

## Beyond Election Day: Unarmed Civilian Protection and Electoral Cycles

### Introduction

At this moment in history, more people are going to the polls to elect political representatives than ever before. **Elections hold potential for community dialogue, collective action and political participation – and, at the same time, also bring increased risks of community tension and political violence.** In the past five years alone, there has been a 22% increase in political violence incidents, with elections often flashpoints and catalysts for this kind of violence.

Engaged and proactive voting communities are well positioned to ensure their own safety and security throughout election cycles. These groups can act quickly and serve as interrupters who prevent violence, mitigate rumors, de-escalate tensions and advocate for processes that prioritize the safety of civilians. Strengthening responses to electoral violence through the tools of Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) - a nonviolent and civilian-led methodology for the protection of civilians before, during, and after violent conflict - increases community capacities to prevent, mitigate, and respond to potential violence.



Nonviolent Peaceforce  
Election Volunteers  
Minneapolis, MN, USA, 2020  
Photo: Nonviolent Peaceforce



NP Protection Officers meet with members of Hamam al Holil Camp Iraq 2018  
Photo: NP

## Unarmed Civilian Protection: Protecting civilians during elections

**Unarmed Civilian Protection is a highly effective tool for protecting civic spaces and minimizing the threat of violence during elections.** Utilizing tools such as advocacy, protective presence, de-escalation training, Early Warning Early Response (EWER), and rumour control, NP has partnered with communities across a range of different contexts to protect civic spaces, support safe political participation, and help to facilitate peaceful elections. This might look like protective presence at polling stations or at public protests as in the United States; accompanying candidates or voters who fear reprisals to election related events or polling; or working with community groups to advocate for greater voice and representation in political processes, as in Myanmar and South Sudan. These tools are particularly important for the protection of communities that are often disenfranchised or excluded from electoral processes, such as women, youth, and minority religious and ethnic groups.

**The utility of UCP in preventing violence and protecting civilians during election processes is well documented across a range of contexts.** For example, During Iraq's elections in 2018, NP effectively advocated for the protection of displaced women voters at the polls. Mid-morning on the day of the elections, NP staff in a displacement camp realised one of the women's voting lines was at a standstill. Only men were being called into the voting tent. Men began amassing around the women and they began to appear uncomfortable as they remained in line to cast their ballots. NP staff **advocated** with local security, highlighting the need to ensure the women were able to vote, and to have their line move faster to reduce harassment, and to allow mothers to return more quickly to unaccompanied children back in their tents. Soldiers were immediately instructed to call forward voters from the women's line, and the process for women voters at this polling station was smooth for the remainder of election day. This intervention effectively addressed the protection risk faced by women and **helped facilitate a peaceful election process at the site.**

**UCP can also be instrumental in protecting the right to vote for historically marginalized groups and ensuring that these groups are represented in the decision-making process.** During the Myanmar General Election on November 8th 2020, Emerging Women Leaders across the country used organizing skills they learned as part of training with Nonviolent Peaceforce to monitor and observe their local elections. In the months leading up to the election, young women leaders who had trained in UCP methodologies by NP amplified these skills in their communities by training a further 25 village communities in voter education and voter registration. On election day, the women leaders kept an eye on how the crowds at the polls were keeping safe and were prepared to intervene to prevent or address violence. “It is important that we continue working with the Emerging Women Leaders in Myanmar so that they can keep strengthening their skills to nonviolently increase women’s participation in the decision-making process and initiatives for peace and reconciliation” shared Kyaw\*, Nonviolent Peaceforce Myanmar National Project Coordinator. While the political landscape in Myanmar has dramatically changed since 2020, the UCP and organizing skills learned by the Emerging Women Leaders have prepared them to respond to new and emerging threats of violence in their communities.

**Careful community preparation and training can also bring communities together to prevent and violence during contentious elections where political rhetoric has become violent and divided communities.** In the weeks leading up to the 2020 U.S. Presidential elections, Nonviolent Peaceforce mobilized 250 volunteers and 100 poll captains in Minnesota in de-escalation, nonviolence, and unarmed civilian protection. Each volunteer team was plugged into an extensive online Early Warning Early Response network where community members and volunteers shared verified information about potentially violent actors and changing community contexts, allowing them to anticipate advancing threats as well as dispel rumors circulating online and in communities. When a truck bedecked in Trump flags appeared outside one of the polling stations, tensions ran high and neighbors became concerned about election tampering and potential violence from all sides. Voters became more and more escalated and several approached to confront the two men inside the truck. Having prepared for potential violence, volunteers trained in UCP were able to de-escalate the potentially violent conflict, asking the men to move their truck further from the polling place and clarifying that they were there to vote and had no intentions to stir up violence. The men were able to vote and left the polling site shortly thereafter. “That could have easily been a problem,” shared the volunteer. “In this environment it’s easy for rumors to get started and people to react without thinking.”



*Nonviolent Peaceforce  
Training with Community Members  
Myanmar, 2019  
Photo: NP*

## Urgent Actions

**As so many people seek to exercise their right to vote worldwide, the risk of electoral violence is significant and growing. It is essential that we prioritise research, investment, and practical tools that enable communities to participate in free, fair and safe elections. To that end, we call for:**

1. Proactive investment in peacebuilding programs designed to strengthen community relationships across different identity groups, increase social cohesion, and facilitate community conversations, in order to decrease the likelihood of electoral violence before it starts;
2. Support for cross-community and cross-identity solidarity to stand against election-associated violence, identify common roots of politically-motivated violence, and strategize with other local groups on how to de-escalate violence within each specific community;
3. Training of unarmed civilian monitors to provide protective presence to civilians and protect civic space during elections and other major political events, including rallies and protests;
4. Resources and action to empower and equip civilians in nonviolent self-protection methodologies so they are prepared to address election violence and protect civic space in their own communities.

\*Name changed for security