

Understanding electoral violence: Lessons from Kenya



The 2007 general elections culminated in unprecedented levels of violence.

What do the consequences of this violence hold for the future of democracy in Kenya?

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Summary

In its last general elections held in 2007, Kenya experienced a number of electoral irregularities and allegations of rigging which culminated in unprecedented levels of electoral and ethnic violence. The abrupt eruption of violence left two important questions: *Were the electoral irregularities directly orchestrated by political actors?* and *What consequences did the violence leave on the future of democracy in Kenya?*

Using two nationally representative surveys conducted before and after the 2007 elections, we find that political parties strategically targeted vote-buying towards specific groups to weaken the support of their political rivals and to mobilize their own supporters. Furthermore, political parties instigated violence in various areas both before and after the elections. Overall findings suggest that violence can produce 'unintended consequences' for those who employed it, as victims of violence became more willing to use violence themselves. In addition, results indicate an increased risk that electorally related violence will recur in the forthcoming 2013 elections.

Policy conclusions

Stringent election monitoring must be put in place, and electoral institutions strengthened to avoid the electoral violence of 2007 recurring.

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Overview

In just a matter of weeks, Kenya was transformed from one of Africa's most stable democracies into chaos after the 2007 disputed elections. More than a thousand people died in the post-election conflict and over a quarter of a million people were forced to flee their homes once the presidential electoral results were announced.

This iiG project has two main objectives. Firstly, to identify whether the instigation of violence by political actors both before and after the elections was strategic. Secondly, to assess whether having experienced violence affected the stance of people on key issues such as the role of ethnic divisions in politics.

Project findings in more detail

The Centre for the Study of African Economies (CSAE) conducted two detailed nationally representative surveys of attitudes toward violence and socio-economic characteristics of Kenyans right before and after the 2007 elections. The data are based on a nationally and regionally representative sample of 1,207 people. These surveys are complemented by data on the death toll, estimated by the Commission in Kenya in charge of investigating the post-electoral conflict (CIPEV). We also monitored independently the Kenyan media on a daily basis over the period December 2007- March 2008 to track casualties due to political violence.

Using the CSAE surveys we find that both the two leading political parties contesting the 2007 Kenyan presidential elections used vote-buying practices extensively. Both parties targeted the less contested areas and potential swing or moderate voters with the aim of weakening the support for their main political rival. Political parties also instigated violence strategically, but avoided making direct threats. Instead, political actors focused on encouraging people to be violent, particularly in the more contested areas.

The CSAE surveys also reveal that the ordeal of 2007 reduced the desire of the general population for holding elections. Those affected by the violence that occurred after the elections at a personal level seem to be trapped in a vicious circle. After the elections it was found that they are more likely to prefer political parties be prevented from forming along ethnic or religious lines, but their own ethnic identity was strengthened and continued to be as important to them as it was before the elections in deciding which parties they most liked or disliked. Furthermore, those who were affected by violence at a personal level are more likely to support the use of violence in order to solve conflicts.

Conclusions

We found three important implications for the future of democracy. First, the reasons for the widespread vote-buying could be rooted in a prisoner's dilemma. All political parties would be better off financially if no-one bought votes, thereby making more resources available for the provision of public goods. However, given that no

politician can commit to *not* buying votes, the expensive dominant strategy is to vote-buy.

Second, while some of the electoral violence occurred opportunistically, we found that political actors choose to reinforce their chances of election by instigating violence. The areas with more closely contested elections received more reported threats; more instigation of violence; and reported a higher incidence of gangs with political links operating in their areas, both before and after the elections. The reason political actors targeted these areas was to prevent rival supporters from voting, using these tactics as a measure of 'damage control'. These practices were widespread and not limited to a specific party.

Third, the overall findings suggest that violence can produce 'unintended consequences' for those who employed it, as victims of violence became more willing to use violence themselves.

The forthcoming 2013 general elections will test whether the recent institutional reforms that Kenya has implemented will be enough to prevent electoral violence from recurring. The recent reports that suggest some political actors are instigating political violence once again ahead of the elections are alarming and suggest that the violent scenes witnessed by Kenya in 2007 may well be seen again.

For more detailed information

Gutiérrez-Romero, Roxana. (2012). "An Inquiry into the Use of Illegal Electoral Practices and Effects of Political Violence", Department of Economics, University of Oxford, [CSAE Working Paper Series 2012-16](http://www.csae.ox.ac.uk/workingpapers/pdfs/csae-wps-2012-16.pdf), available at <http://www.csae.ox.ac.uk/workingpapers/pdfs/csae-wps-2012-16.pdf>

Information about the Researcher

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Improving Institutions for Pro-Poor Growth (iiG) is an international network of applied research institutes across Africa, Asia, the USA and Europe, working to generate new insights about institutions' influence on pro-poor growth through an innovative programme of research, capacity building, and dissemination. iiG research is funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Open Society Institute. The views expressed in this document are not necessarily those of the funders. **Briefing paper prepared by Roxana Gutiérrez Romero**