

CAUSES OF ELECTORAL VIOLENCE IN POST-CONFLICT COUNTRIES: INSTITUTIONS, POLITICAL COMPETITION, AND THE CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

By

Dhieu Mathok Diing Wol, PhD

African Centre for Conflict Resolution and Peace Building

aromjok@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of Study: This study examined the principal causes of electoral violence in post-conflict countries through an interdisciplinary analysis integrating political science, conflict studies, peacebuilding, and electoral governance.

Problem Statement: Electoral violence remains one of the greatest obstacles to democratic consolidation in post-conflict societies. Although elections are widely regarded as mechanisms for legitimising governments, facilitating peaceful political competition, and consolidating peace agreements, they frequently become catalysts for renewed violence where political institutions remain fragile and wartime grievances unresolved.

Methodology: Drawing upon comparative evidence from Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Burundi, Nepal, Bosnia and Herzegovina, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the article argues that electoral violence is rarely caused by elections themselves. Rather, elections become focal points through which pre-existing political, institutional, economic, and social tensions are expressed.

Result: The analysis identified weak state institutions, winner-takes-all political systems, unresolved wartime grievances, ethnic mobilisation, militarised political actors, electoral fraud, youth unemployment, hate speech, misinformation, and ineffective electoral management bodies as the principal drivers of violence. The findings further demonstrate that successful post-conflict elections depend less upon technical electoral administration than upon broader processes of institutional reform, political inclusion, rule of law, and peacebuilding.

Recommendation: Sustainable electoral peace requires transforming political competition from violent confrontation into institutionalised democratic contestation.

Keywords: *Electoral violence, Post-conflict elections, Peacebuilding, Democratic consolidation, Electoral management*

INTRODUCTION

Credible elections are widely regarded as a hallmark of democratic governance and are often used in post-conflict societies to legitimise governments, implement peace agreements, and restore constitutional order. However, experience demonstrates that elections in fragile states frequently generate violence rather than consolidate peace (Höglund, 2009, pp. 412–414). Instead of serving solely as democratic milestones, electoral periods often become arenas in which unresolved wartime grievances, ethnic divisions, historical injustices, and struggles over state power converge. Where institutions remain weak, former combatants retain coercive capacity, and political elites perceive electoral defeat as an existential threat, elections can trigger renewed instability.

Recent scholarship argues that electoral violence is neither accidental nor inevitable but reflects deeper structural and institutional weaknesses. Hafner-Burton, Hyde, and Jablonski (2014) contend that political elites strategically employ violence to intimidate opponents, suppress voter participation, manipulate electoral outcomes, or reject unfavourable results (pp. 150–153). Likewise, Höglund (2009) argues that elections often allow political actors to pursue wartime objectives through political coercion rather than peaceful democratic competition (pp. 414–416). The experiences of Kenya (2007), Côte d'Ivoire (2010), Burundi (2015), the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and South Sudan illustrate how disputed elections can escalate into widespread violence when political settlements remain fragile and institutions lack credibility.

These experiences support Paris's (2004) argument that rapid democratisation may destabilise post-conflict societies by intensifying political competition before institutions capable of managing conflict have matured (pp. 151–178). Consequently, contemporary peacebuilding has shifted from focusing primarily on organising elections to strengthening institutions that can sustain peaceful political competition.

This article addressed four objectives: to conceptualise electoral violence within post-conflict peacebuilding; examine its structural, institutional, political, and socio-economic causes; compare experiences across selected post-conflict countries; and identify policy measures for reducing electoral violence while promoting democratic consolidation. It argues that electoral violence results from the interaction of weak institutions, unresolved wartime grievances, exclusionary political systems, identity politics, and strategic elite behaviour rather than failures of electoral administration alone.

Electoral violence itself has evolved conceptually from a narrow focus on polling-day incidents to a broader understanding encompassing physical attacks, intimidation, psychological coercion, hate speech, destruction of property, sexual violence, and politically motivated killings occurring before, during, and after elections. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) defines electoral violence as any organised act or threat intended to intimidate or harm political stakeholders in order to influence the electoral process. Höglund (2009) distinguishes three stages of electoral violence pre-election, election-day, and post-election violence highlighting that violence should be understood as a continuous process rather than a single event (pp. 414–417).

Straus and Taylor (2012) further categorise electoral violence into state-sponsored, opposition, communal, and inter-party violence, illustrating that perpetrators may include governments,

opposition groups, ethnic militias, former rebel movements, or community actors. Scholars also distinguish between instrumental violence, which is strategically employed to influence electoral outcomes, and expressive violence, which emerges spontaneously from anger, frustration, or perceived injustice following disputed elections. Contemporary research therefore views elections not simply as technical administrative exercises but as political institutions embedded within broader struggles over power, legitimacy, and state authority, requiring analysis through the combined lenses of democratisation, peacebuilding, institutional development, and political economy.

Conceptualising Electoral Violence

Electoral violence is a contested concept that has evolved from a narrow focus on polling-day attacks to encompass intimidation, coercion, threats, destruction of property, psychological violence, hate speech, sexual violence, and politically motivated killings occurring before, during, and after elections. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) defines electoral violence as "any random or organised act or threat intended to intimidate, physically harm, blackmail, or abuse political stakeholders before, during or after an election in order to influence the electoral process." This definition recognises that electoral violence includes both physical and psychological forms of coercion aimed at influencing electoral outcomes.

Höglund (2009) conceptualises electoral violence as coercive acts linked to electoral competition and identifies three stages: pre-election, election-day, and post-election violence, highlighting that violence is a continuous process rather than an isolated event (pp. 414–417). Straus and Taylor (2012) further classify electoral violence into state-sponsored, opposition, communal, and inter-party violence, demonstrating that perpetrators may include governments, opposition groups, militias, or communities. They also distinguish between instrumental violence, strategically employed to influence electoral outcomes, and expressive violence, which arises from anger or perceived injustice after disputed elections. Contemporary scholarship therefore views electoral violence as embedded within broader struggles over power, legitimacy, and state authority, requiring analysis through the combined lenses of democratisation, peacebuilding, institutional development, and political economy.

Theoretical Perspectives on Electoral Violence

Understanding electoral violence in post-conflict societies requires an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates insights from political science, conflict studies, peacebuilding, institutional economics, sociology, and comparative politics. No single theory adequately explains why elections become violent in some countries while remaining peaceful in others. Rather, electoral violence emerges through the interaction of political institutions, historical grievances, elite strategies, socio-economic inequalities, and security dynamics. This section examines the principal theoretical approaches that explain the causes of electoral violence in post-conflict societies.

Institutional Theory

Institutional theory explains electoral violence as a consequence of weak, politicised, or illegitimate institutions rather than a rejection of democracy. North (1990) defines institutions as the "rules of the game" that regulate political, economic, and social interactions through constitutions, electoral laws, courts, political parties, electoral commissions, security agencies, and informal norms (pp. 3–6). Where these institutions are credible and effective, electoral disputes

are more likely to be resolved peacefully. In post-conflict societies, however, civil wars often weaken state capacity, undermine judicial independence, erode public trust, and politicise security institutions, increasing reliance on coercion instead of legal processes.

Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) distinguish between inclusive institutions, which promote participation and accountability, and extractive institutions, which concentrate political power and exclude political competitors (pp. 74–99). Electoral violence is more likely under extractive institutions because political exclusion raises the perceived costs of electoral defeat. Kenya's 2007 post-election violence illustrates how the loss of confidence in the Electoral Commission and judiciary contributed to widespread violence (CIPEV, 2008). Similarly, Côte d'Ivoire's 2010 crisis emerged when conflicting electoral institutions declared different winners, transforming an electoral dispute into armed conflict (UNOCI, 2011). Institutional theory therefore emphasises strengthening electoral governance, judicial independence, constitutional legitimacy, and professional public institutions as essential measures for preventing electoral violence.

Rational Choice Theory

Rational Choice Theory explains electoral violence as a strategic instrument used by political actors to maximise electoral advantage rather than as irrational or spontaneous behaviour. Downs (1957) argues that political actors pursue strategies that maximise expected political benefits. Extending this logic, Hafner-Burton, Hyde, and Jablonski (2014) contend that politicians often employ intimidation and coercion to suppress opposition turnout, discourage political participation, influence voter behaviour, and weaken opponents' organisational capacity (pp. 150–154). Violence therefore becomes one of several electoral strategies, alongside campaigning, coalition-building, media engagement, and policy promises.

The theory is particularly relevant in fragile democracies where political office provides access to state resources, public employment, security institutions, and economic opportunities. Under such conditions, the high costs of electoral defeat encourage political elites to use violence when institutions fail to impose effective sanctions. Similarly, Collier (2009) argues that political violence often reflects rational calculations of expected political gains rather than irrational hostility. Zimbabwe's 2008 elections exemplify this logic, as organised intimidation targeted opposition supporters to influence the presidential runoff rather than occurring spontaneously (Human Rights Watch, 2008). However, Rational Choice Theory has limitations because it underestimates the influence of historical grievances, identity politics, and emotional mobilisation, making it most persuasive when combined with institutional and sociological explanations.

Political Economy Theory

Political Economy Theory explains electoral violence as a struggle over political power because state office provides access to economic resources, patronage networks, public employment, natural resources, and government contracts. In many post-conflict societies, weak private sectors, dependence on foreign aid, and state dominance of the economy make political competition synonymous with competition for economic survival. Collier (2007) argues that these countries are characterised by limited productive opportunities, high unemployment, and heavy reliance on public resources, making elections high-stakes contests in which losing office often means exclusion from economic opportunities (pp. 27–43).

The risks are even greater in resource-rich states, where control of government also means control of resource revenues. Ross (2012) contends that petroleum wealth increases the value of political

office by concentrating substantial financial resources within state institutions, encouraging elites to view elections as contests for control over resource rents rather than public policy (pp. 16–39). South Sudan exemplifies this dynamic, as oil revenues constitute the principal source of government income and foreign exchange, intensifying competition for state power. Similar patterns are evident in Nigeria and Angola. Political Economy Theory therefore underscores the importance of economic diversification, fiscal transparency, and equitable resource distribution in reducing incentives for electoral violence.

Ethnic Mobilisation Theory

Ethnic Mobilisation Theory argues that electoral violence is driven not by ethnicity itself but by political elites who strategically exploit ethnic identities to gain electoral support. Horowitz (1985) contends that ethnic divisions become politically significant when electoral systems encourage mobilisation along communal rather than policy-based lines, reinforcing ethnic voting patterns in deeply divided societies (pp. 291–332). Similarly, Fearon and Laitin (2000) argue that ethnic violence is generally organised by political entrepreneurs who manipulate existing identities for strategic advantage rather than arising from ancient hatreds (pp. 845–877).

Kenya's 2007 post-election violence illustrates this dynamic. Although the violence appeared ethnic, investigations found that political leaders deliberately mobilised ethnic identities while exploiting longstanding grievances over land, political exclusion, and unequal development (CIPEV, 2008). In post-conflict societies, ethnic mobilisation is particularly dangerous because wartime alliances often coincide with ethnic identities, increasing the risk that electoral disputes escalate into communal conflict. Bosnia and Herzegovina similarly demonstrates how electoral competition continues to revolve around ethnic political parties representing Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs despite the absence of large-scale violence. The theory therefore emphasises the need for inclusive institutions and electoral systems that encourage cross-ethnic political cooperation and reduce communal polarisation.

Security Dilemma Theory

Security dilemma theory offers another valuable explanation for electoral violence in post-conflict societies. Originally developed within international relations by Herz (1950) and later adapted to civil conflict by Posen (1993), the theory argues that violence often results from mutual insecurity rather than deliberate aggression. Following civil war, former combatants frequently retain weapons, command structures, and distrust toward rival groups. Elections increase uncertainty because changes in political leadership may alter control over security institutions, military appointments, and state resources.

Consequently, competing political groups may arm themselves defensively. However, these defensive preparations are interpreted by rivals as offensive threats, generating escalating cycles of mutual fear. Walter (2002) argues that credible security guarantees constitute one of the most important determinants of successful post-conflict transitions because former combatants rarely trust newly established political institutions (pp. 19–45). Elections conducted before security-sector reform therefore risk intensifying insecurity.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo illustrates this challenge. Armed groups have frequently remained active during electoral periods because incomplete disarmament and weak state security institutions prevent political actors from trusting electoral outcomes. Similar concerns continue to shape electoral planning in South Sudan, where implementation of unified security arrangements

remains incomplete under the R-ARCSS. Security dilemma theory therefore highlights the importance of security-sector reform, disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR), and professional security institutions before competitive elections are conducted.

Peacebuilding Theory

Peacebuilding theory challenges the assumption that elections automatically consolidate peace. Instead, scholars argue that elections may destabilise fragile societies when introduced before political institutions have matured. Paris (2004) coined the concept of "Institutionalisation before Liberalisation," arguing that post-conflict societies require strong institutions before fully competitive politics can safely emerge (pp. 151–178). Premature democratisation may unintentionally intensify political competition, encourage nationalist mobilisation, and undermine fragile peace agreements.

Jarstad and Sisk (2008) similarly argue that post-conflict elections involve an inherent dilemma. While elections enhance political legitimacy, they also increase political competition, potentially reviving wartime rivalries if institutions remain weak (pp. 20–46). This theoretical perspective has profoundly influenced United Nations peacebuilding doctrine. Contemporary peace operations increasingly emphasise institution-building, constitutional reform, judicial strengthening, electoral administration, reconciliation, and inclusive governance before organising national elections.

Liberia's 2005 elections illustrate a relatively successful application of this approach. Extensive UN peacekeeping, security-sector reform, voter education, and institutional strengthening contributed to peaceful elections despite the country's devastating civil war. Similarly, Sierra Leone's 2007 elections benefited from substantial international support for electoral institutions and democratic governance. Peacebuilding theory therefore concludes that elections alone do not produce peace; rather, peaceful elections emerge from broader processes of institutional transformation, reconciliation, and state-building.

Structural Causes of Electoral Violence in Post-Conflict Countries

Electoral violence rarely emerges from a single event or isolated dispute during the electoral process. Rather, it reflects deeper structural conditions that shape political behaviour long before campaigns begin. Post-conflict societies are particularly susceptible because civil wars weaken institutions, militarise political actors, deepen societal divisions, and undermine public confidence in state authority. Elections merely expose these underlying vulnerabilities. As Höglund (2009) observes, elections should be understood as "critical political moments" during which existing conflicts become concentrated rather than created (pp. 414–416). Consequently, analysing electoral violence requires examining the institutional and structural environment within which elections occur. This section identifies five interrelated structural causes that consistently contribute to electoral violence across post-conflict societies.

Weak State Institutions

Weak state institutions remain the most consistently supported explanation for electoral violence in post-conflict societies. Credible elections depend on the effective functioning of electoral management bodies, courts, legislatures, security agencies, political parties, and constitutional mechanisms for resolving disputes. North (1990) argues that institutions reduce political uncertainty by establishing stable rules that enable disputes to be resolved through law rather than force (pp. 3–10). Where these institutions lack independence, capacity, or legitimacy, political actors are more likely to resort to violence.

Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) are particularly critical because they oversee voter registration, polling, vote counting, and the declaration of results. However, in many post-conflict countries they suffer from political interference, inadequate resources, and limited public confidence. Kenya's 2007 post-election violence demonstrated how institutional failures and disputed election results undermined public trust and fuelled widespread violence (CIPEV, 2008, pp. 21–37). Likewise, Côte d'Ivoire's 2010 crisis escalated into armed conflict when rival institutions declared different election winners, illustrating the dangers of institutional fragmentation (UNOCI, 2011).

Judicial independence is equally essential for resolving electoral disputes peacefully. South Sudan continues to face similar challenges, as key institutions established under the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), including the National Elections Commission, judiciary, Political Parties Council, and unified security arrangements, remain under development. These findings support Acemoglu and Robinson's (2012) argument that inclusive political institutions reduce conflict by providing legitimate mechanisms for peaceful political competition (pp. 74–99).

Winner-Takes-All Political Systems

Winner-takes-all political systems significantly increase the risk of electoral violence because electoral victory provides almost exclusive control over executive power, public resources, security institutions, and government appointments, while defeat often results in political and economic exclusion. Horowitz (2000) argues that majoritarian systems encourage zero-sum competition, causing political actors to view elections as existential contests rather than routine democratic exercises (pp. 602–625). This dynamic is particularly pronounced in post-conflict societies where governments dominate economic opportunities.

Collier (2007) similarly contends that weak economies intensify political competition because the state remains the principal distributor of wealth, employment, and public resources (pp. 27–43). Consequently, political elites may resort to coercion to secure electoral victory. Kenya's 2007 elections illustrate how perceptions of electoral defeat as economic marginalisation contributed to widespread communal violence, while Nigeria's presidential elections continue to generate tensions because control of the federal government determines access to petroleum revenues and political appointments.

By contrast, inclusive constitutional arrangements reduce incentives for violence. South Africa's proportional representation system and Northern Ireland's Good Friday Agreement encourage coalition-building and power-sharing, lowering the perceived costs of electoral defeat. These experiences demonstrate that constitutional mechanisms such as proportional representation, federalism, decentralisation, and inclusive governments are essential peacebuilding strategies for preventing electoral violence in post-conflict societies.

Unresolved Wartime Grievances

Unresolved wartime grievances remain a major driver of electoral violence in post-conflict societies. Although peace agreements may end armed conflict, disputes over displacement, land ownership, wartime atrocities, political exclusion, identity, and justice often persist. Lederach (1997) argues that sustainable peace requires transforming relationships rather than simply ending violence (pp. 24–39). Consequently, elections held before reconciliation processes are complete may revive historical divisions as political elites exploit unresolved grievances for electoral gain.

Post-conflict elections frequently occur in contexts characterised by trauma, mistrust, contested historical narratives, unresolved displacement, disputed property rights, and incomplete transitional justice. Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrates how wartime ethnic divisions continue to shape electoral politics despite the Dayton Peace Agreement, while Rwanda has prioritised national reconciliation and restrictions on hate speech to reduce electoral tensions. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions contributed to rebuilding public confidence and reducing political tensions, although they did not eliminate all grievances.

South Sudan faces similar challenges following decades of liberation struggle, civil war, communal conflict, and displacement. The incomplete implementation of Chapter V of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), particularly the Hybrid Court, the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing, and the Compensation and Reparation Authority, leaves many wartime grievances unresolved, increasing the risk that they may be exploited during future elections.

Former Combatants and the Militarisation of Politics

Perhaps the most distinctive characteristic of post-conflict elections is the continued influence of former armed actors within civilian political competition. Civil wars rarely end with complete demobilisation. Former rebel movements often transform themselves into political parties while retaining command structures, military hierarchies, informal armed networks, and considerable coercive capacity. Walter (2002) argues that former combatants frequently distrust peace agreements because they fear political exclusion or renewed persecution following disarmament (pp. 19–45). Elections therefore become moments of heightened insecurity during which former military organisations remain prepared to remobilise if political outcomes appear threatening.

Disarmament, Demobilisation, and Reintegration (DDR) programmes seek to address these challenges by: collecting weapons; dismantling armed groups; reintegrating ex-combatants into civilian life; Vcreating alternative livelihoods; and strengthening state security institutions. However, DDR programmes frequently remain incomplete due to limited financial resources, political disagreements, or renewed insecurity. The Democratic Republic of the Congo demonstrates the consequences of incomplete demobilisation. Armed groups have repeatedly influenced electoral processes through intimidation, territorial control, and violence against civilians.

Similarly, Côte d'Ivoire's 2010 electoral crisis reflected continued military fragmentation despite earlier peace agreements. Former rebel forces and government troops remained politically aligned, facilitating rapid escalation into armed confrontation following disputed election results. In South Sudan, implementation of unified security arrangements under the R-ARCSS remains central to reducing electoral violence. Completing security-sector reform before national elections would significantly strengthen public confidence while reducing opportunities for armed political competition. Research consistently demonstrates that elections held before effective security-sector reform are substantially more vulnerable to violence than elections conducted after professionalisation of national security institutions (Jarstad & Sisk, 2008, pp. 20–46).

Political Exclusion and Constitutional Uncertainty

Electoral violence frequently emerges where significant political actors perceive themselves as excluded from political processes. Exclusion may arise through discriminatory electoral laws, unequal campaign opportunities, restrictions upon political parties, delayed constitutional reforms,

or failure to implement peace agreements. Political inclusion represents one of the central principles of democratic peacebuilding. Inclusive political systems reduce incentives for violence by ensuring that diverse political groups possess legitimate opportunities to participate in governance.

Conversely, exclusion increases the attractiveness of extra-constitutional political strategies. Constitutional uncertainty further compounds these challenges. Post-conflict societies often conduct elections before completing constitutional reform, creating ambiguity regarding institutional powers, decentralisation, electoral systems, presidential authority, and dispute-resolution procedures. Nepal illustrates these dynamics. Following the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2006, repeated constitutional disputes delayed political stabilisation despite successful constituent assembly elections. Although large-scale violence was avoided, constitutional uncertainty prolonged political instability.

Similarly, delayed implementation of constitutional provisions has complicated electoral planning in several African post-conflict states. For South Sudan, successful elections depend significantly upon completing constitutional-making processes, clarifying legal frameworks, strengthening electoral legislation, and ensuring that all political stakeholders possess confidence in the constitutional order before competitive elections are held. Political inclusion is therefore not merely a democratic principle but a conflict-prevention strategy.

Proximate Causes of Electoral Violence in Post-Conflict Countries

While structural factors create the environment within which electoral violence becomes possible, elections often become violent because of immediate political, economic, and social triggers. These proximate causes activate underlying grievances during electoral periods and frequently determine whether political competition remains peaceful or escalates into violence. Comparative evidence from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Balkans demonstrates that these triggers interact with institutional weaknesses rather than operating independently. This section examines the most significant proximate causes of electoral violence in post-conflict societies.

Ethnic and Identity-Based Political Mobilisation

Ethnicity remains one of the most visible features of electoral violence in many post-conflict societies. Nevertheless, contemporary scholarship increasingly rejects the argument that ethnic diversity itself causes electoral violence. Instead, political violence arises because elites deliberately manipulate ethnic identities to mobilise electoral support, construct political alliances, and delegitimise opponents. Horowitz (1985) argues that deeply divided societies often experience ethnic outbidding, whereby political parties compete by presenting themselves as the strongest defenders of their respective ethnic communities (pp. 291–332). Rather than encouraging moderation, electoral competition rewards increasingly exclusionary political rhetoric.

Fearon and Laitin (2000) similarly contend that ethnic violence rarely results from "ancient hatreds." Instead, political entrepreneurs strategically exploit ethnic identities where state institutions are weak and political incentives encourage communal mobilisation (pp. 845–877). Ethnicity therefore functions as a political resource rather than an independent cause of violence. Post-conflict societies are particularly vulnerable because wartime alliances frequently coincide with ethnic identities. During civil wars, communities often organise around ethnic, religious, regional, or linguistic affiliations. Although peace agreements formally end armed conflict, these wartime identities frequently persist into electoral politics.

Kenya's 2007–2008 post-election violence illustrates this dynamic. Although violence appeared to occur primarily between ethnic communities, the Commission of Inquiry into Post-Election Violence concluded that political elites deliberately mobilised ethnic identities while exploiting longstanding grievances concerning land distribution, political exclusion, historical marginalisation, and unequal economic development (CIPEV, 2008, pp. 101–145). Approximately 1,133 people were killed, while more than 600,000 were displaced. Similarly, Côte d'Ivoire's electoral crisis following the 2010 presidential election reflected long-standing disputes surrounding nationality, citizenship, and the concept of *Ivoirité*. Political leaders portrayed electoral competition as a struggle between "indigenous" and "foreign" populations, thereby intensifying communal tensions and contributing to widespread violence (International Crisis Group, 2011).

Burundi provides another example. Although the Arusha Peace Agreement sought to reduce ethnic competition through constitutional power-sharing between Hutu and Tutsi communities, subsequent elections remained influenced by historical distrust arising from decades of ethnic violence. While constitutional reforms reduced large-scale ethnic conflict, political mobilisation continued to draw heavily upon historical narratives. South Sudan similarly confronts significant challenges regarding identity politics. Although political parties frequently emphasise national unity, political mobilisation often reflects ethnic, regional, and historical loyalties developed during successive liberation struggles and civil conflicts. Unless political parties increasingly compete on policy platforms rather than communal identities, elections may reinforce rather than reduce societal divisions. Comparative evidence therefore demonstrates that electoral violence is more likely where political institutions encourage identity-based mobilisation instead of issue-based democratic competition.

Electoral Fraud and Disputed Election Results

Few factors have contributed more directly to electoral violence than allegations of electoral fraud. Elections derive legitimacy from public confidence that electoral outcomes accurately reflect citizens' preferences. Where this confidence disappears, political contestants frequently reject results and mobilise supporters outside constitutional institutions. Lehoucq (2003) argues that allegations of electoral fraud become politically explosive because they undermine the fundamental legitimacy of democratic competition (pp. 233–256). Fraud need not actually occur; widespread public perception of manipulation may itself generate political violence.

Electoral fraud may occur at multiple stages of the electoral process, including: voter registration; candidate nomination; campaign financing; media access; polling-day procedures; ballot transportation; vote counting; transmission of results; and declaration of final outcomes. The Carter Center (2014) notes that transparency throughout every stage of the electoral cycle significantly reduces opportunities for electoral disputes by increasing public confidence.

Kenya's 2007 election remains one of the most extensively studied examples. Following inconsistent announcements by the Electoral Commission, opposition parties rejected the declared presidential results, alleging widespread manipulation. The judiciary lacked sufficient credibility to resolve competing claims, while political leaders encouraged supporters to reject constitutional procedures. Violence rapidly spread across much of the country (CIPEV, 2008).

Similarly, Zimbabwe's 2008 elections witnessed extensive intimidation, delayed publication of results, and allegations of electoral manipulation. Human Rights Watch documented systematic violence directed against opposition supporters before the presidential runoff election (Human

Rights Watch, 2008). Côte d'Ivoire's 2010 election likewise demonstrated how disputed results may trigger armed conflict where rival institutions declare contradictory outcomes.

These experiences emphasise the importance of transparent electoral administration. Measures including biometric voter registration, electronic transmission of results, domestic and international election observation, independent auditing, transparent vote tabulation, and accessible dispute-resolution mechanisms substantially reduce opportunities for political manipulation.

Youth Unemployment and the Recruitment of Political Violence

One of the most consistent findings in electoral violence research concerns the role of unemployed youth. Young people constitute the largest demographic group in many post-conflict societies, yet they frequently experience limited employment opportunities, inadequate education, political marginalisation, and persistent poverty. Collier (2007) argues that economic exclusion increases susceptibility to political mobilisation because unemployed youth possess relatively low opportunity costs for participation in violence (pp. 27–43). Political elites therefore recruit young people as campaign militias, demonstrators, security auxiliaries, or informal enforcement groups.

Importantly, unemployment alone does not produce violence. Rather, unemployment creates conditions under which political entrepreneurs can more easily mobilise frustrated young people by offering financial incentives, promises of employment, ethnic solidarity, or political patronage. Liberia's post-war elections illustrate this challenge. Following fourteen years of civil conflict, thousands of former child soldiers and unemployed youth remained economically marginalised. International peacebuilding programmes therefore prioritised youth employment, vocational training, and reintegration alongside electoral preparations. These programmes contributed significantly to reducing electoral violence during the 2005 elections (United Nations Mission in Liberia, 2006).

In Sierra Leone, similar youth-employment initiatives formed part of broader post-conflict reconstruction efforts. Although isolated incidents of electoral violence occurred, sustained investment in education, vocational training, and youth participation reduced opportunities for political manipulation. South Sudan possesses one of the youngest populations in Africa. Combined with prolonged conflict, economic instability, displacement, and limited employment opportunities, this demographic structure creates both opportunities and risks. Young people can become agents of democratic transformation through civic engagement, entrepreneurship, and political participation. However, where political institutions remain weak and economic opportunities scarce, unemployed youth may also become vulnerable to recruitment into politically motivated violence. Consequently, youth employment should be understood not merely as an economic policy but also as a peacebuilding strategy.

Hate Speech, Political Rhetoric, and Misinformation

Language constitutes one of the most powerful instruments through which electoral violence is mobilised. Political leaders frequently employ inflammatory rhetoric, hate speech, misinformation, and disinformation to delegitimise opponents, mobilise supporters, and intensify political polarisation. The Rabat Plan of Action adopted by the United Nations (2012) distinguishes legitimate political expression from incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence. Although freedom of expression remains fundamental to democratic elections, political speech that deliberately encourages violence represents a serious threat to electoral integrity.

Hate speech typically portrays opponents as existential threats rather than legitimate political competitors. Such narratives frequently dehumanise rival communities while legitimising violence as a form of self-defence. During Rwanda's 1994 genocide, Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) became notorious for broadcasting hate propaganda encouraging violence against Tutsi civilians. Although this occurred outside a conventional electoral context, it demonstrates the extraordinary influence media can exert upon political mobilisation. More recent elections increasingly involve digital misinformation. Social media platforms have transformed electoral communication by enabling rapid dissemination of both accurate information and false narratives.

Bradshaw and Howard (2019) document the growing use of organised computational propaganda during elections worldwide. False claims concerning electoral fraud, ethnic conspiracies, fabricated violence, or manipulated vote counts frequently circulate through social media before official institutions can respond. Kenya's 2017 elections witnessed extensive online misinformation campaigns that amplified political tensions despite improvements in electoral administration. Similar concerns have emerged across Nigeria, Ethiopia, Brazil, India, Myanmar, and numerous European democracies.

For post-conflict societies, misinformation is particularly dangerous because public trust in official institutions often remains fragile. False rumours regarding attacks, ballot manipulation, or ethnic mobilisation can rapidly generate panic and retaliatory violence. Effective responses require: independent media regulation; rapid fact-checking mechanisms; civic education; digital literacy programmes; responsible political communication; enforcement of electoral codes of conduct; and cooperation between electoral commissions and technology companies.

Politicisation of Security Forces

Professional security institutions are essential for peaceful elections. However, in many post-conflict countries police, military, intelligence agencies, and local security organisations remain politically divided following civil war. When security institutions are perceived as favouring particular political parties, public confidence declines substantially. Opposition supporters may distrust police protection, while governments may use security agencies to intimidate political rivals. Höglund (2009) observes that security forces frequently become both perpetrators and victims of electoral violence in fragile states (pp. 417–420). Excessive use of force against demonstrators, selective enforcement of electoral laws, arbitrary arrests, and politically motivated violence all undermine electoral legitimacy.

The 2018 elections in Zimbabwe illustrate these concerns. Security forces used lethal force against demonstrators challenging election results, raising serious questions regarding political neutrality (Human Rights Watch, 2019). Similarly, Uganda's recent elections have generated criticism concerning the extensive deployment of security forces during campaigns and restrictions upon opposition activities. Professionalisation of police and military institutions, together with clear operational guidelines governing electoral security, remains essential for preventing violence.

Comparative Case Studies of Electoral Violence in Post-Conflict Countries

Comparative analysis demonstrates that electoral violence is neither inevitable nor uniform across post-conflict societies. Countries emerging from civil war often share similar characteristics, including fragile institutions, weakened economies, displaced populations, and divided societies. Nevertheless, some countries have conducted peaceful elections that strengthened democratic

legitimacy, while others have experienced severe violence that undermined peace agreements and reignited armed conflict. The differences lie not in elections themselves but in the quality of institutions, implementation of peace agreements, political leadership, security-sector reform, judicial independence, electoral administration, and the willingness of political elites to accept constitutional outcomes. Comparative case studies therefore provide important lessons regarding both the causes and prevention of electoral violence.

Kenya (2007–2008): Institutional Failure and Ethnic Political Mobilisation

Although Kenya was not a conventional post-conflict state in 2007, its post-election violence represents one of the most influential case studies in electoral violence literature because it demonstrates how institutional weaknesses and ethnic political mobilisation can rapidly transform disputed elections into widespread communal violence. The presidential election held on 27 December 2007 was contested primarily between incumbent President Mwai Kibaki and opposition leader Raila Odinga. Initially, vote counting suggested an extremely close contest. However, allegations of irregularities during tallying and delays in announcing results generated widespread suspicion regarding electoral integrity.

When the Electoral Commission declared Kibaki the winner, opposition parties rejected the results, alleging large-scale manipulation. Public confidence in the Electoral Commission collapsed, while the judiciary was widely perceived as politically compromised and incapable of impartially resolving the dispute (Commission of Inquiry into Post-Election Violence [CIPEV], 2008, pp. 21–45). Violence spread rapidly throughout the country. More than 1,133 people were killed, approximately 3,500 injured, and over 600,000 displaced. Property worth millions of dollars was destroyed, while ethnic communities became primary targets of retaliatory attacks (CIPEV, 2008, pp. 300–321).

The Commission concluded that the violence resulted from multiple interacting factors rather than electoral fraud alone. These included: historical inequalities in land ownership; ethnic political mobilisation; youth unemployment; weak police response; institutional failures; impunity for previous political violence; and inflammatory political rhetoric (CIPEV, 2008, pp. 351–370). Following mediation led by former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, Kenya established a coalition government under the National Accord and Reconciliation Act of 2008. Comprehensive electoral reforms subsequently created the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), strengthened judicial independence through constitutional reform, and introduced a new Constitution in 2010. The Kenyan experience illustrates that electoral violence frequently reflects long-standing institutional weaknesses rather than isolated electoral malpractice.

Côte d'Ivoire (2010–2011): Electoral Disputes and Renewed Civil War

Côte d'Ivoire provides one of the clearest examples of how disputed elections may reverse fragile peace processes. Following years of civil conflict beginning in 2002, presidential elections were repeatedly postponed until 2010. The election formed a central component of the Ouagadougou Peace Agreement and was intended to reunify the divided country. The first round of voting occurred peacefully. However, the second round between incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo and challenger Alassane Ouattara generated serious political controversy. The Independent Electoral Commission announced that Ouattara had won approximately 54 percent of the vote. Shortly afterwards, however, the Constitutional Council invalidated results from several northern constituencies and declared Gbagbo the winner.

The competing declarations produced two rival presidents, two rival governments, and two competing claims to constitutional legitimacy. Within weeks, violence escalated into armed confrontation between forces loyal to Gbagbo and those supporting Ouattara. According to the United Nations, more than 3,000 people were killed, while approximately one million civilians were displaced during the crisis (United Nations Operation in Côte d'Ivoire [UNOCI], 2011). International recognition of Ouattara's victory eventually contributed to military intervention by United Nations peacekeepers and French forces, leading to Gbagbo's arrest in April 2011. The Ivorian case demonstrates several important causes of electoral violence: competing institutional authority; politicised constitutional interpretation; weak judicial legitimacy; incomplete disarmament; ethnic and regional polarisation; political exclusion; and unresolved wartime grievances. The principal lesson is that elections cannot substitute for comprehensive institutional consolidation following civil war.

Liberia (2005): Elections Supporting Democratic Consolidation

Liberia presents a contrasting example in which elections contributed positively to post-conflict peacebuilding. Following fourteen years of devastating civil war, the Comprehensive Peace Agreement signed in Accra in 2003 established a National Transitional Government supported by the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL). Rather than organising immediate elections, considerable emphasis was placed upon: security-sector reform; disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration (DDR); electoral institution-building; civic education; voter registration; judicial strengthening; and extensive international election observation.

Approximately 103,000 former combatants participated in DDR programmes before national elections (United Nations, 2006). The 2005 presidential election between Ellen Johnson Sirleaf and George Weah remained highly competitive but largely peaceful. Although political disagreements occurred, both candidates accepted constitutional procedures, while independent electoral institutions maintained public confidence. Jarstad and Sisk (2008) argue that Liberia illustrates the importance of sequencing peacebuilding before democratic competition (pp. 145–172). Several factors contributed to Liberia's peaceful elections: robust United Nations peacekeeping; comprehensive DDR; independent electoral administration; civic education; international monitoring; relatively impartial security forces; and political acceptance of electoral outcomes. Liberia demonstrates that post-conflict elections need not generate violence where institutions receive adequate preparation.

Sierra Leone (2007): Peacebuilding through Electoral Institutions

Sierra Leone's civil war officially ended in 2002 after more than a decade of violence. Like Liberia, Sierra Leone benefited from extensive international assistance before national elections. The National Electoral Commission underwent substantial institutional strengthening, while police reforms improved electoral security. The 2007 elections produced the country's second peaceful democratic transfer of power since the civil war. Opposition leader Ernest Bai Koroma defeated the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party candidate.

Although isolated incidents of violence occurred during campaigning, they remained relatively limited compared with previous conflicts. According to the European Union Election Observation Mission (2007), several factors contributed to peaceful elections: improved electoral administration; independent domestic observation; media monitoring; effective police deployment; civic education; judicial credibility; and political dialogue. The Sierra Leone

experience demonstrates that electoral violence can be substantially reduced through sustained institutional investment.

Burundi (2015): Constitutional Crisis and Political Violence

Burundi's 2015 elections illustrate how constitutional disputes may undermine otherwise successful peace agreements. The Arusha Peace Agreement (2000) had ended years of ethnic conflict by introducing constitutional power-sharing between Hutu and Tutsi communities. However, controversy emerged when President Pierre Nkurunziza announced his intention to seek a third presidential term. Opposition parties argued that this violated both the Constitution and the Arusha Agreement. Large-scale demonstrations followed. Government security forces responded forcefully, while opposition groups organised armed resistance. According to the United Nations, more than 1,200 people were killed, while over 400,000 refugees fled neighbouring countries between 2015 and 2017 (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2017). Although elections proceeded formally, many opposition parties boycotted the process. The Burundian experience demonstrates that constitutional ambiguity concerning presidential term limits can become a major source of electoral violence.

Nepal (2008): Elections Supporting Peace Agreement Implementation

Nepal offers another relatively successful post-conflict experience. Following the Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2006 ending the Maoist insurgency, elections for the Constituent Assembly were organised in 2008. Former Maoist rebels transformed themselves into political competitors while participating peacefully in democratic institutions. Although tensions remained high, extensive international mediation, security-sector monitoring, and constitutional negotiations prevented widespread electoral violence. International observers concluded that Nepal's elections strengthened implementation of the peace agreement despite continuing constitutional disputes. The Nepalese experience illustrates the importance of integrating former combatants into democratic institutions rather than excluding them from political competition.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Managing Ethnic Electoral Competition

Bosnia and Herzegovina continues to provide valuable lessons regarding elections in deeply divided post-conflict societies. The Dayton Peace Agreement established an elaborate constitutional system designed to prevent renewed ethnic conflict. Power-sharing arrangements, proportional representation, collective presidency, and extensive international supervision have prevented large-scale electoral violence. Nevertheless, political competition remains overwhelmingly organised around ethnic parties representing Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs. Scholars argue that while Dayton successfully prevented renewed warfare, it simultaneously institutionalised ethnic political competition (Bieber, 2006, pp. 89–116). Bosnia therefore demonstrates both the strengths and limitations of constitutional power-sharing.

South Sudan: Electoral Risks in an Incomplete Peace Process

South Sudan represents one of the most important contemporary cases of electoral violence risk. Since independence in 2011, the country has experienced repeated political crises culminating in civil war beginning in December 2013. The Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) signed in 2018 established a transitional roadmap toward democratic elections. However, implementation has progressed unevenly. Several critical benchmarks remain incomplete, including: constitutional-making; permanent constitution drafting; unification of security forces; judicial reform; electoral legislation; political party

regulation; census; voter registration; civic education; and implementation of transitional justice institutions.

Consequently, elections continue to present significant opportunities as well as considerable risks. Unlike previous case studies where elections followed relatively complete institutional preparation, South Sudan continues simultaneously to implement peacebuilding, state-building, constitutional reform, and electoral preparation. Several factors increase electoral vulnerability: incomplete security-sector reform; widespread displacement; communal violence; political polarisation; weak infrastructure; limited administrative capacity; economic crisis; humanitarian challenges; and unresolved wartime grievances. Nevertheless, important opportunities also exist. Implementation of the R-ARCSS provides an institutional framework capable of reducing electoral violence if fully implemented.

International support from the African Union (AU), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), the Reconstituted Joint Monitoring and Evaluation Commission (RJMEC), civil society organisations, and regional partners continues to strengthen electoral preparations. The principal lesson emerging from South Sudan is that elections should reinforce not replace peacebuilding. Successful elections will therefore depend upon completing institutional reforms before political competition intensifies.

Implications for South Sudan

Among contemporary post-conflict societies, South Sudan presents one of the most significant tests of the relationship between peacebuilding and democratic transition. Since independence in 2011, the country has experienced repeated episodes of armed conflict, humanitarian crises, economic instability, and institutional fragility. The R-ARCSS provides the principal framework through which political transition, constitutional reform, security-sector transformation, and democratic elections are intended to occur. However, implementation has proceeded more slowly than originally anticipated, creating important challenges for future electoral processes. The findings of this article suggest that South Sudan should avoid viewing elections as an isolated event or symbolic milestone. Instead, elections should represent the culmination of broader processes of institutional consolidation, reconciliation, constitutional reform, and state-building. Conducting elections before the completion of essential transitional tasks may inadvertently intensify political competition before institutions possess sufficient capacity to manage disputes peacefully. Several priorities emerge from the comparative analysis.

First, implementation of the Permanent Constitution-Making Process should remain central to electoral preparation. Constitutional legitimacy provides the legal and political foundation upon which electoral competition depends. Without broad agreement concerning constitutional rules, disputes over executive authority, decentralisation, electoral systems, and institutional responsibilities are likely to persist. Second, completion of the Necessary Unified Forces under the R-ARCSS remains essential. Professional and nationally representative security institutions reduce fears among political actors that electoral defeat may expose them to insecurity or persecution. Security-sector reform therefore constitutes both a peacebuilding and an electoral priority. Third, South Sudan should strengthen the independence and operational capacity of the National Elections Commission (NEC), the Political Parties Council (PPC), and the judiciary. Transparent appointment procedures, adequate financial resources, continuous professional training, and public accountability are necessary to enhance institutional credibility.

Fourth, civic and voter education should become a sustained national programme rather than a short-term electoral activity. Civic education should promote constitutionalism, democratic participation, tolerance, peaceful dispute resolution, and respect for electoral outcomes while combating misinformation and hate speech.

Fifth, implementation of Chapter V of the R-ARCSS, particularly the Commission for Truth, Reconciliation and Healing, the Hybrid Court for South Sudan, and the Compensation and Reparation Authority, remains critical for addressing wartime grievances before electoral competition intensifies. Reconciliation and justice should be viewed as complementary components of democratic consolidation rather than separate policy agendas. Finally, South Sudan should strengthen cooperation with regional organisations, including the African Union (AU), the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the East African Community (EAC), and the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS). International election observation, technical assistance, mediation support, and electoral capacity-building can complement domestic reform efforts while reinforcing public confidence.

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the causes of electoral violence in post-conflict countries through a comparative analysis integrating institutional theory, peacebuilding scholarship, political economy, rational choice theory, and conflict studies. The central argument advanced throughout the article is that electoral violence should not be understood as an inevitable consequence of democratic competition. Rather, elections become violent when they occur within environments characterized by institutional fragility, unresolved wartime grievances, exclusionary political systems, socio-economic inequalities, and political elites willing to employ coercion as an instrument of electoral competition. The analysis demonstrates that weak institutions consistently emerge as the most significant predictor of electoral violence. Electoral commissions lacking independence, politicised judicial systems, fragmented security institutions, and incomplete constitutional reforms collectively undermine public confidence while encouraging political actors to seek extra-constitutional means of resolving disputes. Conversely, countries that invested in institutional strengthening before competitive elections—including Liberia and Sierra Leone experienced considerably more peaceful democratic transitions despite emerging from devastating civil wars.

The article further demonstrates that electoral violence reflects both structural and proximate causes. Structural factors including winner-takes-all political systems, weak state institutions, unresolved grievances, militarised politics, and political exclusion create long-term conditions conducive to conflict. Proximate factors including electoral fraud, hate speech, misinformation, youth mobilisation, ethnic political manipulation, and partisan security forces—activate these structural vulnerabilities during electoral periods. Sustainable violence prevention therefore requires addressing both categories simultaneously.

Comparative case studies reinforce these conclusions. Kenya's 2007–2008 crisis illustrates how institutional failures and ethnic mobilisation can rapidly transform disputed elections into widespread communal violence. Côte d'Ivoire demonstrates the dangers of competing constitutional authorities and incomplete peace implementation. Conversely, Liberia and Sierra Leone illustrate how sequencing institutional reform, security-sector transformation, civic education, and reconciliation before elections substantially enhances democratic stability. South

Sudan, meanwhile, represents a contemporary example of the opportunities and risks associated with organising elections during an ongoing peacebuilding process.

From a policy perspective, the article argues that preventing electoral violence requires a comprehensive approach integrating constitutional reform, judicial independence, electoral management, security-sector reform, transitional justice, civic education, political inclusion, media responsibility, youth employment, and early-warning mechanisms. No single intervention can eliminate electoral violence. Rather, peaceful elections emerge through mutually reinforcing reforms that increase public confidence in democratic institutions while reducing incentives for political coercion.

The findings also contribute to broader debates within peacebuilding and democratisation studies. They challenge the assumption that elections alone consolidate peace and instead support the growing scholarly consensus that democratic institutions must be embedded within broader processes of state-building, reconciliation, and institutional transformation. Elections should therefore be regarded not as the beginning of democracy but as the culmination of sustained institutional development.

For South Sudan and other post-conflict societies, the implications are clear. Democratic elections can become powerful instruments for peace, legitimacy, and national unity, but only when supported by credible institutions, inclusive political settlements, professional security services, and genuine political commitment to constitutional governance. Where these foundations remain weak, elections risk reproducing rather than resolving conflict.

Ultimately, the success of elections in post-conflict societies depends less upon the mechanics of voting than upon the broader political and institutional environment within which democratic competition occurs. Building durable peace therefore requires transforming elections from contests over power into constitutional mechanisms through which political differences are managed peacefully, legitimately, and inclusively. Such transformation represents one of the defining challenges of democratic governance in the twenty-first century.

Author Biography

Adjunct Associate Professor at University of Juba and Founding Chairman of the Board of Directors, African Centre for Conflict Resolution and Peace Building based in Juba, South Sudan.

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