

Conflict and Elections Brief

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Politics is a process of conflict; where groups compete for authority and the control of scarce resources, there is necessarily tension between interests. When political systems fail to manage conflicting interests, conflict may express itself violently. Autocracies usually manage conflict by suppressing it, denying social groups other than the faction controlling the state, the opportunity to express their political interests, or even to exist as political organizations. In contrast, democracies seek to manage conflicting interests by allowing them to compete according to agreed upon rules, mediated by institutions. The mechanism for political competition in democratic regimes is multiparty elections. While electoral systems can prevent conflict by offering potential combatants the opportunity to compete for power or express grievances peacefully, they also carry the risk that the high stakes of an election cycle will prompt political actors to turn to violence in defence of their interests. A democracy can only be consolidated when the sole legitimate method of competing for state power is through participation in democratic institutions, and no political actors see the recourse to violence as a feasible strategy for gaining power or influencing the political process.

Since the early 1990's, most of the states of southern Africa have attempted transitions from autocracy, single party, or minority government to multiparty democracy. The region's newly-created democratic institutions have had both successes and failures managing conflict. While democratic transitions have helped to end violent conflicts and created functioning systems of peaceful political competition, and the occurrence of large-scale violence and civil war has decreased, several countries have experienced election-related violence. The continuing use of violence or the threat of violence as a strategy in political competition demonstrates that in most Southern African countries, democratic institutions are not yet so entrenched that they have become 'the only game in town'.

Causes of Violent Conflict

Violent conflict can take the form of intra-state war, where factions battle to establish the terms of a new political dispensation, or it can occur within the boundaries of an existing political arrangement. Countries in Southern Africa have experienced both of these forms of violent conflict. Since the early 1990's, there have been civil wars in Mozambique, Angola, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Large-scale conflicts have tended to take on a regional character, involved other states in the region without formally declared inter-state wars or direct battles between state armies. There has also been significant political violence in South Africa, Lesotho, and Zimbabwe, and to a lesser extent Zambia and Zanzibar.

These conflicts have had various causes. Deliberate destabilisation by cold war superpowers and the minority governments of South Africa and Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) played an important role in civil wars in Angola and Mozambique, and intervention by Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda helped to trigger the Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) civil war. Violent conflict has also been caused by, or been sustained by, grievances against oppressive governments, the motivation to gain control of resources, ethnic rivalry, and destructive strategies intentionally employed by political elites. In most of Southern Africa's violent conflicts, multiple causes interact in complex ways.

Struggling economies and weak states have shaped the character of violent conflict in the region. The weakness of Southern Africa's economies increases the chances of conflict, because the lack of economic opportunities outside of the state dramatically heightens the stakes of electoral competition for elites. Poor economic performance also leads to inadequate resource bases for many states, which contributes to weak institutional capacity and the inability to exercise effective control over the whole of their territories. The inability of the police and the army to suppress unrest can increase incentives for insurgency, as in Lesotho in 1998, where post-election unrest was only suppressed following military intervention by two much stronger states, South Africa and Botswana. The DRC is an extreme example of state weakness; there, a collapsing state has been unable to maintain its territorial integrity, leading to a spiral of civil and regional war, and further collapse.

In some cases, especially in states with histories of one-party government, it can be difficult to distinguish the strength or weakness of the state from the strength or weakness of the ruling party. In Zimbabwe, the rapid decline in the popularity and even the perceived legitimacy of the ZANU-PF government has coincided with the collapse of the economy and state revenue. Generally, the survival tactics of threatened regimes, such as the manipulation of democratic processes, exclusionist politics, and divisive ethnic appeals, combined with frequent contestation of election results by opposition parties, strains weak and unconsolidated democratic institutions.

Elections as a Conflict Transformation and Management Strategy

Three SADC countries—Mozambique, Angola, and South Africa—have attempted transitions from large-scale internal conflict to multiparty elections during the 1990's. South Africa's elections in 1994 were part of a larger transition plan that replaced the violent and violently contested Apartheid government with majority rule. Mozambique held its first multiparty elections in 1994, bringing to an end 17 years of civil war. After 10 years and two subsequent elections, that transition appears to have forged a durable peace. In Angola, a UN supervised election in 1992 failed to end the decades old civil war, when UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi refused to accept his party's defeat. In each case, multiparty elections were an essential aspect of the peace plan—they offered

insurgents the opportunity to compete for state power peacefully, to “trade bullets for ballots.”

In the Angolan and Mozambican cases, this approach involved extensive support from the United Nations as well as bilateral donors. International intervention involved mediated negotiation, a ceasefire, peacekeeping, demobilization of the warring armies, establishment of electoral infrastructure, and the organization of post-conflict elections. Post conflict elections are a complex undertaking, seeking not only to select a legitimate, accountable government, but also to promote reconciliation between the combatants and to transform a violent conflict into peaceful political competition. For post-conflict elections to contribute to stable peace and sustainable democracy, a country in transition must first seek to create the prerequisites for democracy, including full demilitarisation, an appropriate electoral system, and competent electoral administration. Angola's 1992 disaster can be blamed in part on the failure to fully disarm and demobilise the warring armies prior to the election. The international community recognised that failure, and made the disarmament of Renamo and Frelimo a priority prior to Mozambique's elections in 1994.

Following a ceasefire in April 2002, spurred by the death of Jonas Savimbi in February, Angola appears better prepared than ever before to secure durable peace. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, a South African-brokered peace plan between the government and rebel factions has produced an agreement to form a government of national unity, and the withdrawal of foreign armies. If those agreements result in successful transitions to peace, Southern Africa will find itself without a large-scale violent conflict for the first time in decades. Despite the weaknesses of democracy in the region, it appears that the disappearance of cold war rivalry, the elimination of destabilising minority governments, and Southern Africa's new era of multiparty elections has created the necessary conditions for the resolution of intrastate wars.

Elections as a Trigger for Violence in Unconsolidated Democracies

While elections have helped Southern African countries to manage transitions from war to peace, they have also triggered smaller-scale violence. While election cycles themselves are not root causes of conflict, they create space for political activity, and increase the stakes of political competition such that in unconsolidated democracies, existing tensions may find violent expression. The risk of violence is particularly high when inappropriate electoral systems are chosen, or when elections are poorly managed. In Lesotho 1993, a first-past-the-post electoral system produced a lopsided victory for the previously outlawed Basotho Congress Party (BCP). The BCP won all 65 seats in the National Assembly, and the previously ruling Basotho National Party was denied representation in parliament despite winning a substantial minority of the vote. The resulting tension led to an attempted coup in 1994. Similar tensions after the 1998 elections resulted in public unrest and eventual military intervention by regional powers. The electoral system has since been changed to a mixed proportional system to allow

for a more representative national assembly. Proportional representation systems tend to produce more inclusive outcomes, and may therefore lower the risk of conflict.

Election cycles can trigger violence even when electoral systems are appropriately designed. Prior to South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, the high stakes of the transition period heightened existing tensions and deepened violent conflict, particularly between the African National Congress (ANC) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). While South Africa's conflict never reached the level of full-scale war, it resulted in approximately 16,000 violent deaths between 1990 and 1994, a significant increase in fatalities over the already high level of violence of the preceding decades. In other cases, governments that have had multiparty elections thrust upon them may nominally accept the electoral process but, if faced with the possibility of defeat, turn to violence to ensure victory: During Zimbabwe's 2000 parliamentary election and 2002 presidential election cycles, media reports described a campaign of violence and intimidation carried out by the threatened ZANU-PF regime, which had not had to contend with a serious electoral rival since taking power in 1980, against the opposition MDC and its supporters. There were also reports of violence in retaliation by MDC supporters.

Even when electoral competition has not lead to violence, the threat of violence remains a pervasive force shaping politics in some Southern African countries. While Mozambique is considered a model of a successful transition from civil war to functioning democracy, the terms of that country's transition to peace and democracy continue to shape the process of governing, ten years after the ceasefire. While Renamo is excluded from the formal structures of power in Mozambique's government, it consistently uses the threat of non-participation in parliament to force Frelimo into elite negotiation, where it seeks concessions. In South Africa, the threat of renewed unrest in KwaZulu-Natal wins concessions for Inkatha from the ANC. Throughout the region, opposition groups see the threat of force, disorder, or non-participation as a feasible alternative to democratic institutions and as a means to influence the political process. While the actual recourse to violence is relatively rare, the persistent importance of the threat of violence is evidence that democracy remains unconsolidated.

Conclusion

With the notable exception of the DRC, where the outcome of the most recent peace agreement is still uncertain, all of Southern Africa's civil wars have ended or are ending. A large majority of political competition in the region now proceeds peacefully. This relative peace is a significant achievement for a region where several states have long histories of intra-state war or other forms of political violence, and it is an important milestone on the road to democratic consolidation. But despite an encouraging trend towards peace, recourse to violence or the threat of violence to gain or maintain control of the state remains a feasible strategy for influencing the political process in several countries. The remaining violent conflicts in Southern Africa are both a consequence of unconsolidated democratic institutions and a threat the future consolidation of those

institutions. In some cases, reducing violence will depend on strengthening political prerequisites such as appropriate electoral systems, and strong, independent electoral management. In other Southern African states, a permanent solution to violent conflict requires a much more complex set of solutions—economic opportunities must improve, and the resource base, legitimacy and institutional capacity of weak states must be rebuilt before peaceful electoral competition can replace violence as the only legitimate way to compete for state power.