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L'Afrique et les défis du XXIème siècle
Africa and the Challenges of the Twenty First Century
A África e os desafios do Século XXI

إفريقيا وتحديات القرن الواحد والعشرين

**Making Democracy Safe: Managing Electoral Violence
in Africa's Democratic Transition**

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Abstract

The global democratic revolution of the 1980s and 1990s introduced stunning regime changes in Africa. Specifically, it led to the collapse of several authoritarian regimes and the inauguration of democratically elected governments in many African countries. Dictators like Mathieu Kerekou of Benin, Felix Houphouet-Boigny of Cote d'Ivoire, Omar Bongo of Gabon, and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, who ruled without challenge for several years, found themselves incapable of resisting domestic and international pressures for multiparty electoral competition. Today, multiparty elections have become commonplace in Africa. Between 1989 and 2007, almost 200 elections took place in Africa. These elections have now become a key measure of democracy in the continent.

Although elections are now more regular in Africa, they have come at a very high cost. Due to the flawed nature of the electoral process in many African countries, losers in these elections usually tend to challenge their outcomes, sometimes violently. This has led to the outbreak of electoral violence in which several people have lost their lives, properties, or have been displaced. Since 1991, electoral violence have become increasingly common in Africa, occurring in countries such as Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Cote d'Ivoire, Uganda, and Nigeria. In these countries, elections have served more as a trigger of violent conflict rather than a peaceful means of transfer of political power.

Electoral violence poses serious challenges for democratic transition in Africa. From the perspective of democratic politics, electoral violence may undermine the quality of democracy or the outcome of elections in various ways. Just to illustrate, the presence or threat of violence may discourage voters and candidates from participating in the democratic process. It may also whittle down public confidence in elections as more people may prefer other methods of power transfer. From a conflict management perspective, electoral violence may undermine peaceful inter-group co-existence in multiethnic societies. For instance, electoral violence may erode the trust that exists among ethnic and other communal groups. At its heightened level, electoral violence may be a precursor to civil war as the case of Republic of Congo under President Pascal Lissouba illustrates.

Considering the prevalence of election violence and its implications for democratic transition in Africa, this paper seeks to analyse the ways in which African countries are grappling with the problem of electoral violence. Although the issue of electoral violence has inspired enormous academic publications among Africanist and non-Africanist scholars, only a few studies have proffered measures or examined strategies adopted to prevent and manage this ugly development. Much of the academic interest in the issue of electoral violence has focused on defining the phenomenon, particularly analyzing its causes, characteristics, incidence and consequences. The most significant effort to develop preventive and control mechanism for electoral violence was made by scholars who are investigating how the design of electoral systems can prevent or moderate electoral violence. This, however, is not sufficient since much still need to be done in terms of critically examining the existing strategies aimed at managing electoral violence in Africa.

To contextualize our analysis, this paper will examine the conditions that have facilitated the outbreak of electoral violence in Africa. Theoretically, there are three major conditions: 1) the level of salience of ethnicity and other communal identities in politics, 2) the nature of elite-mass linkage in the society, and 3) the degree of power parity among different political groups. Based on the case studies of Nigeria, Kenya, and Ethiopia, this paper will analyze the conditions that made the outbreak of election violence possible and assess measures adopted to manage the violence within the context of these conditions. Preliminary assessment suggests that five key measures have been adopted by these countries to prevent and manage electoral violence. These include: 1) media censorship and attempts to discourage mobilization of primordial sentiments, 2) regulation of political activities, including regulation of the mobilization activities of the political elite and parties, establishment of electoral code of conduct and deployment of election monitors, 3) long-term preventive measures such as public enlightenment/education and electoral reform, 4) mediation in high tension situations, and 5) strengthening of law enforcement and election justice system. This paper will examine the origin, interpretation, implementation, and efficacy of the above measures. The analysis of this paper will be based on observation of political processes in the selected countries and on primary and secondary data derived from documents, including published and unpublished literature, official documents and media reports.