

KEY FINDINGS ON ELECTION VIOLENCE PREVENTION:

Malawi: May 2014 Election

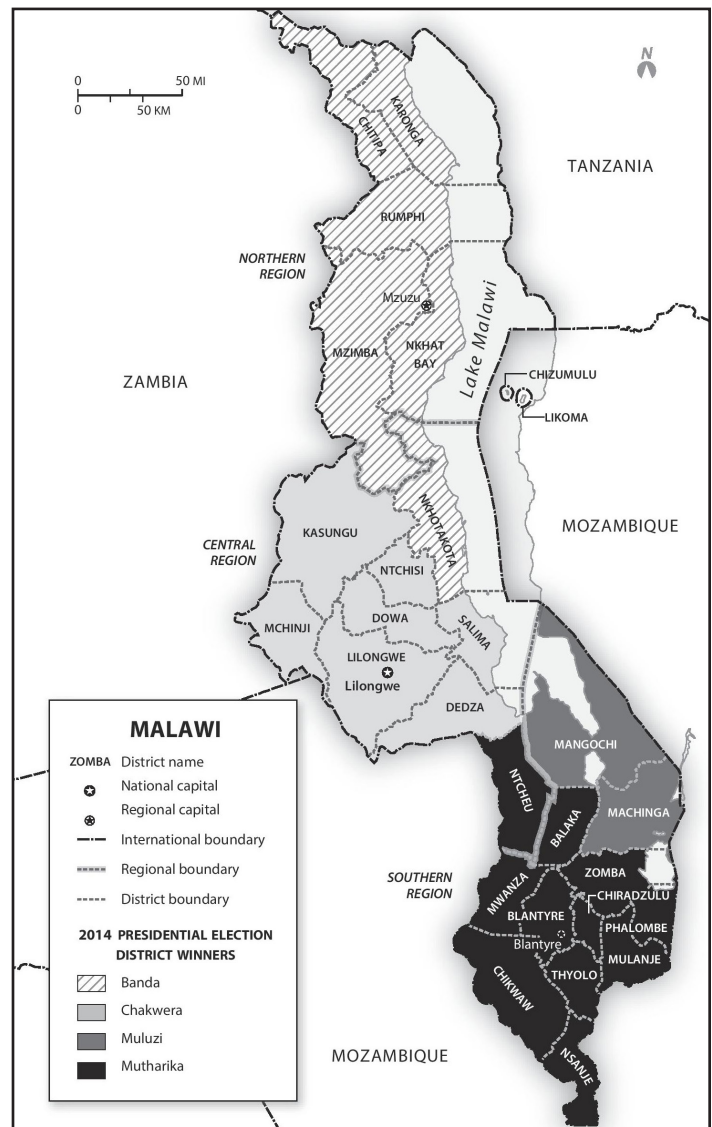


Targeted peacebuilding efforts are frequently used to prevent election violence (PEV). Practitioners possess a variety of programming options or interventions, including peace messaging campaigns, preventive diplomacy, dedicated youth programs, or monitoring missions. The choice among preventive measures 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. Malawi was the least violent election examined in this study, and presents a compelling case for ability of prevention tools, in a supportive environment, to mitigate violence.

In May of 2014, Malawi held its first tripartite elections: citizens went to the polls to elect, all at once, Malawi's president, the members of its national parliament, and local councilors. Commentators were concerned that the high stakes and competitive nature of the electoral races, and the complexity of managing the elections, could stir up tensions and lead to widespread violence. However, the election proceeded calmly, with only a few minor incidents. Tensions were widespread throughout the entire electoral cycle, but in the end only three casualties were reported. The lower-level violence that did occur resulted from frustration with management of the voting process, contestation of the results, and inter-party clashes.

Throughout its recent political history, Malawi has witnessed the remarkably strong implementation of certain prevention models—including peace messaging, civic education, monitoring and mapping, and preventive diplomacy—across a large geographic and societal spread. Furthermore, the implementation of these models has improved over time. Electoral management bodies and security-sector engagement have also generally been well implemented, though to a lesser extent, and shown important signs of improvement compared with past elections. Voter consultations and youth programming have remained meager, however. The absence of proper youth programs in particular has presented a missed opportunity in light of the role youth play as a perpetrator of election violence.

Malawi offers valuable insights on what makes violence a non-appealing strategy for political actors, and the conditions allowing preventive models to thrive. The preventive measures seen most often in the case of Malawi were preventive diplomacy, peace messaging, and monitoring and mapping, which allowed stakeholders to record—and potentially address—instances of violence as they occurred. Malawi also shows that the impact of these preventive measures is highly dependent on the structural context in which they operate. In fact, the positive impact of these PEV models was enabled by the authority of local non-government actors and local conflict-management institutions able to address conflicts as they emerged. In particular, Malawi demonstrates the need for legitimate nongovernmental organizations to facilitate



peace messaging, as the Malawian religious organizations were able to target various layers of society to great effect.

VULNERABILITIES

The Malawi elections of 2014 presented a highly factionalized political arena, strong regional patterns of voting, an electoral

PREVENTION MODEL & ELECTION VIOLENCE CODING, MALAWI CASE ANALYSIS

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	PEV MODEL	ELECTION MGMT. & ADMINISTRATION	PREVENTIVE DIPLOMACY	SECURITY SECTOR ENGAGEMENT	PEACE MESSAGING	CIVIC & VOTER EDUCATION	YOUTH PROGRAMMING	VOTER CONSULTATIONS	MONITORING & MAPPING
CODING	.50	1.0	.75	1.0	1.0	.25	.25	1.0	

system encouraging stiff competition and producing potentially disproportional results, and unclear expectations regarding the electoral outcome:

- **Factionalized democracy:** Malawi is a transitioning democracy.
- **Electoral system and power distribution:** Malawi applies the first-past-the-post system, whose zero-sum nature exacerbates the competitiveness of the electoral race.
- **Uncertainty about the election outcome:** as the UNDP resident coordinator declared in a pre-election op-ed, “the stakes of the May 2014 tripartite elections in Malawi are high, the pre-election projections uncertain, and the rigging fears rampant.”

ELECTION VIOLENCE PREVENTION TOOLS

In continuity with the past, competition for power was the principal motivation behind electoral violence. In their run for power, strong political candidates would employ all strategies at their disposal to gain votes. Before elections, this would translate into intimidation, negative messages, and verbal attacks against political opponents. This practice, in contrast with “issue-based” campaigning, would fire up party supporters and increase tensions.

In this tense electoral context, several measures designed to limit or prevent election violence were implemented. In particular, preventive diplomacy, peace messaging, civic and voter education, and election monitoring and mapping were widely employed in the 2014 elections. Despite some shortcomings, the security sector engagement was also widespread while election management remained mediocre. Voter consultations and youth programming were very limited and inconsistent. However, all PEV models demonstrated improvement in quality or scope compared with past elections. The table below indicates only the quality of a model’s implementation, and not its actual effectiveness in preventing electoral violence.

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At first glance, Malawi seems to confirm this project’s hypothesis: in the presence of strong prevention, low levels of violence occurred. Compared with previous elections, all PEV models in 2014 were more developed; however, despite more limited conflict-prevention mechanisms in place in the past, the country never experienced electoral violence on a large scale in its democratic history.

Nevertheless, a better-functioning electoral management body could have avoided voter frustration. Peace messaging, preventive diplomacy, and monitoring and mapping may have reduced both the occurrence and the escalation of violence; but the effect of these models was conditional on the ability of security forces to intervene, and on the functioning of local conflict-management institutions to address local conflicts as they emerged. Politicians continued to employ negative campaigning, intimidation, and partisan clashes in the run-up to the elections, so the impact of prevention on these specific attitudes and behaviors remains unclear.

Despite the risk of violent unrest and instability, the 2014 election shows that widespread conflict does not necessarily result in lethal violence, and can in fact be channeled through peaceful means of conflict resolution.

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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