Elections on the African continent present both a challenge and an opportunity. Elections can serve as a catalyst for violent contest, and conversely elections have also successfully been used as a mechanism to negotiate political parties out of conflict and protracted civil wars. In post-conflict scenarios, regular competitive elections are a crucial first step towards institutionalizing democratic forms of government. Paradoxically however, elections can also prompt violent resistance when their legitimacy is contested, even in countries where elections have previously facilitated peace.

‘Electoral conflict’ has emerged as an ascendant type of conflict in and of itself on the continent, distinct from other categories of warfare such as civil war, insurgency, or rebellion. However, electoral conflict remains poorly understood as a phenomenon (e.g. what it is, what constitutes as ‘major’ versus ‘minor’ violence; what the proximate versus antecedent and underlying causes to electoral violence are; and finally an investigation into macro versus micro actor motivations). Electoral violence is insufficiently interdicted at the national, regional, continental and international level, despite policy commitments, legal instruments, election observer monitoring, and repeated denunciations.

The APRM Country Review Reports (CRR) provide a useful diagnostic tool in identifying gaps, deficiencies, shortcomings, weaknesses, and conditions that produce conflict within countries. However, the APRM currently does not give sufficient consideration to electoral conflict. There are not enough indicators or measures of electoral violence that are tied to an assessment of whether an election is ‘free and fair’ and how this affects political governance.

The APRM review is best viewed as a learning process, and therefore the review process itself should be a learning exercise. The 2013 revision of the 2004 APRM self-assessment questionnaire used to guide the reports certainly improves in asking countries to report on more detailed and precise governance aspects, of which ‘pre, during and post-election violence’ is one. Reports using the revised self-assessment questionnaire are not yet available for analysis, but would likely enhance the country review and reporting process, establishing the practice of peer review, and ultimately fostering good governance on the continent.
THE CURRENT CONVERSATION

The findings, statistics, causal paths, outcomes and explanations put forward regarding the incidence of electoral conflict and why electoral violence occurs vary widely. Statistically, 1992 and 1993 are classified as highly violent electoral years, with an upswing in the years 2000 and 2005. Overall “…the result is counterintuitive: even though on average sub-Saharan African states are becoming more democratic – at least as measured by Freedom House’s scores on political and civil liberty – elections, on average are not becoming less violent.” In 2011 approximately 60% of elections in Africa were violent to some degree.

In the Ugandan APRM report, the challenge posed by the spread and adoption of multi-party ‘donor democracy’ (that is the meeting of technocratic criteria and standards e.g. holding of elections, existence of term limits, separations of powers, access to information), without true democratic empowerment of the citizenry or political opposition, has meant it is possible to have elections and democratic standards, but not substantive democracy. This is also highlighted in the Ethiopian, Rwandan, Ugandan, Mozambican and Lesotho country reports where elections are a statutory component of the governmental system, but a restrictive political culture dominated by the incumbent political party has developed undermining true democratic plurality, freedom and practice. Significantly restricted political participation is a notable source of grievance and contestation during electoral periods.

According to the Social Conflict in Africa Database (SCAD) data-set, during the 1990’s electoral conflict represented 7.6% of all conflict in Africa, increasing to 10.1% by 2000. Statistically, this upturn is probably best attributed to the overall increase in the frequency of elections. Elections however are not supposed to lead to violence and conflict; elections are supposed to lead to democratic consolidation and political stability. It is the persistence of violence and conflict in the presence of elections and democracy that is troubling for governance in Africa.

Electoral conflicts occur predominantly in countries experiencing ongoing civil discord/war, in post-election periods based on a disputed electoral, and/or within countries with a history of recurrent electoral violence. A thematic analysis of the CRR’s reveals that there are a number of conditions/factors common to countries which experience violence and conflict during electoral periods. This includes ethnic enmity, high youth unemployment, nepotism/cronyism/patronage, partisan politics, land disputes, competition for access to state and/or mineral resources, and horizontal inequality within society.

These conditions are consistently identified as being sources of past conflict, current conflict, or potential conflict. In some cases in the CRR’s chiefs and traditional rulers are accorded importance as latent sources of conflict, or as instrumental in igniting violence; while in others, the politicization of religion has acted as a significant fault line for dispute.
The exact interaction of wide ranging factors in generating conflict in the context of competitive elections is not clear. Some CRR’s specifically identify factors which have played a role in a violent electoral outcome, while other reports downplay or ignore the scale or seriousness of conflict on the political and electoral process. The latter case is particularly dependent on whether the occurrence is assessed as ‘major’ or ‘minor’ by national, regional, continental and/or the international community.

A key limitation of the original self-assessment questionnaire is that no question specifically deals with electoral conflict. This despite electoral conflict being empirically observable on the continent at the time the APRM was formed (2003) and the questionnaire formulated (2004). APRM reporting does not provide a specific, coherent, methodical or analytical assessment of electoral conflict or electoral violence during electoral periods in Africa, despite it occurring across CRR’s.

The APRM self-questionnaire posits that “indicators in Democracy and Political Governance are not amenable to quantitative measurement” and that the “focus is on qualitative measurement.” There is truth and fallacy to this approach. Certainly, describing political practice and culture rests on a discursive approach, however a more robust evaluation in which a country describes practice, policy or implementation linked with a scored assessment would strengthen reporting by providing an objective aggregate.

Most countries do well in reporting on the technocratic aspects of the electoral process. The 2004 APRM questionnaire currently asks countries to:

- Describe your electoral system, providing relevant legal and institutional provisions as appropriate;
- Assess the effectiveness of the electoral system in terms of its capacity to deliver results that are adjudged to be broadly free and fair;
- Provide reports produced by governmental sources and other sources on recent elections held in your country;
- Provide evidence of recent contentious electoral cases and how they were resolved by the courts.”

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Improving self-reporting quality:** The benchmarking and standardized design of the questionnaire allows for consistent and equivalent comparison across countries. However voluntary contribution/ elaboration permits for great variance in detail, depth and length of the reports. This is certainly evident in reporting on incidences and the intensity of conflict/violence/armed clashes/protests related to the democratic process and elections.

**Framing of questions and structure of questionnaire:** A definition of what constitutes electoral violence and electoral conflict is needed in the APRM self-assessment questionnaire. A working definition should include recognition of random or organized acts or threats of violence, harm, intimidation, or coercion against persons and/or property that form...
part of the electoral process, the electoral process itself, and other electoral participants. This may include any of the following: physical attack resulting in injury or death, arson, looting, assassination, forced assemblies, confinement, riots, destruction of property, rape, ballot stuffing, candidate visibility, presence of militias/youth gangs, incentivizing electoral participation to name a few. By providing an expanded definition of what constitutes electoral violence or electoral conflict, the CSAR and CRM will be better equipped to report on these identified acts. Elections as a site for contestation are what need to be addressed and targeted in the APRM reporting and this is not dealt with effectively in the APRM reports.

**Scoring of Indicators:** A specific measurement tied to a definition of, and question on, electoral violence and electoral conflict is needed here. This would provide for better comparative data between countries and within countries over time, especially given that the electoral violence is so varied within and between countries. It would also allow for a more targeted understanding of where in a country’s ‘Democracy and Political Governance’ they are under performing, where intervention is needed the most, what type of intervention is necessitated, and whether intervention has been successful. Another benefit of providing quantitative scoring on performance is that claims about meeting technocratic ‘donor democracy’ standards (which in some cases is even debatable), versus a lack in ‘substantive democracy’ can be better extrapolated, understood and analysed. Further, how far a country accords to conceptualizations and measurements of democracy and ‘free and fair’ elections as provided by the APRM is not always clear or accurate with qualitative reporting: signing and ratifying treaties does not equate into implementation, and where there is implementation, provide an assessment of its impact.

**Country self-monitoring censorship:** Each country should be required to respond to each question and objective in the 4 thematic areas, even if the response is “null” based on country specifics and domestication of the questionnaire. Currently too much leeway exists, and country omission or under-reporting by selection of objectives of which to report on has meant that countries have either not reported on, or have provided rudimentary details on democratic deficits and/or electoral malpractice and conflict.

**REFERENCES**

This policy brief was compiled by Melanie Meirotti, drawn from the full report, “Calling a Spade a Spade? Electoral Conflict in APRM Reporting,” by Michelle Small, which can be found at (www.eisa.org.za).