



# Electoral violence: causes and prevention

*Key findings from AFSC's Shared Security, Shared Elections report*

## Why do elections become violent?

Violence around elections increasingly captures the attention of donors and practitioners, who invest growing resources into enhancing the safety and security of democratic practice around the world. Concerned at continuing patterns of violence around elections, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) recently commissioned a study of the causes of electoral violence and best practices for its prevention.

Our research showed that electoral violence is more likely when:

**1. Political systems are based on patronage and clientelism.**

In political systems in which formal political institutions are superseded by informal relationships based on the exchange of resources and political loyalty, political supporters seem willing to perpetrate election violence in support of their preferred candidates.

**2. Electoral management bodies, such as electoral commissions, are weak.**

This is due to their importance in establishing credible elections.

**3. Ongoing conflicts over land or other issues or resources go unresolved.**

While this relationship can have several explanations, one appears to be the tendency for politicians to adopt the grievances of conflicting factions into their campaigns.

In addition, we found that international election observation missions may decrease the likelihood of pre-election violence, but may increase the likelihood of post-election violence if they expose attempts at election fraud.

A growing number of studies also find significant differences in how men and women experience election violence. However, AFSC found that too few policy interventions in the field explicitly take these differences into account.

# How can we make elections safe?

Based on a literature review and interviews with practitioners in Kenya, Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Sri Lanka, AFSC found that electoral violence prevention efforts are more successful when:

- 1. They are implemented under the structure of a strong coalition or consortium.**  
This allows civil society organizations and state agencies to avoid program redundancies and benefit from the lessons and information produced by one another's projects.
- 2. They can closely involve the political parties and candidates in their interventions.**  
While this is not entirely within the control of field practitioners—political elites may choose not to participate in peace programs for many reasons—when programs do engage political elites. Interviewed participants felt that their programs had considerably more impact.
- 3. Practitioners are able to access and adopt methods successfully used in other countries.**  
Successful investments in secure elections in one country can have positive spillover effects in other countries via transnational civil society networks.
- 4. Practitioners have access to geographical violent incident mapping during the campaigns.**  
Both civil society actors and state organizations can best target their resources when they have access to accurate, up-to-date information on violent events in their respective countries as well as information on hotspot areas most likely to experience various types of election violence.
- 5. They are integrated with a long-term peacebuilding strategy.**  
Many efforts to address violence around elections begin 6-18 months before elections, and conclude shortly after polls close. These are more of crisis response approaches than they are preventative approaches. Prevention strategies around elections need to be carefully integrated with long-term efforts to address root causes.

## Key findings for donors

Our research suggests that donors should consider placing additional resources into three areas:

- 1. Program follow-up funds.**  
Multiple practitioners in each country stated that there was not enough funding available from donors for follow-up programs and the continuation of violence prevention programs after the election cycle ended.
- 2. Long-term youth programming.**  
Practitioners also noted that more resources were needed for long-term programs that engaged those youth who were likely to participate in electoral violence, as well as women and girls, who are most at risk when elections become violent.
- 3. Police reform.**  
One key commonality across all cases under study was the very limited success of police training to handle protests and demonstrations, as well as skirmishes between supporters of rival parties.



To see the full report, visit [afsc.org/electoralviolencereport](https://afsc.org/electoralviolencereport)

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) is a Quaker organization that includes people of various faiths who are committed to social justice, peace, and humanitarian service. Its work is based on the Quaker belief in the worth of every person and faith in the power of love to overcome violence and injustice.



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