

KEEPING ELECTIONS PEACEFUL AHEAD OF THE CRISIS

USIP Evaluative Research on Election Violence Prevention



Targeted peacebuilding efforts are frequently used to prevent election violence. Practitioners possess a variety of programming options or interventions, including peace messaging campaigns, preventive diplomacy, dedicated youth programs, or monitoring missions. But the ability of election violence prevention to achieve its intended outcome merits further investigation. What works, and what does not? The choice among preventive measures is often made intuitively or impulsively, rather than based on empirical evidence, risk assessments, or thorough practice evaluations. USIP recently concluded an ambitious study to assess whether prevalent intervention models demonstrate a measurable impact on electoral violence levels. Such practice evaluations expand our knowledge base, and help practitioners prioritize the most appropriate and cost-effective prevention tool in a given context. The findings present compelling evidence that prevention works. But all prevalent models are not equally impactful.



METHODOLOGY

Through a small-N comparative evaluation, applying a mixed-method approach, this study gauges the individual and combined impact of eight peacebuilding models or tools commonly thought to reduce the risk of election violence as intended or indirect outcome. Five cases were carefully selected for this comparative evaluation: Bangladesh, Malawi, Honduras, Moldova, and Thailand. The selection was based on three basic criteria: The presence of a partial electoral democracy; “middle range risk” of political instability during the election period; and a recent election. Each country displayed similar risk levels prior to the elections, but experienced differing levels of violence. Did prevention make the difference?

FINDINGS

The study presents compelling evidence that **prevention works**. But all prevention models are not equally impactful. More prevention will not necessarily reduce violence levels, as success remains highly contextual.

Our research hypothesized that the variation in election violence in each country was closely linked to the quality and scope of preventive models. The research team looked at prevention instruments commonly practiced by the state, the international community, and local NGOs. Sound **security sector engagement** and **election administration**, both at the heart of the state’s electoral responsibilities, demonstrate the greatest ability to mitigate violence or preventing it all together. **Long-**

term civic education stands out as a promising prevention tool as well. The quality and scope of these prevention efforts often correspond with lower levels of election violence, while the attitudes and behavior of political elite, voters, and perpetrators tend to shift in line with the theorized impact of these instruments.

TOOLS REVIEWED

1. Security sector engagement
2. Election management and administration
3. Preventive diplomacy
4. Peace messaging
5. Civic and voter education
6. Monitoring and mapping
7. Voter consultations
8. Youth programming

State actors hold the key to peaceful elections through their central responsibility in maintaining security and election management. When acting appropriately, across the election cycle, security forces and election administrators effectively manage the incentive structure of potential perpetrators, and overcome those challenges that frequently give rise to election violence. Adequate domestic consideration of election security and the quality of the electoral process also boosts the likely effectiveness of grassroots or international prevention.

Both election monitoring/mapping and preventive diplomacy are common in elections at risk. However, the relationship between these “international models” and the intensity of election violence differs considerably. **Election monitoring and mapping** is the most impactful instrument available to international prevention actors. **Preventive diplomacy** is unable to demonstrate the same level of impact. The instrument is commonly used as a last resort option for crisis management, when violence appears imminent or already ongoing.

Despite their theoretically compelling logic, the measurable impact of **peace messaging, voter consultations, and youth programming** remains small or unclear. The utility and impact of these citizen-oriented instruments that are commonly led by domestic NGOs are either secondary or inconsistent, and merit further research. Even with the best of intentions or practices, both domestic NGO and international efforts can only help realize the peaceful conduct of elections in the presence of at least minimal quality standards, effort and buy-in from the national government organizing elections at risk.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Break the Cycle of Election Violence through Conflict Prevention: International interventions frequently start when the election cycle is well underway, or after violence already erupted. To address the underlying causes of election violence, as well as the frustrations, financial incentives, or fears of its perpetrators and enablers, sustained interventions across election cycles are needed. Measures like civic education, peace messaging and youth engagement are unlikely to shape the attitude and be-

havior of the broader electorate within the timespan of a single election. Long-term conflict prevention, with consideration of deep-rooted conflict drivers, presents a more sustainable and evidence-based action agenda to prevent election violence.

2. Be Strategic and Match the Anticipated Problem: The growing engagement by national, international, regional, and local actors during elections is shaping up as a patchwork of interventions with little strategic vision. The choice for a given instrument is commonly driven by the mandate and capacity of the implementing actors or their familiarity with a given preventive approach, instead of the nature of anticipated the violence in a given context. Frequently a model of practice is repeated across different countries without a solid evidence base, needs assessment, or rigorous evaluation indicating the likelihood of impact. Further improving the assessment and evaluative capacity of election practitioners will help address this challenge. A strategic selection of the appropriate instruments, driven by early and recurring assessments of the anticipated violence, combined with stronger evaluation methods, are required to succeed. Unless we improve the metrics for evaluating preventive success, and address the underlying drivers of conflict, elections will remain a flashpoint for violence and tension, requiring the peacebuilding community to repeat its efforts each and every election cycle.

3. Prioritize Support of State-led Prevention and Election Security: International support of those state institutions primarily responsible for election security and administration, i.e. the security sector and the election management body, is merited. Targeted police training, early on in the election cycle, offers a particularly commendable investment when implemented appropriately. International support for state-led prevention should extend beyond technical support for the democratic process. Organizing free and fair elections may benefit the peaceful character of the electoral process. However, at times it also competes with election security as a strategic objective. Decisions to withdraw from, or refrain from engagement in, elections that suffer from poor organization or anticipated fraud, should consider the potential increase in violence disengagement strategies may entail.

ABOUT THE CENTER

Through evaluative research and field experiments, USIP’s Center for Applied Research on Conflict (ARC) will continue to facilitate the transition from intuitive programming towards sustained election support grounded on empirical research and rigorously evaluated for impact.

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