# DIPLOMATIC INTERVENTIONS AND MITIGATING ELECTORAL VIOLENCE: THE CASE FOR ALIGNING DIPLOMACY WITH DEVELOPMENT

A REVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE

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*Diplomatic Interventions and Mitigating Electoral Violence:*
*The Case for Aligning Diplomacy with Development*

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# INTRODUCTION

Electoral violence is a recurring challenge in countries around the globe, one that can imperil US political, diplomatic, and economic interests. Over three-quarters (78%) of elections in countries that are considered as vulnerable to (electoral) violence experience violent events during elections.[1] Preventing and mitigating this type of violence requires dissuading or neutralizing key perpetrators and holding them accountable. It also requires shoring up electoral processes that, if unaddressed, can lead to perceptions of fraud and foment violence. US development aid and associated technical assistance to electoral management bodies to strengthen election integrity, enhance security planning, and deter fraud is therefore necessary to address violence risks; however, it is not sufficient. To mitigate the risks of violence, the United States must couple development assistance with diplomacy to understand actors' motivations and strategies, dissuade them from perpetrating violence, and incentivize them to participate peacefully. Political sections of US Embassies are therefore critical to foreseeing and preventing violence risks.

This brief outlines the role of diplomatic engagement in mitigating electoral violence risks. It provides an overview of key findings and relevant evidence drawn from two interdependent streams of recent scholarly literature: electoral misconduct, and conflict and political violence. It emphasizes the importance of long-term diplomatic engagement; highlights the difference between political efforts and the more technical, capacity-focused efforts undertaken by development actors; and concludes with a discussion of the types of diplomatic interventions that appear effective in mitigating electoral violence.

# KEY FINDINGS

## Finding #1: Mitigating Electoral Violence (MEV) requires a strategic commitment by US Missions' political sections.

The challenge of electoral violence is not simply a technical problem but a political one. There are several instances where both capacity building and political interventions (or some combination of the two) fail to mitigate electoral violence because of the weak enforcement potential of interventions. Mitigating violence is primarily about understanding politics and addressing the underlying power dynamics that nourish political behavior and preferences. Diplomats, more so than any other actor, are well placed to publicly, and credibly, bind state actors to peaceful conduct of elections. They can structure behind-the-scenes deals or compromises to enable political transitions, to coopt opposition elites, or to illustrate the salience of specific interests and/or grievances to all parties. They are also particularly well positioned to address drivers of electoral violence that lie outside the state, such as neighboring states fomenting violence to support their favorites in an overseas election.

Successful MEV requires continuous, long-term diplomatic engagements. Scholarly literature suggests that perceptions and short-term expectations are far easier to alter than underlying motives, which entail a longer-term engagement. This long-term perspective, by design, is better suited for diplomatic missions than development agencies. Diplomatic missions can leverage their relationships, networks, and resources to steer parties away from violence, and to shape narratives about democratic elections that both incentivize good behavior and deter bad behavior. Development agencies may not always have access to high-level strategic partners and political relationships that can alter long-term calculus of political parties. But, diplomatic corps are particularly well positioned to access such high-level political relationships to reduce the available incentives for violence.

International MEV interventions – to be effective – require, overtly or tacitly, official buy-in from the state. Under most circumstances, state actors are more likely to support interventions that are designed to prevent violence by non-state actors (such as opposition political parties) than they are to support programs that seek to prevent violence from the state. There is, however, overwhelming evidence that most of the electoral violence is committed by state actors.[2] Mitigating electoral violence thus entails not only using rigorous evidence to design programs -from setting up early warning systems to building capacity of an electoral commission - but also investing in key relationships with state actors that shape the contours of politics. Diplomats are best placed to leverage such relationships.

## Finding #2: Diplomatic MEV efforts are political in character and separate from – but should complement – technical, capacity-building aid efforts.

Political efforts engage the underlying grievances that are sustained by the power dynamics in a society.[3] These efforts include initiatives such as strategic public relations and communication that call for peace; deliberate engagement with youth and emerging leaders; peace pacts; dialogues; and mediation. These initiatives aim to alter perceptions about the utility of violence as an election strategy, provide alternatives for dispute resolution, and build trust between key stakeholders in a way that responds to the underlying power dynamics.[4]

Diplomatic mediation and externally led (by the United States) dialogue between groups have been found to be effective in diffusing tensions and preventing the escalation of violence.[5] Trust building initiatives have also helped key stakeholders avoid violence in contexts where the Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) were seen as inclusive and engaging with all actors.[6] This positive effect was documented in the relatively peaceful elections in Malawi (2004) and Zanzibar (2005), whereas, the lack of inclusiveness of the EMBs in Ethiopia (2005) resulted in an election that was marred by violence.[7] Attitude transforming initiatives such as bringing electoral actors together in dialogue fora have also been seen as effective in Ghana (National Peace Council and Regional and District Peace Advisory Councils) and Sierra Leone (Inter-party Consultative Committee).[8]

# Finding #3: Technical assistance focuses largely on building capacity of electoral actors, primarily the electoral management bodies (EMBs), security sector (police), and civil society organizations.

The aim of such assistance, implemented largely through training programs, is to organize an election process that is credible, and whose outcome will be recognized as fair by both the winners and losers.[9] The underlying logic behind such capacity building and technical assistance efforts is that the disadvantaged (those who lost the election) are likely to attribute any gaps in election planning or coordination to political machinations. Such grievances can stoke violence.[10]

There is evidence that lack of confidence in the integrity of electoral management institutions is routinely associated with electoral violence.[11] Technical assistance to EMBs is a useful way to improve public confidence in elections and reduce the likelihood of violence.[12] Evidence also suggests that technical assistance to the security sector, EMBs, and voter education programs can reduce the uncertainty that elections introduce.[13] For instance, training the police with effective (and non-lethal) crowd control approaches that are consistent with democratic norms, and enhancing the competence of electoral management bodies, can engender trust in the ability of the state to organize credible elections. In a way, such efforts address a typical coordination problem that the state and non-state actors need to confront: key actors often lack the skills and the training to communicate their competence in organizing elections and resolving disagreements to the public.[14]

Similarly, voter education programs can help citizens better understand the electoral process, especially candidate and voter registration, polling station protocols, and election timeframe (including a timeline for election results) that would address any perceived misunderstanding.[15]  If state institutions are weak or partisan, or perceived as such, citizens are less likely to trust the elections[16], which often results in violence.[17] This is evidenced by the outbreaks of violence around recent elections in Kenya[18]; Malawi[19]; Uganda[20]; Afghanistan[21]; Nigeria[22]; Azerbaijan, Zimbabwe and Iran.[23]

# Finding #4: Political and diplomatic tools are particularly effective in mitigating or preventing electoral violence by state actors (which accounts for the majority of electoral violence).

There is compelling evidence to suggest that capacity-building interventions led by development actors reduce violence by non-state actors (in particular, the opposition political parties and affiliated groups), whereas attitude-transforming strategies, which are more amenable to diplomatic intervention, are associated with a reduction in violence by state actors and their allies.[24] Since a majority of violence around elections is orchestrated by state actors, the role of diplomatic mediation/reporting/observation in violence mitigation cannot be overemphasized.

## Relevant diplomatic approaches to MEV that are supported by the evidence include:

Independent inquiries and fact-finding missions[25] serve as mechanisms to highlight and verify abuses, irregularities, and violence, and deter key actors from repeating their crimes. They can be organized by deploying observers to a fact-finding mission; setting up a Commission of Inquiry; or appointing a Special Rapporteur. Examples include:

— A fact-finding mission led by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to interrogate deaths of Ghanaian migrants in Gambia. The mission helped mend relations between Ghana and the Gambia.[26]

— International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala in 2007 to dismantle criminal networks.[27]

— Mission to Darfur in 2008 to diffuse tensions between Sudan and Chad.[28]

— Mission to Côte D'Ivoire in 2011 to assess post-election violence.[29]

Preventive Diplomacy refers to any "action to prevent disputes from arising between parties, to prevent existing disputes from escalating into conflicts, and to limit the spread of the latter when they occur".[30] **IRI defines preventive diplomacy in the context of mitigating electoral violence as any act by a government or a multilateral organization that aims to prevent or mitigate election-related violence by changing the calculus and behavior of perpetrators, and encouraging peaceful conduct of politics among key stakeholders.**

Preventive diplomacy that focuses on mitigating violence around elections can be disaggregated into private and public forms.

*Private preventive diplomacy* involves US diplomats meeting with key actors (potential perpetrators) to dissuade them from orchestrating violence or encourage them to participate peacefully.  For example, US diplomats might hold private meetings with political parties who are understood as planning to foment violence. In these private meetings, US diplomats might convey messages to dissuade and deter party elites from organizing violence. These messages vary with actor and context, but they might include potential penalties such as visa bans, travel restrictions, and asset freezes that political parties or their support network of elites could face should they incite violence. These messages may also entail benefits that these elites could reap should they opt to participate peacefully. Some of these may include elevating their standing or prestige in their communities and financial opportunities if the post-election period is peaceful. Due to the sensitive and inherently secure nature of these meetings, it is difficult to summarize evidence on their efficacy. Nevertheless, such private sessions are an essential form of preventive diplomacy focused on supporting peaceful elections.

*Public preventive diplomacy* involves US diplomats, alone or in partnership with allies, issuing public statements, convening meetings, or employing other tools - all in the public eye - to dissuade actors from perpetrating violence and encourage peaceful conduct of elections. For example, the United States regularly issues statements, often signed with allied governments, urging contestants to participate peacefully in elections. The United States also uses its good offices to organize meetings, open to the press, where it facilitates opposing sides in signing pacts to conduct their affairs amicably.  A lesser known, but potentially, equally impactful, form of public diplomacy involves diplomats traveling to likely violence hotspots to meet with local officials and civil society representatives to gather their views on risks surrounding the upcoming elections. While the meetings might be conducted in private, this is a form of public diplomacy in so far as citizens - and potential orchestrators of violence - are aware that the United States representatives are invested in a free and safe election. Traditional development efforts

such as civic and voter education programs and strengthening the EMBs can support and augment these diplomatic initiatives, but they are not a substitute for them.

Public diplomacy is the most widely understood form of preventive diplomacy since it can be readily seen by citizens, the media, government actors, and the international community. Examples include:

— The appointment of the Panel of the Wise (PoW), i.e., five highly credible African persons with outstanding track record of contributions to peace and security, who can be deployed on peace-making missions. The PoW have been engaged in several contexts such as Guinea (2010), the DRC (2011), Senegal (2012), Sierra Leone and Ghana (2012), Egypt (2013), Kenya (2013), and Tunisia (2014).[31]

— Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was a key institution to mediate disputes in Guinea in 2009 and 2010.[32]

— The African Union (AU) Panel of Eminent African Personalities, led by Kofi Annan, mediated in 2008 to facilitate talks between the Kenyan government and the opposition in the aftermath of the contentious and violent elections in 2007.[33]

— The Organization of American States (OAA) facilitated dialogue among key stakeholders in Guyana and contributed to peaceful elections in 2006.[34]

— Preventive diplomacy by US State Department was instrumental to brokering a diplomatic compromise in Afghanistan in 2009 (preventing a re-run of the disputed election), 2014 (structuring a power-sharing arrangement between the two leading candidates)[35] and 2019 (preventing escalation of violence by endorsing the election result).

— In the wake of the 2015 and 2019 General Elections in Nigeria, the United States Government declared its intolerance for electoral violence by announcing strict repercussions and consequences for perpetrators, including visa and travel restrictions.[36]

— The Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act: a diplomatic tool to tacitly warn foreign government officials of consequences (sanctions) if they commit human rights offenses in the conduct of elections, including state-sponsored election violence against civilians.[37] It has been used against officials in Zimbabwe, Venezuela, and Saudi Arabia.

— External communication to shape narratives on the electoral process and imposing reputational costs (followed by political and economic costs) for those who perpetrate violence. These efforts include publicly naming and shaming perpetrators of violence to prevent recurrence of violence; condemning specific acts of violence from the past to prevent violence around next elections; making statements after elections about electoral irregularities and violence to deter post-election violence. Some of the recent examples include USG and EU officials condemning post-election violence in Congo in 2016; US Ambassador to Bangladesh (Earl Miller) tweeting his support for election observers and urging political parties to act peacefully and responsibly in Bangladesh in 2018; US State Department designating Officials and Military Units in Response to Escalating Violence in Myanmar in 2021.

# CONCLUSION

## Diplomacy and Development Assistance Must Work in Tandem

Violence, threats of violence, and intimidation tarnish the integrity and credibility of elections around the world. Incumbents who are uncertain about their prospects for victory and who are not bound by institutional constraints often resort to violence and fraud. In doing so, they provoke violent post-election protests from their opponents. In many cases, these protests are met with the brute force of state security forces. Addressing these spirals of electoral violence requires a skillful use of diplomatic and development interventions, deployed in tandem, with both an immediate and a long-term ambition: to mitigate violence around elections, and to enable institutional changes that would address the underlying distribution of power in a society.

Development programming interventions can inform diplomacy by sharing assessments of political dynamics and trends in local sentiments about key political actors, often measured by extensive polling that accompanies such programming. This data can be crucial for diplomatic missions in calibrating their approach to elections and in shaping their response to plausible violence. In turn, diplomatic missions can leverage their high-level relationships with host governments to call for a level playing field among all candidates, impose prohibitive costs to undertake violence, and thus improve the effectiveness of development programming. Development interventions, especially those establishing early warning networks, can augment diplomatic efforts by extending information gathering to local contacts and organizations. These entities can then, as appropriate, share projected risks with US officials, and representatives from other governments, who can use diplomatic engagement to diffuse tensions (e.g., by engaging both sides or potential perpetrators) or enhance local response (e.g., by pushing the government to do more).

Traditional development programming interventions have been useful in mitigating violence from non-state actors, but it is state actors who orchestrate most amount of electoral violence. There is thus a pronounced need to align state prerogatives – normatively, organizationally, and operationally – with the popular will of the people over whom it enjoys sovereignty. Unlike any other stakeholder, US diplomats enjoy access to high level political relationships that are critical to altering the behavior of state actors and structuring such alignments. Employing this diplomatic leverage is integral to both institutionalizing a culture of non-violent resolution of political disagreements in the long term, and to creating conditions for success of the development interventions in the short term.

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