



## JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

Volume 2, Number 1 (March 2026)

ISSN: 1595-9457 (online); 3093-060X (print)

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Received: February 09, 2026 Accepted: March 05, 2026 Published: March 31, 2026

Citation: Miebi, Gbe A. (2026). "Electoral Violence and Democratic Backsliding: A Security Analysis of Emerging Democracies." *Journal of Philosophy and Contemporary Issues*, 2 (1): 75-85.

Article

Open Access

### ELECTORAL VIOLENCE AND DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING: A SECURITY ANALYSIS OF EMERGING DEMOCRACIES

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#### **Abstract**

Electoral violence has emerged as a critical threat to the consolidation of democracy in emerging democracies, undermining political stability, social cohesion, and institutional legitimacy. This study examined the complex relationship between electoral violence and democratic backsliding, focusing on how insecurity, intimidation, and partisan conflict during electoral periods erode democratic norms and compromise governance structures. Employing a security-focused analytical framework, the research utilizes a comparative case study approach, drawing on instances from selected emerging democracies to identify patterns, causes, and consequences of electoral violence. The analysis revealed that electoral violence often manifests through organized political militias, partisan security forces, and societal polarization, creating a feedback loop that weakens democratic institutions and fosters authoritarian tendencies. The study demonstrates that the impact of electoral violence extends beyond the immediate election period, influencing citizen trust in democratic processes, undermining rule of law, and impeding effective policy implementation. Policy implications highlight the need for comprehensive security sector reforms, strengthened electoral oversight, early-warning mechanisms, and community-based interventions to prevent electoral violence and promote democratic resilience. By integrating security analysis with democratic theory, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the conditions under which electoral violence accelerates democratic backsliding and provides actionable recommendations for policymakers, civil society actors, and international organizations committed to safeguarding democratic governance in fragile contexts.

**Keywords:** Electoral Violence, Democratic Backsliding, Emerging Democracies, Security Analysis, Political Stability, Institutional Resilience, Governance, Conflict Prevention.

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## **Introduction**

Electoral violence constitutes a spectrum of coercive behaviours including physical, psychological, and structural acts aimed at influencing electoral processes before, during, or after elections through intimidation, harm, or suppression of political participation (Kovacs, 2018). This form of violence undermines not only the immediate conduct of elections but the broader legitimacy of democratic institutions by subverting free, fair, and competitive political competition. Electoral violence can manifest as threats, intimidation at polling stations, targeted attacks on candidates and voters, or broader communal clashes triggered by partisan competition. Its effect is a compromised electoral environment in which citizens cannot freely express political preferences without fear of retribution. Such coercive dynamics intensify uncertainties surrounding the democratic process, thereby inhibiting electoral integrity and political inclusiveness. Electoral violence, by eroding public trust in elections and political institutions, becomes a catalyst for democratic decline when left unchecked. Democratic backsliding refers to the process through which established or emerging democracies experience a deterioration in institutional norms, practices and the protections that underpin democratic governance. This phenomenon frequently involves narrowing civic and political space, weakening electoral integrity, and concentrating power in ways that restrict citizen participation and accountability mechanisms. Democratic backsliding is understood as a systemic weakening of democratic checks and balances, often leading to authoritarian tendencies within formally electoral systems.

Electoral integrity the adherence to principles of transparency, accountability and competitiveness in election administration is fundamental to democratic consolidation. Credible electoral processes enable regular alternation of power and political renewal through citizen choice, thereby reinforcing democratic legitimacy, participation, and institutional stability. When electoral integrity is compromised by violence, these democratic foundations are severely weakened. Contemporary trends indicate that electoral violence continues to plague many emerging democracies globally, from sub-Saharan Africa to parts of Asia and Latin America, often intensifying in transitional contexts where institutional capacity is limited and political cleavages are deep. The persistence of electoral violence in emerging democracies underscores the fragility of democratic norms and the pressing need to analyze its drivers and consequences comprehensively. Emerging democracies frequently confront the challenge of consolidating democratic practices amid persistent socio-political tensions. Electoral violence undermines democratic consolidation by eroding confidence in electoral processes, deterring citizen participation, and legitimizing political actors who rely on coercion rather than democratic persuasion. It contributes to weakened institutional authority, as electoral management bodies and security apparatuses are either unable or unwilling to prevent or respond effectively to violence, thereby creating a permissive environment that emboldens anti-democratic behaviours. This interplay between political violence, security challenges, and institutional weaknesses poses a significant threat to the democratic trajectories of emerging states, often precipitating cycles of instability and political fragmentation. The primary objectives of this research are:

- i. To analyze the underlying causes and patterns of electoral violence in emerging democracies;
- ii. To assess the impact of electoral violence on democratic institutions and public trust; and
- iii. To propose security-oriented strategies that can mitigate electoral violence and strengthen democratic resilience.

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- i. What are the key drivers of electoral violence in emerging democracies?
- ii. How does electoral violence contribute to democratic backsliding?
- iii. What security measures can prevent or mitigate electoral violence?

This study is significant to multiple stakeholders. For political scientists, it adds to the theoretical understanding of the intersection between electoral conflict and democratic erosion. Security analysts benefit from insights on how violence interacts with institutional fragility. Policymakers and electoral management bodies can use the findings to craft strategies that safeguard electoral integrity and enhance institutional capacity. Civil society organizations and international actors will find the recommendations useful for designing interventions aimed at reducing violence and strengthening democratic participation.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

**Electoral Violence:** Electoral violence refers to organized acts or threats physical, psychological, and structural aimed at influencing, disrupting, or undermining electoral processes and outcomes. These acts may occur before, during, or after elections and can range from intimidation and propaganda to physical assault, destruction of electoral materials, or manipulation of election officials to influence results (Kovacs, 2025). Pre-election violence includes intimidation and clashes during political campaigns or intra-party contests, while election day violence often manifests in ballot box snatching, voter suppression, and attacks on polling stations (ACR Journal, 2025;). Post-election violence typically emerges when electoral outcomes are contested or perceived as illegitimate, resulting in protests, riots, or sustained conflict that undermines democratic legitimacy. These various manifestations demonstrate how electoral violence jeopardizes not only individual safety but also the integrity and credibility of democratic competition.

**Democratic Backsliding:** Democratic backsliding denotes the erosion of democratic norms, institutions, and processes within a political system that remains formally democratic. It involves a regression toward authoritarian practices, including weakened electoral integrity, restricted civil liberties, diminished checks and balances, and concentrated executive authority (Democratic backsliding, 2025). Indicators of backsliding include deterioration in free and fair elections, diminished press freedom, limitations on civil society, and erosion of judicial independence. The consequences extend beyond procedural democratic erosion to systemic shifts where democratic mechanisms exist in form but are hollowed out in substance, reducing meaningful citizen participation and accountability (Democratic backsliding, 2025).

**Security Analysis:** A security analysis framework examines threats both physical and structural to democratic processes, focusing on how electoral violence arises, how it is managed or mitigated, and how security actors interact with political institutions. This approach considers the roles of law enforcement, electoral management bodies, and non-state actors in either exacerbating or containing violence. It emphasizes that insufficient security planning, politicized security forces, and weak institutional oversight create vulnerabilities that can be exploited to undermine electoral integrity and democratic stability.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

**Democratic Peace Theory:** Democratic Peace Theory traditionally explains the relative absence of war between democratic states due to shared norms, institutional checks, and

mutual accountability. Scholars argue that democracies institutionalize mechanisms for conflict resolution, negotiation, and transparency, which reduce the likelihood of recourse to violence (Russett & Oneal, 2001). When applied to domestic politics, the theory suggests that states with strong democratic institutions and civic norms are less prone to internal political violence, including electoral violence. In emerging democracies, the absence or weakness of these institutional mechanisms can create incentives for political actors to bypass peaceful processes, resorting instead to coercion, intimidation, or electoral manipulation to secure political advantage (Diamond, 2008). Thus, the theory highlights the critical link between democratic institutional strength, political stability, and the capacity to prevent electoral conflicts, providing a normative and analytical lens to assess how electoral violence undermines democratic consolidation.

**Political Violence Theory:** Political Violence Theory examines the structural, social, and individual factors that drive groups or actors to employ force in pursuit of political objectives (Tilly, 2003). Electoral violence is considered a specific form of political violence in which coercion is used to influence electoral outcomes. Key drivers include intense competition for political power, socio-economic inequalities, ethnic or religious cleavages, weak law enforcement, and limited access to formal political channels (Hughes, 2017). The theory underscores that electoral violence is rarely random; it is strategic, goal-oriented, and often facilitated by systemic vulnerabilities in governance and security structures. Understanding these dynamics enables policymakers and security analysts to identify risk factors, design preventive interventions, and strengthen resilience against democratic erosion.

**Institutional Decay Theory:** Institutional Decay Theory emphasizes the role of institutional weakness in facilitating democratic backsliding and political instability (North, 1990). It posits that when institutions such as electoral commissions, judiciaries, and security agencies lose legitimacy, capacity, or impartiality, they become ineffective in enforcing rules, maintaining order, and ensuring accountability. In emerging democracies, such institutional weaknesses create a permissive environment for electoral violence, as actors perceive low risk for transgressions and little likelihood of enforcement. Recurrent electoral violence further accelerates institutional erosion by undermining public trust, reducing compliance with democratic norms, and enabling authoritarian tendencies. This theoretical lens is crucial for analyzing how the interplay between institutional fragility and political conflict contributes to democratic backsliding in emerging democracies.

## **Methodology**

**Research Design:** This study adopts a desk research design that relied on secondary sources that provide both quantitative and qualitative data. The qualitative component involves in-depth examination of historical accounts, policy documents, and scholarly literature, enabling a nuanced understanding of the contextual, socio-political, and institutional factors underlying electoral violence (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The quantitative component utilizes secondary data from electoral commission records, security incident reports, and election observation datasets to identify trends, patterns, and correlations between electoral violence and indicators of democratic erosion. A comparative case study approach is employed to analyze selected emerging democracies, allowing for cross-national comparison and identification of contextual similarities and differences (Yin, 2018). This approach facilitates the exploration of both generalizable patterns and country-specific dynamics, capturing the interaction between institutional capacity, security arrangements, and socio-political factors that influence electoral outcomes. Case selection is based on

criteria such as recent history of electoral violence, availability of reliable data, and variations in institutional strength and democratic consolidation levels.

### **Data Sources**

The study relies primarily on secondary data sources, including:

- i. Electoral commission reports: official election results, incident logs, and procedural assessments;
- ii. Security agency records: documentation of pre-election, election-day, and post-election violence;
- iii. Media reports: coverage of electoral conflicts, protests, and violence-related events; and
- iv. Scholarly publications: peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and policy papers analyzing electoral violence, democratic backsliding, and institutional capacity (Kovacs, 2018).

Triangulation of these sources enhances data validity, ensuring a more robust and multi-dimensional understanding of the causes, manifestations, and consequences of electoral violence.

### **Analytical Framework**

The study adopts a security-focused analytical framework to examine electoral violence, emphasizing identification of:

- i. Patterns: recurring types of violence across election cycles;
- ii. Hotspots: geographical areas most prone to electoral violence; and
- iii. Triggers: political, social, or institutional factors that precipitate violence (Hughes, 2017).

For democratic backsliding, the analysis focuses on specific indicators, including:

- i. Constitutional violations: breaches of legal provisions governing elections and governance;
- ii. Manipulation of electoral processes: tampering with voter registration, ballot counts, or election procedures; and
- iii. Restrictions on civil liberties: constraints on freedom of speech, assembly, press, or political participation (Diamond, 2008).

By integrating security analysis with democratic backsliding indicators, this study links patterns of electoral violence to broader institutional and political consequences, offering insights into both immediate threats and long-term democratic erosion.

### **Patterns and Causes of Electoral Violence in Emerging Democracies**

**Common Forms of Electoral Violence:** Electoral violence manifests in multiple forms, reflecting both physical and non-physical strategies aimed at influencing electoral outcomes. Physical attacks remain the most visible form, encompassing assaults on political opponents, candidates, election officials, and voters, often escalating to riots, arson, and in extreme cases, political assassinations (Igbuzor, 2010). Such violence typically occurs in high-stakes elections or in regions where political competition is intense and societal tensions are pronounced. With the advent of digital technology, cyber and information warfare has emerged as a contemporary form of electoral violence. This includes the dissemination of disinformation, hacking of electoral databases, manipulation of social media narratives, and coordinated campaigns to undermine public trust in electoral integrity (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016). These non-physical forms of violence can exacerbate polarization, provoke offline

conflicts, and delegitimize electoral outcomes, highlighting the need to broaden security analysis beyond conventional physical threats.

### **Drivers of Electoral Violence**

Electoral violence is typically the product of complex, interrelated drivers:

- i. **Political Competition and Party Rivalry:** High-stakes contests and zero-sum perceptions of electoral outcomes create incentives for political actors to use coercion or violence to secure advantage (Hughes, 2017). Weak enforcement of electoral laws further incentivizes such behaviors.
- ii. **Ethno-Religious Tensions and Social Divisions:** Deep-seated societal cleavages based on ethnicity, religion, or regional identities often become politicized during elections, serving as flashpoints for violence (Osaghae, 2007). Parties may mobilize identity-based grievances to consolidate support, which can escalate into intergroup conflict.
- iii. **Weak Institutions and Ineffective Law Enforcement:** Institutional decay, including compromised electoral commissions, politicized security agencies, and an inefficient judiciary, undermines accountability and deterrence, facilitating electoral violence (North, 1990).
- iv. **External Interference and Influence Operations:** International or transnational actors may exacerbate electoral violence through funding, strategic advisories, or disinformation campaigns, particularly in fragile emerging democracies where domestic institutions are unable to regulate such influences effectively (Levitsky & Way, 2010).

### **Electoral Violence in Emerging Democracy**

- i. **Nigeria:** Electoral violence in Nigeria has been characterized by pre-election clashes between party loyalists, post-election riots, and targeted attacks on political figures. These episodes often correlate with ethno-religious tensions, particularly in the North and South-South regions (Igbuzor, 2010).
- ii. **Kenya:** The 2007-2008 post-election violence in Kenya exemplifies how tightly contested elections combined with ethnic mobilization can lead to large-scale riots, property destruction, and loss of life, exposing institutional weaknesses in electoral dispute resolution (Reilly, 2011).
- iii. **Bangladesh:** Electoral processes in Bangladesh are frequently marked by party-led street protests, strikes, and violent clashes between rival political factions, particularly around voter registration and polling station security (Riaz, 2013).
- iv. **Venezuela:** In Venezuela, both physical intimidation and information manipulation have been used to consolidate political power, illustrating the combined effect of institutional decay and partisan control over media and security forces (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

These cases collectively demonstrate that electoral violence in emerging democracies is both context-specific and shaped by structural vulnerabilities, highlighting the need for comprehensive, security-informed strategies to mitigate risks and protect democratic integrity.

### **Electoral Violence and Democratic Backsliding**

**Erosion of Democratic Norms:** Electoral violence undermines the foundational norms of democracy by compromising the principles of political equality, transparency, and accountability. In emerging democracies, the decline in free and fair elections is a major manifestation of this erosion. Intimidation of voters, targeted attacks on opposition candidates, and manipulation of electoral results create an environment in which citizens

cannot exercise their political rights freely (Hughes, 2017). These practices delegitimize the electoral process, reduce electoral competitiveness, and increase public skepticism regarding the authenticity of democratic outcomes (Igbuzor, 2010). Moreover, judicial independence and oversight institutions are often weakened in contexts of electoral violence. Courts may be pressured, undermined, or co-opted by political elites to legitimize contested results or shield perpetrators of electoral violence from accountability (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Similarly, election management bodies, which are meant to ensure neutrality, may be politicized or incapacitated, diminishing their capacity to enforce electoral laws effectively. The suppression of political dissent and civil society, including restrictions on protests, media censorship, and harassment of opposition actors, further erodes democratic space, reducing opportunities for public scrutiny and civic engagement (Diamond, 2008). Collectively, these trends represent a gradual erosion of democratic norms, which creates fertile ground for systematic democratic backsliding.

**Institutional and Security Implications:** Electoral violence has profound institutional and security implications, undermining both the effectiveness and legitimacy of state institutions. One critical consequence is the politicization of security forces, wherein law enforcement and paramilitary units are deployed to favor ruling parties or suppress opposition, rather than impartially maintaining public order (Osaghae, 2007). This compromises the neutrality of security apparatuses and may result in direct participation of state actors in acts of electoral violence, further delegitimizing state institutions. The threats to state stability and rule of law are also significant. Electoral violence disrupts governance functions, erodes adherence to constitutional provisions, and weakens institutional oversight. It often escalates into post-election conflicts, which can result in widespread destruction of property, displacement of populations, and long-term socio-political instability (Reilly, 2011). The inability of institutions to respond effectively to electoral violence signals systemic weaknesses that not only facilitate recurring violence but also enable authoritarian tendencies to emerge, weakening democratic consolidation.

**Socio-Political Consequences:** Beyond institutional decay, electoral violence has severe socio-political consequences for citizens and society at large. Citizen disenfranchisement and political apathy are common outcomes, as individuals lose confidence in the electoral system and refrain from participating in subsequent political processes (Igbuzor, 2010). This decline in political engagement reduces the responsiveness of the government to citizen needs and further entrenches elite control over the political system. Electoral violence also exacerbates polarization and radicalization of political actors, as parties and social groups adopt extreme positions in response to threats or systemic injustices (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Such polarization undermines the potential for consensus-building and collaborative governance, fostering a cycle of confrontation and mistrust that is detrimental to democratic stability. Finally, these dynamics contribute to the reduced legitimacy of democratic institutions, which is both a cause and consequence of democratic backsliding. As institutions lose credibility, they become less capable of preventing or responding to violence, further weakening electoral integrity and facilitating authoritarian consolidation. This interplay between electoral violence, institutional decay, and societal polarization underscores the multidimensional nature of democratic backsliding in emerging democracies (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

## **Security Oriented Strategies Towards Mitigating Electoral Violence**

**Strengthening Institutional Capacity:** Strengthening institutional capacity is central to mitigating electoral violence and promoting democratic consolidation in emerging democracies. Electoral commission reforms are critical for ensuring independence, transparency, and credibility in election administration. Reforms may include merit-based recruitment of electoral officials, technological enhancements for voter registration and result transmission, and mechanisms for impartial adjudication of electoral disputes (Kovacs, 2018). Security sector reform and professionalization is equally essential. Professional, depoliticized security forces can prevent partisan manipulation and respond effectively to electoral threats without infringing on civil liberties. Training, accountability mechanisms, and civilian oversight help reduce abuses and enhance public trust in the security apparatus (Hughes, 2017). Further, the rule of law and judicial accountability must be reinforced. Judicial institutions should have the capacity to adjudicate electoral disputes impartially, prosecute violations of electoral law, and uphold constitutional provisions. Strengthened judicial oversight ensures that violations do not go unpunished, deterring potential perpetrators and reinforcing democratic norms (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018).

**Conflict Prevention Strategies:** Proactive strategies are vital for preventing electoral violence before it escalates. Early warning systems and monitoring of electoral hotspots enable timely interventions by security agencies, civil society, and electoral management bodies. Mapping risk-prone areas and historical patterns of violence allows for targeted resource deployment and preventive measures (Reilly, 2011). Civic education and political tolerance campaigns foster informed citizenry and encourage peaceful engagement. Promoting awareness of electoral rights, dispute resolution mechanisms, and the importance of democratic norms reduces susceptibility to manipulation and incitement to violence (Diamond, 2008). Engagement with traditional, religious, and community leaders provides a grassroots mechanism for conflict mitigation. These leaders often have the trust and influence necessary to mediate disputes, discourage violence, and mobilize communities toward non-violent electoral participation (Igbuzor, 2010).

**Regional and International Mechanisms:** Regional and international bodies play a pivotal role in mitigating electoral violence and supporting democratic resilience. Organizations such as the African Union (AU), ECOWAS, and the Organization of American States (OAS) facilitate preventive diplomacy, mediate disputes, and provide technical and logistical support for credible elections (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Peacekeeping and observation missions serve as deterrents to violence by monitoring elections, reporting irregularities, and providing security assistance where necessary. Electoral assistance programs, including technical support, observer missions, and capacity-building initiatives, strengthen the legitimacy of elections and reinforce international norms for democratic conduct (Reilly, 2011).

### **Recommendations**

Based on the security analysis, several key recommendations emerge:

- i. Integrate security analysis into electoral planning to identify risks, allocate resources effectively, and design preventive measures tailored to local contexts.
- ii. Promote multi-stakeholder collaboration among electoral commissions, security agencies, civil society, political parties, and regional organizations to safeguard democratic processes and foster inclusive dialogue.
- iii. Institutionalize early warning and conflict resolution mechanisms to ensure timely responses to potential flashpoints, particularly in ethnically or politically volatile regions.

- iv. Enhance civic education and political tolerance programs to build a culture of non-violent electoral participation, emphasizing the importance of democratic norms and citizen responsibility.

Implementing these strategies requires political will, institutional resilience, and sustained engagement from both domestic and international actors to reduce electoral violence and prevent democratic backsliding in emerging democracies.

### **Conclusion**

Electoral violence poses a significant challenge to democratic consolidation in emerging democracies, as it undermines institutional legitimacy, erodes public trust, and disrupts governance mechanisms. This study has shown that electoral violence is multifaceted, encompassing physical attacks, intimidation, riots, arson, political assassinations, and increasingly, cyber and information warfare. These manifestations, whether occurring before, during, or after elections, have direct implications for electoral integrity, citizen participation, and political stability (Hughes, 2017; Kovacs, 2018). The drivers of electoral violence are complex and interrelated. High-stakes political competition and party rivalry create incentives for coercive tactics, particularly when elections are perceived as zero-sum contests. Ethno-religious tensions, social cleavages, and historical grievances exacerbate the risk of conflict during electoral periods. Weak institutions, including politicized security agencies, compromised judicial systems, and under-resourced electoral management bodies, fail to deter or respond effectively to violence, creating environments conducive to democratic erosion (Osaghae, 2007; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). External interference, through funding, disinformation, or advisory influence, further complicates the electoral landscape in fragile democracies (Levitsky & Way, 2010). The consequences of electoral violence extend beyond immediate physical harm. There is a systemic erosion of democratic norms, including declines in free and fair elections, weakening of judicial independence, suppression of dissent, and restrictions on civil society. Politicization of security forces and threats to rule of law undermine state capacity to maintain order, escalating post-election crises and contributing to long-term instability. At the societal level, citizens experience disenfranchisement, political apathy, and reduced trust in institutions. Polarization and radicalization of political actors further fragment the political space, diminishing prospects for consensus-driven governance (Igbuzor, 2010; Reilly, 2011).

### **Policy Implications**

- i. **Strengthening Institutional Capacity:** Electoral commissions must be reformed to ensure independence, transparency, and credibility, with merit-based recruitment, technological modernization, and robust dispute-resolution mechanisms. Security sector reform is necessary to professionalize police and paramilitary forces, depoliticize their operations, and establish civilian oversight to prevent abuses. Judicial institutions should be empowered to adjudicate electoral disputes impartially, enforce electoral laws, and uphold constitutional norms.
- ii. **Conflict Prevention and Civic Engagement:** Early warning systems and monitoring mechanisms should be implemented to detect electoral hotspots and deploy preventive interventions. Civic education campaigns and promotion of political tolerance can empower citizens to resist manipulation and engage peacefully in electoral processes. Engaging traditional, religious, and community leaders as mediators can leverage their influence to prevent localized violence and promote dialogue.

- iii. **Regional and International Mechanisms:** Regional organizations such as the African Union (AU), ECOWAS, and the Organization of American States (OAS) should continue offering electoral observation, mediation, and technical support to enhance credibility and legitimacy. Peacekeeping operations, observation missions, and electoral assistance programs can deter violence and strengthen domestic institutional capacity to manage electoral processes.
- iv. **Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration:** Collaboration among government agencies, electoral management bodies, political parties, civil society, and international actors is essential to integrate security analysis into electoral planning and coordinate proactive interventions. Multi-level engagement ensures that preventive strategies are context-specific, inclusive, and capable of addressing both structural vulnerabilities and emergent threats.

In conclusion, reducing electoral violence and preventing democratic backsliding in emerging democracies requires a holistic, multi-dimensional approach. Combining institutional strengthening, proactive security measures, civic education, and regional/international support can mitigate risks, protect democratic norms, and foster political stability. Ensuring that electoral processes are credible, inclusive, and secure is vital for the sustainability of democracy, the resilience of institutions, and the cultivation of citizen trust in governance systems. Without these measures, emerging democracies remain vulnerable to cycles of electoral violence, political polarization, and democratic erosion, jeopardizing the prospects for long-term stability and development.

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