



## Election violence, a good sign for Pakistan's democracy?

By Megan Reif, Nadia Naviwala ■ Friday, May 10, 2013 - 6:55 PM ■ [Share](#)



Recent election violence in Pakistan has been called unprecedented. But Pakistan's 2008 elections were bloodier. The electoral death toll in this election has crossed 100, but in 2008, over 150 were killed and 400 injured.

If Pakistan's experience is like that of other countries around the world, then Saturday, Election Day, will be violent. But when perpetrated by political actors -- candidates, parties, party workers, and supporters -- that violence can be taken as a sign that electoral administration is getting stronger and that democracy is maturing.

While the Pakistani and international press have expressed alarm at the vehemence of electoral violence perpetrated by the Pakistani Taliban and other extremist groups, Islamist parties have never won more than about five percent of the vote in any of Pakistan's elections. This election will be no different.

The apparent increase in the extremists' use of violence in this historic election is a sign, not of their strength, but of their increasing irrelevance in a society that is moving forward with regular, competitive elections between mainstream parties.

As William McCants [has argued](#) in reference to the rise in militant violence in the Middle East, when moderate Islamists and other opposition parties begin to compete successfully in increasingly democratic elections, attacks by extremists who could not take power through political participation escalate. It is thus more important than ever for voters and parties to participate peacefully and for citizens, international observers, and other electoral stakeholders to resist the temptation to conclude that election violence implies that Pakistan, or any country, for that matter, is not suited or ready for democracy.

Data on violent incidents collected during Pakistan's 2008 elections show that the dynamics here are consistent with those in many other parts of the world. Electoral violence is correlated strongly  
[afpakforeignpolicy.com/posts/2013/05/10/election\\_violence\\_good\\_for\\_pakistans\\_democracy](http://afpakforeignpolicy.com/posts/2013/05/10/election_violence_good_for_pakistans_democracy)

are consistent with those in many other parts of the world. Electoral violence is correlated strongly with two things: uncertainty and reform. The more uncertainty there is in an election -- whether because of the entrance of new candidates or shifting strength of parties -- the higher the risk of violence. And the more reform -- electoral reforms or strengthening institutions that conduct oversight -- the greater the incentives for competitors to add violence to their tactics as their support bases become less reliable and fraud gets more difficult.

Many transitions to democracy since 1945 have been accompanied by an increase in political violence. This phenomenon, however, is not unique to Africa, Pakistan, or even new democracies. French political scientist Patrick Quantin, for example, **compares** African election violence with tumultuous elections in 19th-century France in order to illustrate how messy the consolidation of democracy can be.

Similarly, Rapoport and Weinberg **document** episodes of election violence that erupted during phases of electoral reform and political liberalization in ancient Greece, Eastern Europe, Western Europe, Latin America, and the United States. **Case study evidence** suggests that at least 198 countries or territories and more than 22 U.S. states have experienced at least one episode of election violence at some point in their electoral histories. As a 2001 U.S. Agency for International Development **report** notes, "some violence is likely in nearly all elections.

Contested, competitive elections have been associated with violence or the threat of violence in polities as diverse as the United States (**Colfax County, Louisiana, 1873; Wilmington, North Carolina, 1898; Florida, 1920**; U.S. Presidential elections in **1860** and **1876**), Costa Rica (**1945**), Algeria (**1991/92**), Colombia (**1875**), and Côte d'Ivoire (**2011**), to name a few. All occurred not during founding elections, but later in the process, as electoral administration improved, multiple parties were allowed to compete on a more even playing field, new electoral coalitions formed, voter sophistication and participation increased, and other factors made incumbents less certain of winning.

These patterns at first seem counterintuitive, but are plainly logical. Violence is on the menu of options that parties and candidates have to win elections. But there is a natural disincentive to deploy violence. It is easy to detect, makes the perpetrators look bad, and can result in sanctions. So what are the preferred alternatives? Fraud, intimidation, negative campaigning, slander, fear creation -- the quieter the means of coercion, the better.

But reforms disrupt the usual pathways and make fraud more difficult. So throughout history and across countries, reform tends to be correlated with violence.

Take, for example, Kentucky. Prior to the introduction of the secret ballot in Louisville in 1888, the Democratic political machine would pay clerks to mark blank ballots and buy votes from white and African-American voters alike.

In his research on the effects of electoral reform on political violence, historian Tracy Campbell **finds that** ballot secrecy undercut these strategies and forced the machine to resort to more flagrant means to manipulate the outcome-threatening jobs, using police to suppress turnout in the African American neighborhoods that tended to vote Republican, and moving polling stations after long lines formed. Seventeen years later, when the new Fusionist party, which had multi-ethnic support, entered the scene and threatened its dominance, the machine intensified its use of police violence and intimidation. Those attending Fusionist rallies were "whacked with sticks," Fusionist candidates and voters were thrown out of polling stations, ballot boxes were taken at gunpoint by armed thugs, and those seeking to document the tactics with cameras were driven "off the streets."

When the Democrats won, the Fusionists challenged the results with the evidence they had amassed, and Kentucky's high court ruled in 1907 that extensive fraud and violence had disenfranchised 6,296 voters and overturned the result because it had been "designed in fraud, backed up by vilification and abuse." While Kentucky and other states would still witness both fraud and intimidation, the decision was the first of its kind and would not have been possible had the rise in violence not drawn attention to the problem and bolstered the voices of those calling for reform.

But this example is only one among many, indicating that electoral violence is intrinsic to the process of democratization.

Violence is a symptom and a sign of a strengthened electoral system. At the same time, it creates the outrage necessary for further reform. Violence and reform feed into each other cyclically.

Increased instances of violence in modern elections is not a sign that these countries cannot cope with democratization. Instead, it is because international norms and pressure have condensed the process of democratization for contemporary nascent democracies -- versus in the 1800s when the process could be more incremental -- that we see more electoral violence across the world today.

Thanks to a growing body of research on election violence in a variety of contexts, including data from Pakistan's 2008 elections, the dynamics of violence driven by parties, candidates, and their supporters are well understood. What remains for Pakistan to figure out is what the intensification of militant violence directed at the political process means for the future.

For candidates, violence is a means of winning within the democratic system. For militants, electoral violence is a strategy meant to re-engineer that system or seek its very demise because it is a form of government in which they cannot compete and win based on the merits of their policy ideas and vision for society.

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