

A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS AND RESOLUTION

ELECTORAL CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE

by Jeff Fischer



Jeff Fischer in Afghanistan, 2002.

An electoral process is an alternative to violence as a means of achieving governance. However, when an electoral process is perceived as unfair, unresponsive or corrupt, its political legitimacy is compromised and stakeholders are motivated to go outside the established norms to achieve their political objectives. Electoral conflict and violence become tactics in political competition.

Even electoral processes that are fair, responsive and honest can be similarly victimized. In either scenario, stakeholders use conflict, violence and threat as means to determine, delay or otherwise influence the results of an election. Under this reasoning, when electoral conflict occurs, it is not a product of an electoral process; it is the breakdown of an electoral process.

Past thinking at stemming electoral conflict and violence has been deficient in that there is a lack of a common framework for research and practice. This connection between research and application has not occurred perhaps because the object of the research, electoral violence analysis, is different from the concern of the practitioners, which is election security.

Electoral conflict takes on different forms depending on when it occurs in an election timeline:

1. *Identity conflict*: conflict during the registration process, when refugees or other conflict-forced migrants cannot establish or re-establish their officially recognized identities.
2. *Campaign conflict*: rivals seek to disrupt the opponents' campaigns, intimidate voters and candidates, and use threats and violence to influence participation in the voting.
3. *Balloting conflict*: Election Day violence when rivalries are played out at the polling station.
4. *Results conflict*: disputes over election results or the inability of judicial mechanisms to resolve disputes in a fair, timely and transparent manner.
5. *Representation conflict*: occurs when elections are organized as "zero-sum" events and "losers" are left out of participation in governance.

Reviews of news accounts and observer reports yield five descriptive categories of electoral conflict, suggesting a variety of motives, victims and perpetrators.

1. *Voter-motivated conflict*: Voters challenge the State and claim unfairness in the election process.
2. *State-motivated conflict*: The State initiates conflicts with voters who challenge the results of elections.
3. *Rival-motivated conflict*: Political rivals are in conflict with each other for political gain.
4. *Insurgent-motivated conflict*: Forces capitalize on the visibility of an election to promote their insurgencies.
5. A combination of the categories above.

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In 2001, the IFES *ElectionGuide* listed major elections in 55 countries or entities. Adding the assembly elections in Kosovo and local elections in Pakistan brings the total to 57. Of these 57 locations, 31 are rated as “Free” by Freedom House. Two of these entities, East Timor and Kosovo, are a special category outside of the Freedom House rating because they were under international administration. The remaining 24 countries are classified as “Partly Free” or “Not Free.”

In a survey of these 2001 elections, instances of conflict or violence were identified in a total of 14 elections (24.5%); of these, three occurred in countries considered Free (21%) and 11 occurred in countries considered “Partly Free” or “Not Free” (79%).

Reports on these elections show that the primary source of electoral violence arose from rival-motivated conflict (72%).

Voter-motivated conflict occurred in 14% of the cases and State-motivated conflict occurred in 14% of the cases. However, in at least one case, Sri Lanka, the violence can also be considered as insurgent in nature.

In 2002, the IFES *ElectionGuide* listed major elections occurring in 75 countries. Electoral violence was identified in eight elections (11%). Of these eight conflict-plagued events, one was conducted in a country regarded as “Free” and seven occurred in “Partly Free or “Not Free” countries. It appears that the general profile of the conflict was State-motivated in three instances (37.5%), rival-motivated in three cases (37.5%) and insurgent-motivated in two cases (25%).

In 2003, the IFES *ElectionGuide* listed 83 countries holding major elections. Conflict was reported in ten of those cases (12%). All ten were countries regarded as “Not Free” or “Partly Free.” Reports show one state-motivated conflict (10%), five cases of rival-motivated conflict (50%), and four incidences of insurgent- or sectarian-motivated conflict (40%).

Six general observations can be made from this preliminary research:

First, there appears to be a link between the occurrences of electoral violence and the relative freedom of society. Closer examination of these cases also suggests that there are larger problems with the democratization of these countries than problematic elections alone. The Freedom House rating system includes consideration of civil liberties, rule of law, and other political rights, any of which could affect conflict.

Second, the State appears motivated and perhaps better able to initiate conflict against voters than voters can initiate against the State. Such a strong State role may also highlight imbalances in the election dispute resolution mechanisms that favor State interests.

Third, in each year surveyed, conflict among political rivals is the most common type of electoral violence. However,

this conflict may be the most responsive to mediation, political party building and conflict resolution initiatives.

Fourth, the instances of insurgent violence have grown with each year of the survey. Insurgent- and sectarian-motivated conflict played out during elections could prove to be the most difficult conflict to prevent. Compared with rival-motivated conflict where the object is governance, insurgent-motivated violence is unresponsive to such objectives and seeks only to disrupt, delay and diminish the democratic process.

Fifth, electoral conflict seems most likely to occur during the Campaign Conflict, Balloting Conflict and Results Conflict phases of the election timeline.

Sixth, the survey suggests that if a history of electoral conflict exists, there is a tendency for conflict to recur. If this final point holds true, then those practitioners mandated with providing election security in countries with repeated conflict may be able to better forecast the security requirements for future elections. The 2004 IFES *ElectionGuide* lists 67 countries and territories where elections will be held. Of this number, there are 14 locations (20.8%) where a history of conflict exists. It may serve as a worthwhile exercise to assign a “watch list” status to these elections and conduct more in-depth analysis.

Employing a common framework for research and security planning may produce a useful pathology of electoral conflict for practitioners. A better understanding of the root causes and flashpoints of conflict could in turn lead to promising initiatives to prevent, contain and resolve electoral violence.



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