



POLICY BRIEF

ELECTORAL VIOLENCE PREVENTION: STRATEGIES THAT WORK

BACKGROUND

Nearly all countries in today's world, hold elections to allow for the peaceful transfer of power. However, elections held outside of consolidated democracies are often accompanied by substantial violence. Of course, that is now debatable given the last couple of days in the US.

Electoral violence is usually triggered during the electoral period, when the party in a strong or weak position finds that the other party is unilaterally setting the rules of the game for its own benefit. The most common trigger events in African elections are the compilation of the electoral register, the establishment of the electoral administration, during vote counting.

Electoral violence is expressed through actions such as the use of invectives, intimidation of opponents, voters, or electoral officials; ballot stuffing; exclusion of communities or even murder. Following the 2007 general election in Kenya which left more than 1,000 Kenyans dead and more than half a million displaced a CSO, Una Hakika and other "peace-tech" organizations started leveraging technology to function as election monitors, fact-checkers and early warning systems.

In Ghana, which happily has not had any significant election related violence, Penplusbytes and others have leveraged tech to serve as a monitoring tool and an early warning system, ensuring that people can verify information and hence, squash the disinformation that tends to exist and thrive around elections. This year, it appears that despite the security forces' best efforts, the hotspots in Ghana have more than tripled.

PENPLUSBYTES WEBINAR SERIES-A FIRST STEP TO APPROACHING THE ISSUES

Penplusbytes Webinar series discussed ideas on how to curb electoral violence focusing on machine and human collaborations. These discussions which captured the attention of nearly 2000 people in Ghana and those within the diaspora had security analysts, governance experts as well as tech experts who have many years of experience in the field of elections banding together to proffer ideas and solutions. We believe strongly that the results of these stakeholder thought-sharing forums are critical and worth the time and attention of the government, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), donor agencies, and every citizen who believes in the rights of citizens to vote during elections and peaceful transfers of power towards deepening our democracy as a country.

The 15th Webinar titled Elections 2020: Curbing Electoral Violence through New Digital Technologies featured Professor Kwesi Aning, Director at the Faculty of Academic Affairs and Research at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC), Nana Kwabena Aborampah Mensah the Team Leader of Security Sector Governance and Local and Urban Governance at the Centre for Democratic Governance (CDD-Ghana), and Mr. Kingston Tagoe who is VP Products at Rancard.

The 16th Webinar titled Elections 2020: Electoral Violence and Prevention: What Works? brought on board Mr. Adib Saani a security analyst and the Executive Director of Jatikay Centre for Human Security and Peace Building and Sheikh Labaran Salifu Barry a Social Researcher, a Developmental policy and security analyst and also the Head of Intelligence at the Ghana Ports and Harbours Authority.

KEY ISSUES/CONCERNS

1

Clamp down on Vigilante Groups

Vigilante groups are destroying the fabric of governance. It has become evident that the activities of these groups that are supported by political parties and politicians behind the scenes, tend to cause tensions and violence which could have been completely avoided if we were enforcing the laws without the influence of powers behind them.

2

Manage Invectives in Digital Spaces

The use of abusive words or hate speech in both mainstream media and on online platforms need to be checked in order for it not to get physical. It uses of cartoons, and images that are used with the sole purpose of defaming people especially within the political spheres is an issue that policy actor speak against and take policy actions that clamp down on such activities which could eventually get personal and lead to violence such activities which could eventually get personal and lead to violence

3

Strict Regulations on Small Arms

Ghana is awash with small arms. A 2019 report by the New Times Corporation indicated that the Ghana National Commission on small Arms and Light Weapons at their last count had 2.3million small arms in circulation in Ghana. The statistics of the Ghana National Commission on Small Arms and Light weapons also showed that many people in possession of arms may be having them illegally. Analysts fear that terrorist groups will take advantage of the porous borders in the West African sub-region to smuggle arms across borders to harm innocent citizens and cause instability. The probability of this happening during election periods is very high as tensions are already heightened. This worrying trend therefore calls for immediate policy action that either makes it more stringent for people to acquire small arms or properly legalise and regulate the activities of local gun manufacturers.

4

Critical Observation & Analysis of Electoral Violence in Neighbouring Countries

Neighbouring countries such as Togo and Cote d'Ivoire have become extremely fragile and prone to electoral violence. This might have a spill over effect on Ghana. Hence, policy actors need to take a critical look at these unfortunate happenings, do proper analysis of their major causes and put in place relevant and realistic measures that will guard against such electoral violence in Ghana.

5

Punitive Measures against Electoral Violence Perpetrators

Ghana's inability to take action against criminals who engage in electoral violence is a concern raised by stakeholders during conversations on practical ways to prevent electoral violence in the country. In light of this, policy action should look at effective ways of enforcing the laws to serve as deterrents to potential violence causers. For instance, there is a concern that cyber laws exist in Ghana but criminals still circumvent the laws which needs critical attention if we want to experience absolute violent-free elections.

KEY ISSUES/CONCERNS

6

Dynamic Security Agencies/Personnel

Security enforcers should be dynamic to counter the schemes of criminals who disregard the law and cause mayhem during and after elections. Similarly, the autonomy of the Ghana Police Service should be ensured so that they feel empowered to enforce the laws where necessary, without interference from political powers.

7

Fact checking of Online/Offline Content

Advances in technology have now made possible new digital applications that enable content users and consumers to verify the authenticity of the media content published in mainstream media (Radio, TV, Newspapers) and new media (social media platforms, websites and other internet sources). Thus, policy action needs to be taken to ensure that citizens apply these technological means of fact checking information both offline and online before they use or share with their significant others. Towards this end, policy action should be directed at initiatives that truncate conversations and content that seek to fuel electoral violence especially online where there is less user-censorship.

8

Prioritize Intelligence

Intelligence is the proactive use of information; we need to present policy makers with intelligence on how they can protect our country. We need collaborative efforts of analytical tech savvy people to study intelligence and available data on how to curb electoral violence. We need to review our security strategies at both individual and national levels and make peacebuilding long term and not on an ad hoc basis or only relevant during elections.

9

Use of Opinion Leaders as Peace Campaigners

Opinion leaders are more influential in behaviour change campaigns. This is because they are very revered in their respective communities. Hence, the need to target them for effective peacebuilding ahead of elections.

10

Early Compilation of Voters Register

The compilation of the voters' register for 2020 elections was contentious. These contentions and issues that are framed around it have the likelihood of lowering trust and thus impacting the acceptance of the results of the elections. Therefore, to avoid this, a decision to compile new voters register should be timed to happen at least one full year ahead of an election. This is particularly essential because it will give the EC enough room to correct any anomalies in the voters register ahead of the elections to prevent any tensions that may arise from the fear of people not finding their names in the voters register, an issue that has a high tendency to bring about violence before, during and after elections.



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CONCLUSIONS

Indeed, elections that are characterised by violence defeat the very purpose for which they are conducted which is, to deepen the democracy of the country. Violence has never brought about the change in development that people seek but rather destroyed lives which are most essential to the development of any nation. Therefore, these policy actions require the unfettered attention of policy actors to ensure that the ongoing and future elections in Ghana are totally violent-free.

ABOUT PENPLUSBYTES



Penplusbytes is a not-for-profit organization driving change through innovations in four key areas: using new digital technologies to enable good governance and accountability, investigating new media which drive innovations, enhancing oversight for effective utilisation of mining, oil and gas revenue and conducting research to improve health and environmental outcomes.

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