crowdsourcing and electoral violence mapping; and
- **Section 5:** conducting grassroots electoral violence mitigation and mediation.

Section 6 addresses challenges for citizen observers when addressing electoral violence and ways of developing multi-pronged security strategies and approaches.

These sections are followed by a concluding section and several annexes that include examples of a variety of tools that observer groups have used; an in-depth case study on citizen observer groups' efforts to monitor and mitigate electoral violence in Sri Lanka; and a list of additional resources on the subject of electoral violence.

NATURE OF ELECTORAL VIOLENCE

Electoral violence can be distinguished from other types of political violence by its goal – to influence electoral conduct of voters, contestants, officials or other actors and/or to affect the electoral outcome. It can take place during any part of the electoral cycle. Electoral violence involves any use of force with the intent to cause harm or the threat to use force to harm persons or property involved in the electoral process. Electoral violence can be widespread before or on election day, as it was for example in Afghanistan's 2009 elections, and it can occur on a large-scale immediately following elections, such as the events in Kenya in 2007-08 and Cote d'Ivoire in 2010. More common, however, are less widespread forms of violence, designed to: prevent voters from participating; coerce participation or change voter choices; eliminate candidates; disrupt the process or negate votes in certain locations; or seek retribution for political support or votes cast.

Most studies recognize that elections are not a root cause of violence.² In fact, when conducted credibly, elections are an alternative to violence,³ as they are intended to peacefully and inclusively resolve the competition for power. Credible,

² Atwood, Richard. How the EU Can Support Peaceful Post-election Transitions of Power: Lessons from Africa. EU, 2012.

³ Fisher, Jeff. Electoral Violence and Conflict: A Strategy for Study and Prevention. IFES, 2002.

transparent and inclusive elections provide contestants with a fair chance to win office and a channel through which contestants voters can communicate their preferences about candidates and issues, thus reducing the temptation to resort to violence. Genuine elections also provide legitimacy to the winners, which increases the government's capacity to manage conflict going forward.

The **underlying causes** of electoral violence are often rooted in social, political and economic deficiencies including but not limited to: a lack of information; polarization and divergent preferences; cultural, religious, tribal and ethnic clefts; scarcity of and ongoing disputes over resources; large-scale inequalities; history of civil conflict or war; and weak security and rule of law institutions.

While elections are typically not the underlying cause of violence, they can exacerbate existing tensions, particularly when they are not conducted credibly. Elections are high-stakes processes in which political power is won and lost, which by nature creates a degree of conflict that needs to be managed so that violence does not ensue. There are several ways in which elections can potentially **trigger violence**, including where there are:

- high degrees of uncertainty about the outcome of the election due to intense competition, combined with a lack of public confidence in the process and/or a lack of transparency;
- population groups and/or electoral contestants expecting to be systematically excluded from gaining power; and/or
- features of the electoral system that produce high stakes, “winner-take-all” outcomes.⁴

Acts of electoral violence are often the result of a combination of such underlying causes, particularly where there are not sufficient mechanisms to build public confidence in the electoral process. For example, in a context with deep social cleavages and high inequality, an electoral process that is poorly managed could spark violence if one or more political contestants believe the outcome does not reflect the will of the people. Developing confidence enhancing mechanisms, such as systematic election monitoring by nonpartisan citizen organizations, can reduce tensions and help sort out the proper course of action.

⁴ *Elections and Conflict Prevention: A Guide to Analysis, Planning and Programming*. UNDP, 2009.



Women and Election Violence

Citizen monitoring organizations should take into account the disproportionate impact that electoral violence has on women. While the vast majority of violence perpetrators are male, women are quite commonly the victims. Violence against women is also less commonly reported and harder to track, particularly because it includes familial or social intimidation occurring in private spaces. Those with traditional viewpoints may dismiss such violence as a “domestic issue” and not politically related. Sexist and gender-based harassment are often not identified as intimidation despite the fact that it can have a significant impact on the degree to which women feel comfortable participating in politics. Moreover, violent environments can severely restrict women’s movement, which can infringe on their ability to participate in the electoral process, including voting.

DATA ON ELECTORAL VIOLENCE

Studies have shown that while large-scale armed conflict declined over the last 50 years, political violence rose, particularly in the form of escalations of long-standing disputes and rivalries. However, comprehensive information on electoral violence is limited. This is due in part to the difficulties of collecting information in closed societies or in places with weak infrastructure. In remote or chaotic environments it may be challenging to obtain accurate information on deaths and injuries, and data often reflects broad estimates. In addition, because violence often arises from seemingly unrelated societal conflicts, it may not always be categorized or tracked as “politically-motivated” or “electoral” in nature. This also makes it difficult to determine whether the absence of violence was the result of violence mitigation efforts. In these instances, the role of citizen monitors can be important in providing more accurate and clear information on electoral violence.

Nonetheless, in reviewing the data, some basic information about the context of electoral violence is clear. Violence can occur at any moment during the elections process, including well before election day, during key elections processes like voter registration or campaigns, on election day both within and outside polling stations, as well as in the post-election period. There are victims and perpetrators in electoral violence, and those may interchange. Anyone can be implicated in and affected by these conflicts, including voters, candidates, parties, election officials, security forces, government authorities, businessmen, unions or even civil society.

WHY CITIZEN ELECTION OBSERVERS?

Widespread and timely electoral violence monitoring can help combat impunity while identifying potential risks and trends for security forces, government authorities and political contestants to address. With networks of hundreds or thousands of trained, professionalized observers, nonpartisan citizen election monitoring organizations are well suited to play key roles in violence monitoring and mitigation. Citizen election observers can ensure that violence monitoring is incorporated throughout all aspects of election observation, including during official election processes, and not treated as a separate and unrelated occurrence. Citizen election monitoring groups also have several other comparative advantages, including that they:

- maintain an established nonpartisan profile and garner the trust of the public as independent and neutral stakeholders;

EXAMPLE



The EVER Program

Election Violence Education and Resolution (EVER), a project of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), has made strides in researching the causes and impacts of electoral violence. Through case studies and assessments, the program has gathered and compiled detailed information on electoral conflict in a number of countries. Moreover, the program examines and supports the work of citizen violence monitors in targeted countries, helping enhance their capacity to identify trends in

violence and catalog incidents. As the information collected by this program increases, citizens, stakeholders and the international community may be able to develop clearer perspectives on the diverse and challenging nature of election-related violence.

More details on the program are available at:

www.ifes.org/Research/Cross-Cutting/Election-Violence-Education-and-Resolution/Nav/Electoral-Violence-and-Mitigation.aspx

- usually aim to have a nationwide presence, including state and local branches;
- often link large, diverse communities of interest, crossing ethnic, cultural, geographic, religious and other divides and typically mobilize large numbers of youth and women;
- have existing internal decision making, staffing, training and communication structures;
- usually deploy long-term observers (LTOs) throughout the country to monitor the pre-election, election day and post-election environment and processes;
- have accreditation and access to key political processes during which violence can occur;
- can be deployed in much larger numbers and for longer periods of time than international observers
- can link with violence monitoring, mitigation and mediation efforts of other citizen organizations and governmental authorities; and
- serve as technical authorities on the election process with knowledge and data that can help dispel rumors by providing fact-based information.

Incorporating targeted violence monitoring and mitigation strategies and tactics into an election monitoring effort requires a more complex approach to developing the overall observation strategy, greater financial, human and time resources, and additional logistical and security considerations.

Also, it is important to keep in mind that while citizen observer groups' role in mitigating electoral violence can be vital, they are only one of many actors that are essential to addressing the causes and triggers of violence. For example, legislatures and governments must play key roles in addressing the underlying causes of violence, which could include developing policies to reduce exclusion and inequality between groups, tempering zero-sum competition, strengthening rule of law institutions, demobilize armed groups and building trust in the institutions managing and adjudicating the electoral process.⁵

The following sections of this guide highlight several planning and implementation strategies for broadening a group's election observation efforts to take into consideration and help address electoral violence.

⁵ Atwood, Richard. How the EU Can Support Peaceful Post-election Transitions of Power: Lessons from Africa. EU, 2012.

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