

SOUTH AFRICA

Research paper's abstract



In recent political transitions in Southern Africa, competitive elections have become the most critical events in the allocation of power. The electoral process in Southern Africa in the last decade has been marked by a paradoxical dynamic of participation and exclusion – but also different manifestations of violence. The nature of a political system, a country's political trajectory and the election itself, determine its propensity and vulnerability to election security threats and violence. Various research on the links between elections and conflict in the Southern African region has made some key conclusions. These include firstly, that, electoral violence may arise at any point during the electoral cycle. Therefore a concerted effort should be made to entrench the quality of elections through an approach that gives support to the electoral cycle. Secondly, the requirement for prevention necessitates adequate cognition of the types, manifestations, and causes of election-related violence in a way that informs the strategic design of prevention and management programmes.

Thirdly, preventative activities should also be woven into each stage of the electoral cycle, as should the careful assessment and tracking of violent incidents. The continuum of various phases of the electoral process provides viable entry points which could allow for early interventions to obviate, resolve, or mitigate conflicts. The electoral cycle approach focuses on consistent and continuous conflict mapping, monitoring and networking and training and building the capacity of key election stakeholders and civil society components. The last point is that in some countries, the management of elections and subsequent violent outcomes indicate the absence of a democratic culture and dislocations in the broader structures of governance, including the equitable provision of socio-economic dividends, which often results in exclusion and inequality and may sow the seeds of tensions. In these instances elections per se do not cause violence, rather it is the process of political competition which exacerbates existing tensions, exposing structural disparities and inequalities which stimulate the escalation of these tensions into violence.

When it comes to South Africa, the study of election related violence is not conventional per se as the management of the country's elections have not been fraught with deficiencies that may stimulate discontent and confrontation. While elections in South Africa have been conducted in a tense political and social environment, they have not witnessed significant and protracted election related violence. Rather, the stimulus of violence appears to be underlying social, political and economic cleavages or tensions. South Africa therefore presents a peculiar case for the study of

election related violence in the Southern African region for five main reasons. Firstly, while cases of election related violence have been reported in certain parts of South Africa in recent years, they have generally been on the decrease in successive elections since the onset of democracy in 1994 (IDASA: 2009). Secondly, what is emerging from past research is that electoral periods generally trigger high levels of intolerance and political tensions. Indeed various political constituencies use elections as a national platform to air a wide set of grievances – which can contribute to this dynamic. Thirdly, distinct patterns of election-related violence illustrate the upsurge of clashes between supporters of rival political parties and communities – albeit to varying degrees within an electoral cycle. However, these incidents are currently best described as sporadic, rather than widespread and systemic. According to the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) public violence monitoring project – which recorded incidents from the 2014 national elections, there were 76 incidents recorded during the electoral period. Of these, two-thirds turned violent. Half of the recorded incidents took place in metropolitan areas, 29% in rural areas and 20% in small towns.

The fourth factor regards the geographic spread of violence activities. According to the same database; Gauteng (29%) and the Western Cape (21%) experienced the highest number of election-related incidents, followed by the Eastern Cape (16%), KwaZulu-Natal (11%), Limpopo (8%) and North West Province (7%). Lastly, while violence has not been widespread enough to have a significant bearing on the legitimacy and outcome of elections - there are concerns that it has in the past. More recent concerns are that it may compromise the management of local government elections in 2016. Indeed, local-level political violence has consistently manifested in certain provinces, mostly in KwaZulu-Natal, involving local communities, politicians and government officials. These incidents also suggest that inter and intra-party competition is mostly fierce at the local level. Electoral Commissions of course play a vital role in electoral governance and administration – including in dispute resolution and electoral conflict prevention. The South African Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) for instance, has various mechanisms for addressing conflict events at national, provincial and local levels. But, whether existing vehicles for consultation and co-operation work is a matter of debate.

This report will therefore document and analyse evolving patterns of election related violence at the national level broadly and the local government in particular. It will confine itself to the last two general elections in 2009, 2014 and the 2011 local government elections. The latter will aim to provide early warning indicators to preventing violent upsurges ahead of the 2016 local elections. As per the overall terms of reference for the research, this report will be divided into sections as follows:

Section I: Provides the context and drivers of electoral violence in South Africa;

Section II: Maps out the frequency and geographic spread of election related violence;

Section III: Discusses electoral administration and the legal, institutional mechanisms for addressing electoral violence;

Section IV: Discusses the key factors for preventing election related and strengthening early warning mechanisms; and

Section V: Provides a conclusion and recommendations to future activities and initiatives.