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Violence on the Horizon: Elections and Conflict 2018-2019

by David Carment and James Floch
April 2018

POLICY UPDATE

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I n 2018 the world will witness 63 elections, 20 of which will occur in highly unstable or conflict-ridden states. Chief among these are May elections in Venezuela where a humanitarian catastrophe is looming, the Democratic Republic of Congo – where Joseph Kabila recently announced he will not stand for the presidency, creating a power vacuum the country has not seen for 15 years – and Zimbabwe, which is emerging from economic and political calamity. There is also the possibility of even greater volatility in violence-ridden South Sudan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Mali. 2019 will see another 54 elections, 11 of which will take place in countries that are fragile or unstable. These are the findings from our recent study documenting incidences of politically related violence in fragile and unstable states which we describe in greater detail below.

The most contentious elections in 2018 and 2019 will take place at the national level where voters will have a chance to select their president or prime minister, while a minority are local elections in which the chances of conflict escalation and diffusion could undermine what limited security the country has. Our research, drawing on the Country Indicators for Foreign Policy (CIFP) fragile states project tells us that political violence often reaches its peak before, during and after elections in situations where contestation involves countries with little or no experience in managing peaceful democratic transitions. Targeted political assassinations, terrorist bombings, political protests and clashes all make up the panoply of possibilities. Weak, conflict-ridden fragile states are the most prone. When poorly governed states are unable to meet their citizens' needs, competing interest groups emerge and revert to violence as a means of toppling existing powers.

With so many elections taking place over the course of the next year or so, we are motivated to ask which countries are most at risk. To evaluate the probability of election violence and to assess its likely impact on a country-by-country basis we draw on two sources: CIFP from Carleton University and the Global Conflict Risk Index (GCRI) produced by the European Union.[1] Our approach to forecasting electoral violence draws on a sample of 117 elections taking place in 2018 and 2019. Looking ahead to elections occurring throughout 2018 and into 2019, we assess those countries that may be most at risk of conflict and identify the primary factors driving violence in these cases. Through this, we may come to better inform policy-makers and other stakeholders of the underlying factors which make election violence more likely, allowing for the consideration of preventative measures to reduce and contain electoral-related violence.

Generally speaking, weak democracies are the most threatened and vulnerable to conflict as the previously solid foundations of authoritarian rule erode. It is not uncommon for emerging democracies to experience relatively volatile conditions, particularly during times of power transition, such as elections. Recent incidents in Kenya and Liberia late last year highlight this probability and have prompted further investigation of the issue.[2]

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[1] http://conflictrisk.jrc.ec.europa.eu
[2] This study is a starting point to highlight countries most at risk. Probabilistic analysis will follow in a later report as we dig deeper into each country's risk indicators in greater detail.

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As noted, these include elections at differing levels (local, territorial, federal, presidential, etc.) and span all regions of the world. Some countries will undergo multiple elections at different points over the two-year period, making them potentially more vulnerable. Others will be holding elections in the midst of large-scale war or humanitarian disaster.

Our analysis rests primarily on the employment of six key variables: using CIFP's fragility index[3] as our baseline and then the categories of authority,[4] and security and crime, which are more specifically tied to political-violence behaviour.[5] From the GCRI, we have selected government effectiveness[6] and recent internal conflict[7] in order to look more precisely at histories of conflict within countries, as well as the state's capacity to contain, carry or inhibit its occurrence. In ranking our countries by risk we also consider the type of the election, operating under the assumption that more significant elections (i.e., federal, general or presidential) are more prone to violence than more localized elections, given the elevated nature of the stakes involved.

Our first-stage analysis involves classification of the sample according to the ranked indexes of fragility, authority, and security and crime. The rationale behind this first stage is grounded in the idea that states characterized by fragility, deficiencies in authority and elevated levels of crime and insecurity are vulnerable to disruptive forces and more likely to fall victim to election violence. In order to narrow the focus of the list so as to capture the cases most at risk, we chose to look exclusively at federal or country-wide level elections.

Scores in each index range from roughly one to nine, with higher scores indicating weaker performance. The index scores were then added to create the total score, which enabled ranking of the countries based on risk and generating a top 10. Simply put, for a country to be considered at risk of electoral violence it has to be holding national-level elections, score poorly in its overall fragility rank, and have poor authority and security crime scores. After applying these criteria, the following countries were considered at greatest risk of election-related violence.[8]

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[3] According to CIFP's conceptualization, states need to exhibit three essential properties: authority, legitimacy and capacity (ALC) to function properly. Fragility measures the extent to which the state's actual characteristics differ from its ideal situation (www.carleton.ca/cifp).

[4] Authority measures the extent to which a state can enact binding legislation over its population, to control its territory and to provide core public goods and security to its population (www.carleton.ca/cifp).

[5] The security and crime cluster covers a range of measures that tap into the presence of low-intensity violence and threats to human security as well as the occurrence of terrorism and organized crime.

[6] Government effectiveness is taken from the World Bank's Worldwide Governance Indicators database. The original data are an estimate of government effectiveness based on a range of factors, such as perceptions of the quality of public services, civil services, and these services' independence from political control http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/#home .

[7] Conflict history is not only important because the old conflict might continue, but because the presence of weapons and experienced fighters makes it easier for violence to continue or restart.

[8] Countries holding local-level elections (provincial, territorial, municipal, etc.) that exhibited high risk (scores of 6.0 or above) were ranked below these and are not included in the tables.

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Table 1 below contains the top 10 high-risk elections of 2018 based on the analysis outlined above. They are ranked in order of highest to lowest risk.

Rank	Country	Type of Election	Year	Fragility	Authority	Security & Crime	Total
1	South Sudan	President	2018	7.63	8.38	8.90	24.92
2	Chad	Parliamentary	2019	7.30	7.73	7.75	22.78
3	Iraq	General	2018	5.88	7.33	8.49	21.70
4	Pakistan	National Assembly	2018	6.21	7.05	8.42	21.67
5	Mali	President + National Assembly	2018	6.34	6.71	8.06	21.10
6	Libya	Parliamentary	2018	5.42	6.84	8.63	20.89
7	Democratic Republic of Congo	General	2018	6.46	7.06	6.96	20.48
8	Lebanon	Parliamentary	2018	5.63	6.34	8.27	20.24
9	Mauritania	National Assembly	2018	6.46	5.94	7.66	20.06
10	Guinea	National Assembly	2018	6.15	6.61	7.04	19.80

Table 2 below contains the top 10 at-risk elections in 2019 according to the analysis outlined above. They are ranked in order of highest to lowest risk.

Rank	Country	Type of Election	Year	Fragility	Authority	Security & Crime	Total
1	Haiti	Parliamentary	2019	6.71	5.78	8.77	21.26
2	Ukraine	President + Parliamentary	2019	5.13	7.17	8.23	20.54
3	Afghanistan	President	2019	6.51	7.17	5.62	19.30
4	Algeria	President	2019	5.41	6.16	6.28	17.85
5	India	General	2019	5.18	5.94	5.77	16.90
6	Mozambique	General	2019	5.85	5.86	4.91	16.62
7	Israel	Parliamentary	2019	4.08	4.50	7.86	16.44
8	Senegal	President	2019	5.43	5.21	5.75	16.40
9	Venezuela	President	2019	5.72	6.43	4.21	16.36
10	Nigeria	General	2019	6.12	6.83	3.30	16.24

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In our second stage of analysis, the same process was conducted using GCRI data on government effectiveness and recent internal conflict. The rationale for this operation was to include data points which are more specific to incidences of political violence. While fragility, authority, and security and crime may identify potential structural weaknesses within a country, the GCRI data helps to pinpoint whether the country has recently experienced episodes of political violence and whether the state can contain or prevent such violence. In short, we aim to compare our results in the first table against estimates of violence occurrence to identify high-impact outcomes.

Table 3 (below) contains the top 10 at-risk elections in 2018 according to the analysis outlined above. They are ranked in order of highest to lowest risk. GCRI scores range from 0-10 rather than 1-9, as in CIFP.

Rank	Country	Type of Election	Year	Government Effectiveness	Internal Conflict	Total
1	South Sudan	President	2018	9.40	10.00	19.40
2	Libya	Parliamentary	2018	8.40	10.00	18.40
3	Chad	Parliamentary	2018	7.90	10.00	17.90
4	Afghanistan	Parliamentary	2018	7.70	10.00	17.70
5	Iraq	General	2018	7.50	10.00	17.50
6	Democratic Republic of Congo	General	2018	8.20	9.00	17.20
7	Cameroon	National Assembly	2018	6.50	10.00	16.50
8	Pakistan	National Assembly	2018	6.30	10.00	16.30
9	Egypt	President	2018	6.50	8.00	14.50
10	Mexico	President	2018	4.50	10.00	14.50

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Table 4 (below) contains the top 10 at-risk elections in 2019 according to the analysis outlined above. They are ranked in order of highest to lowest risk.

Rank	Country	Type of Election	Year	Government Effectiveness	Internal Conflict	Total
1	Afghanistan	President	2019	7.70	10.00	17.70
2	Nigeria	General	2019	6.20	10.00	16.20
3	Ukraine	President	2019	6.00	10.00	16.00
4	Haiti	Parliamentary	2019	9.00	6.00	15.00
5	Turkey	General	2019	4.50	10.00	14.50
6	Bangladesh	Parliamentary	2019	6.40	7.00	13.40
7	India	General	2019	4.70	8.50	13.20
8	Venezuela	President	2019	7.40	5.00	12.40
9	Indonesia	General	2019	5.40	7.00	12.40
10	Guatemala	General	2019	6.40	6.00	12.40

Given the varying results presented in the first two stages, it is clear that risk can vary significantly based on which factors are weighed more heavily. For example, if it is judged that risk of violence stems primarily from structural weakness, countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia or Turkey would not be considered at risk. Conversely, when government effectiveness and recent internal conflict are introduced, these countries join the ranks of those at risk.

Given these facts, the final stage of our analysis aims to combine the two risk assessments in order to generate a more definitive and multi-faceted list. This will be done through simple summation of the indexes in order to calculate a total risk score. This final ranking reflects the following: The capacity of a country to absorb the risk of police violence, thus attenuating the possibility of rapid escalation, previous incidences of political violence and the quality of the state's governance structures to ensure a violence-free transition in power.

Table 5 (below) presents the results from the final part of our analysis, which is a ranking of the top 20 highest risk elections in 2018 and 2019, based on a combination of total risk scores. The elections identified in this final list exhibit an overall structural weakness coupled with demonstrable risk of violence and limited ability of the state to contain it.

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Rank	Country	Type of Election	Year	Month	Total Risk Score
1	South Sudan	President	2018	July	44.32
2	Chad	Parliamentary	2018	TBA	40.68
3	Libya	Parliamentary	2018	TBA	39.29
4	Iraq	General	2018	May	39.20
5	Pakistan	National Assembly	2018	December	37.97
6	Democratic Republic of Congo	General	2018	TBA	37.68
7	Afghanistan	President	2019	TBA	37.00
8	Ukraine	President	2019	TBA	36.54
9	Haiti	Parliamentary	2019	TBA	36.26
10	Cameroon	National Assembly	2018	December	35.85
11	Mali	President	2018	December	34.90
12	Lebanon	Parliamentary	2018	May	33.14
13	Guinea	National Assembly	2018	December	33.10
14	Egypt	President	2018	May	32.75
15	Nigeria	General	2019	TBA	32.44
16	Mauritania	National Assembly	2018	December	32.06
17	Zimbabwe	President	2018	July	30.90
18	Colombia	President	2018	May	30.46
19	India	General	2019	April	30.10
20	Turkey	General	2019	November	29.82

Key Findings

South Sudan is the country most at risk of election violence, scoring significantly higher than all other countries in nearly every cluster, with Chad, Libya, Iraq and Pakistan rounding out the top five. Making up the rest of the list are fragile states located primarily in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, as well as sub-Saharan Africa. Outside of these regions are Ukraine, Colombia, India and Turkey where risk is driven largely by recent internal conflict, with Turkey and Ukraine each scoring a full 10 out of a possible 10. At the lower end of the list are Turkey, India, Colombia, Zimbabwe and Mauritania. Though registering lower scores than some of their

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counterparts in the top 20, each of these countries faces significant internal challenges which do not make them immune to election violence. This is especially the case in Zimbabwe, where upcoming elections may disrupt the relative stability which has set in since former president Robert Mugabe's resignation. A similarly volatile situation exists in Turkey since the failed military coup in 2016 which has ratcheted up tensions in the country, resulting in the imprisonment of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's political opponents and the repression of civil society.

Among this list are seven countries with upcoming presidential elections. These are South Sudan, Afghanistan, Mali, Ukraine, Egypt, Zimbabwe and Colombia. Given their significance, these elections may be at increased risk of violence or conflict. Two especially interesting cases here are Ukraine and Colombia. In Ukraine, this will be the first election held since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2015 and may thus serve to trigger a further political clash between pro-Western and pro-Russian stakeholders in the country. In Colombia, this election will be the first held since the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) peace agreement was signed in 2016, and will thus be a true test of whether the deal's provisions have established a stable political environment in which government leaders and former rebels can co-operate. Notably absent on our list is Venezuela, whose cluster scores did not place in the top 20. Though appearing more stable by the quantitative scoring, recent events in the country are indicative of instability. Most notably, unilateral constitutional and structural changes enacted by President Nicolas Maduro and his supporters, the de facto elimination of the opposition, and the country's rapidly deteriorating economy causing severe food and supply shortages are each possible causes for violence and conflict in the upcoming May election.

Policy Implications

Of the 20 countries above, Canada has some direct involvement in at least five, including Mali where a recent decision was taken to deploy a task force in support of the United Nations mission MINUSMA. Other countries of importance include Ukraine, Lebanon, Haiti and Iraq where Canada has been active on several fronts and has made considerable political and economic investment. While we should not be surprised by the report's findings, it is important to recognize that all of these coming elections could well portend the future of democracy on a global scale.

Unstable situations prevail in many countries that are attempting to move towards a more popular, democratic state, or have recently transitioned from former centralized authoritarian rule. This echoes the concept of the "J-curve" which we have expounded on in related research on democratic backsliding. The implication is that the process of democratization can render countries vulnerable to conflict, as the previously solid foundations of authoritarian rule erode. The overriding concern is that increased conflict and violence, especially around election time, could cause these countries to backslide towards authoritarianism. [9]

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[9] https://www.wider.unu.edu/sites/default/files/Publications/Working-paper/PDF/wp2017-170.pdf

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▶ About the Author

David Carment is a full Professor of International Affairs at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, Carleton University and Fellow of the Canadian Global Affairs Institute (CGAI). He is also a NATO Fellow and listed in Who's Who in International Affairs. In addition Professor Carment serves as the principal investigator for the Country Indicators for Foreign Policy project (CIFP).

Professor Carment has served as Director of the Centre for Security and Defence Studies at Carleton University and is the recipient of a Carleton Graduate Student's teaching excellence award, SSHRC fellowships and research awards, Carleton University's research achievement award, and a Petro-Canada Young Innovator Award. Professor Carment has held fellowships at the Kennedy School, Harvard and the Hoover Institution, Stanford. and currently heads a team of researchers that evaluates policy effectiveness in failed and fragile states (see Country Indicators for Foreign Policy). Recent publications on these topics appear in the Harvard International Review and the Journal of Conflict Management and Peace Science.

James Floch is an M.A. candidate in International Affairs at Carleton University specializing in International Organizations and Global Public Policy. He holds a bachelor's degree in social sciences from the University of Ottawa, with a specialization in sociology and a minor in Public Administration. His research interests include international organizations and international political economy as well as conflict studies and country risk analysis.

▶ Canadian Global Affairs Institute

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