Zambia Electoral Analysis Project (ZEAP) Briefing paper series

Briefing Paper 4: Electoral Violence in Zambia

Findings

- Political and electoral violence has been increasing in Zambia, in the period 2006-2016
- The 2016 elections were broadly seen to be the most violent in recent memory, leading to the establishment of a Commission of Inquiry into Voting Patterns and Electoral Violence.
- Increases in electoral violence may be connected to enhanced levels of regional polarisation.
- Zambian voters' fear of violence is at an exceptionally high level with potentially detrimental effects on political participation, electoral legitimacy and political equality.
- In 2021, the Electoral Commission of Zambia (ECZ) has moved to respond to high levels of violence in some constituencies by suspending campaigns for 14 days.
- Violence is largely organised through groups of "cadres", who are linked to key politicians within parties. Cadres are mobilised to fight both intra- and inter-party battles.
- Electoral violence has been perpetrated with impunity. The police force has systematically failed to prevent cadre violence committed by the ruling party.
- Post-electoral violence is particularly likely if the governing party claims victory with a small margin, and the opposition challenges both the integrity of the election and the results announced.
- There is a significant risk that if the opposition wins the presidential election the ruling party will not accept defeat, triggering a sustained crisis in which both government repression and opposition protests would be heightened.
- Political actors need to refrain from the use of hate speech, labelling and stereotyping against rival parties, usually on the basis of ethnicity; and must be encouraged to promote peaceful campaigning.

Policy Implications:

- Key reform areas following the elections should be police reforms, the ECZ, and legislative change including the repeal of the Public Order Act.
- All political parties must be encouraged to promote intra-party and inter-party democracy and desist from politicising government institutions.
- Pressure must be brought to bear on the police and other security forces to enforce the rule of law around the elections.

1. Electoral violence in Zambia: historical background

Zambia is not a country that has been historically known for high levels of conflict during elections (Straus and Taylor 2012). By and large, Zambia has maintained elite consensus on matters of national unity. Nevertheless, more or less isolated events of election violence have occurred in relation to most elections, even before the most recent introduction to multipartyism in 1991.

During the first republic (1964-1972), violence occurred mostly between the dominant United National Independence Party (UNIP) and its main competitor, the African National Congress (ANC). Even in the period of UNIP one-party rule (1972-1991), internal candidate nominations sometimes became violent in collisions between national and local political interests (Baylies and Szeftel 1992; Macola 2018).

Elections in the early Zambian multi-party state were mostly peaceful, especially in the period 1991-96. However, there is a general consensus that electoral violence has been a steadily growing problem and reached alarming levels in the 2006 to 2016 period. Electoral violence is increasingly perceived as a factor affecting the conduct, quality, and outcome of elections. Violent escalation in the mid-2000s signalled a breakdown in the national consensus and was prompted by increased national-level competition and entrenched regional, ideological, and religious divisions.

The 2016 election is generally regarded as Zambia's most violent election to date, featuring both significant pre- and post-electoral violence. Violence in the 2016 election was mainly a result of inter-party conflict, but intra-party conflicts were also recorded (Goldring and Wahman 2018).

The campaign also featured significant events of state repression (including a widely covered deadly police shooting of an opposition supporter in Lusaka), but also police inaction on numerous cases of violence. Escalating electoral violence prompted a presidential Commission of Inquiry after the 2016 election to study voting patterns and electoral violence during the previous decade.

The Commission, appointed with retired Justice Munalula Lisimba as its chairperson, was motivated by the fear that violence appeared to be escalating to the point where civil unrest was deemed a possible threat to human security.

2. The fear factor and Zambia in comparative perspective

If measured in terms of violent incidents or fatalities related to electoral violence, Zambia does not stand out compared to other African countries (Raleigh et al. 2010). Indeed, comparing Zambia to other sub-Saharan African countries, the Deadly Electoral Conflict Dataset (DECD) (Fjelde and Höglund Forthcoming) finds that there are 22 countries in sub-Saharan Africa with higher or comparable levels of fatal electoral violence. Compared to other countries on the continent such as Kenya, Nigeria, Cote D'Ivoire or Zimbabwe, elections in Zambia have certainly been significantly more peaceful.

Despite not standing out in terms of violent incidents, Zambia does stand out in terms of fear of electoral violence. According to the seventh round of the Afrobarometer, only four African countries (Kenya, Lesotho, Sierra Leone, and Guinea) had a higher share of respondents stating that they feared election violence "a lot" during electoral competition. When asked in 2017, 34% of Zambians stated that they feared electoral violence "a lot"; this is the same percentage as neighbouring, but more manifestly violent, Zimbabwe.

In the Zambian Electoral Panel Survey (ZEPS), fielded early in the 2021 electoral campaign, respondents are asked to state whether they fear violence while participating in different forms of political activities (Lust et al. 2021). These data suggest that voters are particularly fearful of participating in highly visible forms of electoral activity, such as attending rallies (54% of respondents), wearing party regalia (56% of respondents), or discussing politics in public (48% of respondents). A smaller, but also important, share of respondents state that they are fearful of violence when voting (19% of respondents). It is, however, important to note that electoral turnout was high in 2016 despite high levels of violence and fear.[1]

The discrepancy between levels of manifest violence and levels of fear of violence is indicative of the fact that most violence in Zambian elections is low-scale and does not result in fatalities. Secondly, political actors have actively used claims of violence to delegitimise political opponents. Thus, high levels of fear fundamentally shape the Zambian electoral environment and reduce meaningful political participation. There is a particular risk that fear of violence perpetuates political inequalities and further marginalises women and ethnic minorities. The ZEPS survey shows that while 26% of men who responded fear election violence "a lot", 36% of women reported the same level of fear.

3. Political parties and cadre culture

The main instigators of electoral violence in Zambia in 2016 and also in the early stages of the 2021 electoral cycle are the two main political parties, Patriotic Front (PF) and United Party for National Development (UPND). In particular, early incident reports have found many cases of violence conducted by PF cadres in relation to campaigns, often amid unsatisfactory protection provided by the police (CCMG). Political parties have been known to organise violence through their political campaigns and to build repressive capacity within their organisations by the recruitment of party cadres. For party cadres, joining political parties has become a gateway to political connections and rent-seeking. Party cadres in the government party have been known to develop significant economic interests in preserving the status quo. The economic incentives of cadres do not solely derive from one-time payments from political candidates during election times (or in relation to internal party candidate nominations); cadres have also benefitted greatly from patronage politics in relation to government contracts and the ability to extract rents from urban populations without prosecution (Skage 2016).

With cadre organisations resembling criminal gangs and organisational structures being highly hierarchical, recruitment at lower levels has been aided by social and economic marginalisation among Zambia's youth. During election times, cadres have often been mobilised strategically to deploy violence during political campaigns. The Lisimba Commission's report pointed particularly to the problem of urban cadres being transported to rural locations with the purpose of reinforcing political campaigns. Such cadres were often regarded as particularly violent and disruptive when interacting with populations from other regions and ethnicities (Final Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Voting Patterns and Electoral Violence: 2018). Although much of the violence perpetrated by cadres may be seen as strategic and sanctioned, some violence may also be an expression of a generalised machismo culture prevailing within such organisations.

1. ZEPS was conducted with a sample of 1,710 respondents in a non-nationally representative sample. Percentages exclude respondents who refused to answer the question or opted for the "Don't know" option.

4. Violent hotspots and political regionalism

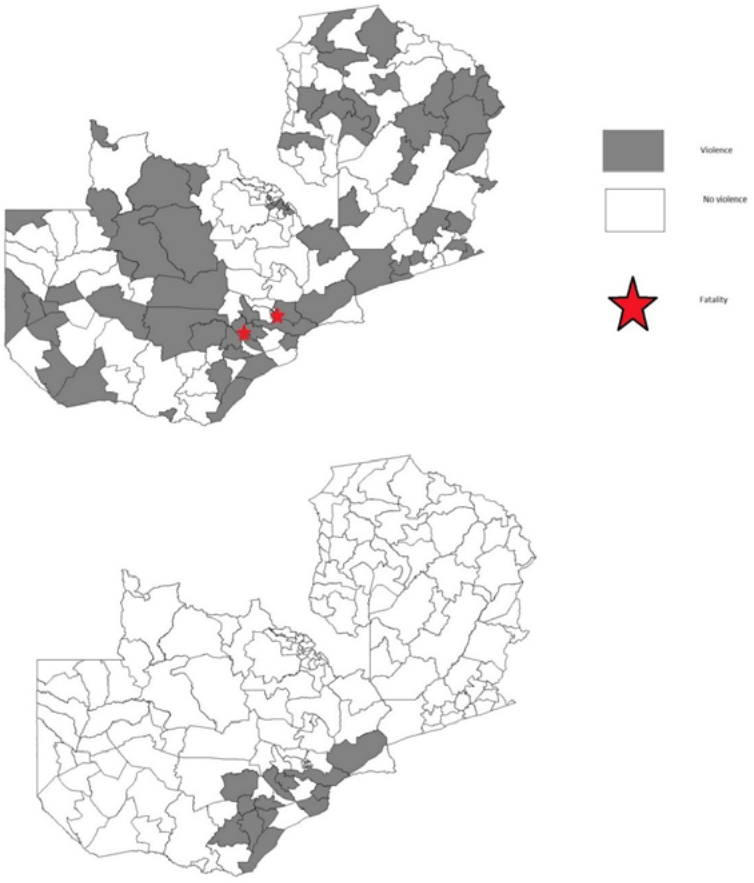
Zambian politics has become increasingly regionalised in nature since the PF electoral victory in 2011. The 2016 election split the country in two roughly equally sized electoral blocs, with the PF winning Eastern and Northern Zambia, including the two major urban areas, Copperbelt and Lusaka, and the opposition UPND winning Southern and Western Zambia.

High levels of regionalism are crucial for understanding electoral violence in Zambia, both in the pre-and post-electoral stage (Kapesa et al. 2020; Wahman and Goldring 2020). While the 2016 election was highly competitive at the national level, elections at the subnational level were rarely competitive (with the exception of some urban areas and parts of Central province).

The map below indicates constituency-level variations in electoral violence according to domestic election observer data in the 2016 election (von Borzyskowski and Wahman 2021). One of the most prominent hotspots of electoral violence in 2016, particularly in the campaign period, was Lusaka. In the capital, parties had high coercive capacity and the PF, in particular, used violence to maintain territorial control.

However, campaign violence was also common, perhaps surprisingly, in party strongholds. Such areas were characterised by a sort of territorial politics where locally dominant parties attempted to restrict campaigning by rival parties. Much violence in such strongholds occurred in connection with campaigns and rallies when locally weak parties imported party supporters to boost their campaigns in areas with low levels of support (Commission of Inquiry into Voting Patterns and Electoral Violence 2018; Wahman and Goldring 2020).

Figure 1: Pre-election violence (top) and post-election violence (bottom) in the 2016 election



Source: Wahman and Goldring (2020), based on domestic election observer surveys.

In relation to the 2021 campaign, the ECZ has taken a more active stance against campaign violence and been more prone to suspending local campaigns at signs of increased tensions. In the early stages of the campaign, the ECZ decided to suspend campaigns in four districts for 14 days due to violence. Affected districts included Lusaka, Nakonde (Muchinga Province), Namwala (Southern Province), and Mpulungu (Northern Province) districts. However, the ECZ has struggled to maintain and enforce suspensions – as with the suspension of the PF's Chishimba Kambwilli. Kambwilli was suspended for hate speech in June – this suspension was overturned ten days later and then reinstated in the third week of July. It remains to be seen whether this suspension will remain in place until election day.

It is still too early to discern the more general geographical patterns of campaign violence in the 2021 election. Reports from national media only provide a partial picture of the geographical distribution of campaign violence. Earlier research has suggested that media reports are a biased source for the mapping of electoral violence. Media reporting is not equal across different areas and relying on media reports threatens to underestimate the level of violence in rural areas (von Borzyskowski and Wahman 2021). Nevertheless, reports from the Christian Churches Monitoring Group (CCMG) provide a preliminary basis for the assessment of the 2021 election environment. According to CCMG's reports, most violence (as in 2016) has been perpetrated by cadres in the two main parties. PF cadres in particularly are identified as perpetrators of violence in several of the documented incidents of election violence. CCMG documents 47 incidents of political violence with an identified perpetrator in their reports published in the period March-June 2021. In 24 incidents, PF cadres are identified as the perpetrator, and in eight instances UPND cadres are identified as the main instigators. CCMG also noted an increase in the number of incidents over the course of the electoral campaign. It is not clear whether this trend will continue until election day. More general research on election violence has noted that violent incidents tend to peak a few weeks before election day (Daxecker 2014). Zambia has no experience of run-off elections and the consequences of an indeterminate outcome of a first round of voting, with a second deciding round between the top candidates, are unclear. However, experiences from other African countries suggest that second round elections may lead to particularly high levels of polarisation and tension. This is particularly the case if the governing party finds itself in a precarious situation and decides to double down on repression as a tool to maintain power.

CCMG also note a continued problem of transported cadres perpetrating violence outside their home areas; in most cases such transported cadres belonged to the governing party. However, one factor that may have altered patterns of violence during the 2021 election campaign compared to 2016 are restrictions on campaigning put in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While there are still many recorded incidents in relation to campaigns and roadshows, fewer large rallies inside rival parties' strongholds may have reduced the number of incidents between imported cadres and local populations.

5. Post-election violence

Zambia experienced serious post-election violence after the 2016 election. Most of this violence occurred in opposition strongholds in Southern Province. Most of the violence in 2016 was directed towards partisan and ethnic minorities living within Southern Province but was also frequently a consequence of clashes between police and voters during protests and riots. The risks of post-election violence in 2021 are considerable; many of the factors conducive to post-electoral violence in 2016 are also very much in place in 2021.

Such factors include low trust in political institutions, low perceptions of electoral integrity, and significant levels of electoral regionalism. Research on election violence has suggested that post-election violence is most likely in close elections (Hafner Burton et al. 2016). Post-election violence in Zambia is of great concern both in the event of a narrow PF victory or a narrow UPND victory. In the case of a PF victory, low electoral legitimacy and a lack of trust in political institutions may serve to raise tensions and mobilise voters, particularly in opposition strongholds and densely populated and ethnically heterogeneous urban areas. Urban areas are also likely to see clashes with criminal elements involving party cadres wishing to profit from control of public facilities such as bus stations, markets and government contracts (Lisimba Commission Report). In the case of the governing party's defeat, the greatest risk for post-election security is the possible scenario of the that party refusing to concede, leading to high levels of government repression and opposition protest, particularly in Lusaka.

The probability of post-election violence in relation to parliamentary or local elections is lower than in relation to the national level presidential election. Transparency in relation to such local-level elections is higher and the legal system provides a more credible path towards appealing elections fraught by manipulation (Kerr and Wahman 2020).

6. Conflict mitigation

Even though the government did not issue a white paper to formalise a strategy to reduce electoral violence in relation to the recommendations of the Lisimba Commission Report, several of the Commission's recommendations have de facto been put into practice. Moreover, voters, churches, and civil society have increased pressure on political actors to promote peaceful elections. Initiatives from international actors, such as the Commonwealth, have also been put in place to foster inter-party dialogue. Such ongoing initiatives both at the national and local level are important, particularly in the event of a contested outcome or a second round of voting.

In particular, the passing of First President Kenneth Kaunda on 17 June 2021 created a moment of reflection on the late President's legacy of peace, non-discrimination, and patriotism. Nevertheless, parties have continued to place the blame for violent escalation on their rivals. Despite such national escalation, local party officials have also engaged in local peacebuilding initiatives to preserve local peace and stability. Such initiatives seem particularly promising as a possible mechanism for conflict mitigation.

7. Policy recommendations

In light of the above observations and drawing from submissions made to the Lisimba Commission of Inquiry, we make the following policy recommendations for mitigating the main causes of violence in Zambian elections.

8. Political parties

The key actors in the promotion of peaceful elections are the political parties, especially the ruling party with its control over state resources and government institutions. All political parties must, therefore, be encouraged to promote intra-party and inter-party democracy and desist from politicising government institutions.

In order to strengthen democratic legitimacy, political actors need to adhere to democratic principles and respect the rule of law. Parties need to commit to the peaceful transition of power and to legal processes of conflict resolution. Parties also need to respect rival parties' right to freely campaign across the territory. Furthermore, political actors need to refrain from the use of hate speech, labelling and stereotyping against rival parties, usually on the basis of ethnicity.

9. Promoting professional conduct of security agencies

Political violence must be given higher priority by legal authorities and enforcement of current legislation must be consistent and free of political bias. Particular suspicion of political bias has been raised over uneven and politically motivated enforcement of the Public Order Act.

A general laissez faire attitude towards political violence has resulted in a culture of impunity. The police have failed to prosecute perpetrators of violence, particularly individuals with significant political influence. The security agencies, especially the Zambia Police Service, thus need to be given more support so that they can shed their colonial traditions of being a police force and become a security service able to function in a democracy.

Enhancing the capacity of the Police Service to do its job in a professional manner may require depoliticising the appointment of the Inspector General and Provincial Police Commissioners. Increased independence of the police could be achieved by restoring the police command structure and allowing the Zambia Police Service Committee to appoint Provincial Police Commissioners on recommendation by the Inspector General. Currently, conditions of service, training and procurement of transport, riot control and other operational equipment for the security services have been improved.

The 2021 polls will reveal the extent to which these measures may contribute to more professional conduct in the security agencies, in support of the ECZ and other elections stakeholders' attempt to hold peaceful and credible elections.

10. Increasing the capacity, independence and legitimacy of the ECZ

The lack of trust in the ECZ – particularly within the main opposition UPND – is a major destabilising factor, eroding confidence in elections. The ECZ works under difficult conditions with a small team at their national office and part-time local government officials who serve as electoral officers. It is vital that adequate resources are mobilised to fund ECZ activities, promote decentralisation to district level, and implement the legally mandated continuous registration of voters.

The independence of the ECZ, if enhanced and formalised, will enhance its smooth operation, allowing it to process and publish results in a timely manner, thereby reducing the frustrations of the participants. This will also reduce the overreliance on international elections monitors for validation.

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