



Civil Society Dialogue Network Policy Meeting

Preventing Election-related Violence: Analysis from Civil Society

7-8 October 2020, online

Meeting Report

Background

The objectives of this Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) Policy Meeting were (1) to reflect on common forms of election-related violence (ERV) across the electoral cycle; (2) to consider whether and how the risks of ERV have been exacerbated or have changed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic; and (3) to identify opportunities for preventive action considering both the full range of instruments at the EU's disposal and best practices / lessons learnt by civil society actors. It was focused on four country case studies: Bolivia, Ghana, Myanmar, Sudan.

The meeting brought together 30 participants, including representatives of civil society organisations (CSOs) and officials from both the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). Discussions were held under the Chatham House Rule.

This report includes the key points and recommendations which were expressed in the meeting. They may not be attributed to any participating individual or organisation, nor do they necessarily represent the views of all the meeting participants, the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO) and its member organisations, or the EU institutions.

Key findings on ERV in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic

- ERV includes both lethal and non-lethal forms of violence. It can occur at any time during the electoral process and in any type of election. There is no universally accepted definition of ERV.
- The Covid-19 pandemic has brought new tensions in conflict-affected countries and regions as well as countries and regions at risk of conflict. Many governments have taken advantage of this crisis to increase their grip on power at the expense of civil liberties and human rights, and this has had negative impacts on peace and stability.
- ERV exists in places where violence is present in other political and social spaces. This violence is usually politically orchestrated and is therefore more visible during electoral disputes, but it can also be a symptom of underlying issues.
- Observing elections can contribute to preventing ERV. International observers often have more political clout and are given a more important role in electoral processes than their local equivalents. However, they can also face hostility from uncooperative local authorities. Electoral observation has proven to be more effective when strong collaboration between international and local actors takes place and the electoral process benefits from genuine local ownership.
- ERV is less common in contexts where dialogue among the different stakeholders is encouraged and rules, norms, and codes of conduct are commonly accepted by all parties.
- During the last decade, policies on preventing ERV have improved and now take into account the complexity of the issue and the need for inclusive and long-term approaches. However, this has not been accompanied by an improvement in the targeted allocation of financial and human resources by international actors.
- Women and minority groups are disproportionately affected by ERV.
- Disinformation can cause an increase in ERV. Fake news about the Covid-19 pandemic is widespread and can create or exacerbate social tensions.

Country-specific analysis

Bolivia

- Bolivia is marked by a deep political polarisation which was further exacerbated by the controversial 2019 general elections and the chaotic aftermath. In the months following the 2019 elections and in the build-up to the 2020 elections, episodes of ERV occurred regularly, including politically-motivated killings, arbitrary detentions, and media intimidation.
- Both national and local elections are characterised by polarisation and ERV.
- The deterioration in the relationship between local authorities and both international organisations and civil society was one of the first signs of the degradation of the electoral process.
- The reforms implemented by the interim government based on recommendations made by the international community were useful in restructuring existing institutions and helping to prepare the electoral management bodies for the 2020 elections. In particular, a change in the leadership of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal and other reforms in the justice system have allowed for a significant increase in openness and transparency.
- The mediation role played by international actors, including the EU, the United Nations (UN), and the Church, has been crucial in bringing together the opposing parties and creating the conditions for a stable transition government in view of the 2020 general elections.

Ghana

- Ghana has been a positive example of preventing ERV in West Africa due to the valuable engagement of the international community, the presence of a strong local civil society, the helpful role played by community leaders and the establishment of successful institutions (e.g. the National Peace Council).
- Despite positive experiences in recent years, Ghana still remains a vulnerable country and practices to strengthen peace and prevent ERV have to be maintained.
- The vigilante groups which have been set up by the different political parties remain a cause concern as they are increasingly acting as independent security actors. For this reason, it is important to remind political leaders of their influence in maintaining peace in the country.
- Risks of violence also exist due to the vulnerability of young people. The Covid-19 pandemic is increasing unemployment and poverty, and is likely to create the conditions which enable young people to be drawn into vigilante rhetoric, extremist narratives and identity politics.
- Some media are generally strongly biased towards certain political leaders and propagate their narratives blindly. This risks fuelling identity politics and can undermine social cohesion.
- The authoritarian trends which are visible in West Africa and which threaten stability in the region could also influence politics in Ghana. The country has managed so far to escape these trends because of the solid infrastructure for peace and a culture of trust building between governmental authorities, local CSOs and the broader population, which therefore needs to be preserved.

Myanmar

- Due to the size and diversity of Myanmar, the security situation varies greatly between states and regions. ERV is a major concern throughout the country and it reflects the political tensions which exist in the different states and regions.

- Compared to the 2015 general election, the 2020 elections come at a more advanced phase of the political transition. There is more electoral competition than there was five years ago, but the rise of parties based on ethnicity has also created a stronger exclusionary rhetoric which fuels social tensions and undermines social cohesion.
- Episodes of voter intimidation occur regularly in Myanmar. These can happen physically (e.g. door-to-door checks by the military), online or in the media.
- Hate speech and disinformation are extremely serious problems in Myanmar and have tangible impacts on violence levels, especially against women and minorities. Discriminatory language and policies are commonly used as campaign tools to raise political support.
- Most media are under pressure, especially in areas populated by ethnic minorities and internet shutdowns, the blocking of websites and the harassment and threatening of journalists are common occurrences throughout the country.
- The Covid-19 pandemic has been used by the government as a pretext to shrink media space even further. The origin of the virus and the spread of the pandemic in certain regions is also being used by some political actors as a dividing factor which results in further marginalisation of minority ethnic groups.

Sudan

- Following decades of one-party rule, elections are a new exercise for Sudan. The military is still involved in the government, and institutions and citizens lack experience in democratic processes, so huge capacity building efforts will be required to meet this challenge successfully.
- Violence still plays a pervasive role at all levels in Sudanese society. Conflicts occur around power and resource sharing, and are therefore reflected in electoral disputes.
- The legal framework for elections and the rules and practices for setting up a national election commission will be crucial to prevent ERV and build peace in the long run. It is important they are carefully crafted so that they do not exacerbate existing conflict risks.
- Since most Sudanese people have lived their whole lives under the rule of the former president (Omar al-Bashir), a culture for peace and democracy in Sudan is largely absent from the country. This could be addressed by investing considerable resources in civic education and supporting CSOs to work on peacebuilding and citizen engagement.
- The situation of women and minorities in Sudan is also troubling. They are often victims of discrimination and are still largely excluded from political life, even within the most progressive parties.
- Due to the radical changes which Sudan is currently undergoing, this political transition period could represent a valuable opportunity to strengthen institutions, reform the security sector, and support civil society so that a culture of peace and awareness of civil liberties and human rights can be developed.

Recommendations for the EU

- The EU should ensure that its approach to ERV covers any form of lethal or non-lethal act of violence directed against electoral stakeholders with the purpose of affecting an electoral process or influencing its outcome.
- The engagement by the international community, including the EU, cannot be limited to the period of the elections and focus exclusively on the electoral dispute. In order to prevent ERV successfully, engagement should be consistent throughout the whole electoral cycle.
- Since ERV is often a symptom of larger scale issues within a given context, the EU should adopt a multistakeholder approach to increase its ability to identify and address the drivers

of conflict. This includes ensuring dialogue across and between civil society actors, security forces, media organisations, political actors, electoral authorities, etc.

- Co-operation between international and local observers should be encouraged but balanced carefully in order to avoid imposing or reinforcing hierarchies. The EU should help to ensure that local ownership is maintained so that electoral processes do not lose legitimacy.
- The EU should work with local stakeholders not only to gain a deeper knowledge of the local context and adapt its own engagement, but also to foster virtuous activities and reinforce existing effective approaches. Credible partnerships between international and local actors can strengthen electoral processes and thereby contribute to preventing ERV.
- The EU should also consider engaging with political parties as a means of increasing the credibility of electoral processes.
- The EU should also work to create favourable conditions for preventing ERV. This includes supporting civic education and efforts to establish common norms and rules agreed and accepted by local stakeholders.
- In most of the countries which are affected by ERV, young people represent the bulk of the electorate. The EU should pay particular attention to young people and support those organisations which work to try to involve them in electoral processes.
- Women and minorities are disproportionately affected by ERV. The EU should ensure that its approaches to the prevention of ERV are gender-sensitive and address systemic discrimination and inequality.
- The EU should pay particular attention to the media, disinformation and hate speech as early warning signs of future ERV. In doing so, it should work in close partnership with local actors since hate speech is often conducted in the vernacular. EU electoral observation missions (EOMs) should also pay more attention to the role played by new information and communications technologies in electoral processes.
- Given the often close link between security forces and ERV, the EU should consider integrating staff in EOMs who focus exclusively on security and who deal directly with local security forces.
- The EU should consider engaging with people who are particularly influential during the electoral process. This is not limited to political figures, but also includes community and religious leaders, businesses and other influential personalities.
- While the international community's policies and strategies for preventing ERV generally seem to be aligned with needs and priorities of local stakeholders and international CSOs, the allocation of their funding does not seem to follow the same logic. The EU should work to reduce the gap between policy commitments and funding.
- Due to the breadth of its diplomatic network and its experience as a mediator, the EU should play a decisive role in coordinating like-minded international actors who are working on preventing ERV in a specific context.
- The EU should also encourage other regional organisations to engage in preventing ERV.

Civil Society Dialogue Network

The Civil Society Dialogue Network (CSDN) is a mechanism for dialogue between civil society and EU policy-makers on issues related to peace and conflict. It is co-financed by the European Union (Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace). It is managed by the European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), a civil society network, in co-operation with the European Commission (EC) and the European External Action Service (EEAS). The fourth phase of the CSDN will last from 2020 to 2023. For more information, please visit the [EPLO website](#).