

Effectiveness of Electoral Violence Prevention Mechanisms: Insights from Malawi

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Abstract

Elections are vital to democracy and democratic consolidation. Ideally, they are peaceful endeavours, allowing voters to express their preferences and winners to take office. However, elections in the Third Wave of democracy often exhibit violence. Election Violence Prevention (EVP) mechanisms have been employed to address conflicts between various actors. Nevertheless, their effectiveness in curbing electoral violence varies across African countries. This paper examines the effectiveness of EVP mechanisms in Malawi, focusing on the Public Affairs Committee, National Initiative for Civic Education, and Multi-party Liaison Committees. The paper argues that EVP mechanisms have been effective in preventing electoral violence. The effectiveness of these mechanisms relates to their origin, design, composition and operation methodology.

Keywords: Elections, Electoral Violence, EVP mechanisms, Malawi

Introduction

Elections allow voters to express their preferences and winners to form a government peacefully (Popper, 1962). In Africa, however, elections have also become theatres of violence since the advent of the Third Wave of democracy (Laakso, 2007; Adolfo et al., 2012; Buchard, 2015; Makulilo & Henry, 2017; Kovacs & Bjarnesen, 2018). Election Violence Prevention (EVP) mechanisms have been employed to address conflicts between contesting actors to restore and sustain peace (UNDP, 2009; Collier & Vicente, 2014; Claes, 2016). The mechanisms are defined by their form, scope of operation, timing and coverage. They include civic education programmes, awareness and peace messages, election liaison committees, election code of conduct, legal frameworks, and capacity-building programmes for election management and administration institutions.

The literature on EVP mechanisms points to free and fair elections as a primary mechanism to address electoral conflicts and violence, enhancing the legitimacy of elections (Jarstard & Houghlund, 2010). African regimes are described as ‘competitive authoritarianism’ or ‘hybrid regimes’ because democracy co-exists with autocracy (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Also, informal institutions play a fervent role, making elections a ‘must-win affair’ (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997; Fortman, 1999; Brown, 2004; Lynch & Crawford, 2011; Kovacs & Bjarnesen, 2018). Similarly, the countries' Electoral Management Bodies (EMB) often lack the legitimacy and technical capacity to deliver free and fair elections (Mozaffar, 2002; IDEA, 2006; Makulilo, 2009; 2015). These realities explain the violence in African elections and the subsequent need for EVP mechanisms.

The lack of capacity and actual or perceived bias of institutions vested with the power to manage and administer elections make them the primary instigators of electoral conflicts and violence (Pastor, 1999; Omotola, 2008). It is argued that “the logic behind capacity building is that in under-developed and underdemocratized settings, lapses in electoral procedures are often the result of poor logistical planning and lack of skills, but those who believe that they have been disadvantaged by such lapses almost invariably attribute to them a political motive. Grievances of this type can spill over into violence, especially in a close race” (Birch & Muchlisnki, 2017: 388). In such settings, there is a need to build the technical capacity of the stakeholders and instruments in the electoral value chain to pre-empt or attenuate violent elections. The stakeholders include EMBs, security forces, election observers and civil society, and the increased capacity to deliver electoral services in their own spaces boosts their efficiency and credibility to deliver peaceful, free and fair elections in the eyes of both the winners and losers (UNDP, 2009). EVP mechanisms include such capacity building, and their effective deployment can help transform stakeholders' attitudes and sustain peaceful elections and responsible political culture (Taylor, 2018).

Capacity building alone cannot curb electoral conflicts and violence: the political context and actors' socialisation matter (Claes, 2016). Attitude transformation needs to fill this void by changing the views and feelings of the electoral actors (Collier & Vicente, 2014). The views and feelings are shaped by underlying power relations in society (ibid.). EVP programmes are devised to recourse the perception of political parties, candidates, voters, and state apparatuses

that violence solves electoral disputes and grievances. Short-term attitude-changing strategies include dialogues, mediation, and election codes of conduct (Fischer, 2009). Impactful civic education is a long-term strategy to catalyse people to learn, accept, internalise, and practise democratic values and build an enduring political culture (Carothers, 1997). However, hybrid regimes oppose civic education since it is an agent of change (Makulilo, 2014; Yuen, 2016). The effectiveness of EVP mechanisms in realising these aims varies among cases in space and time. This attracts research interest.

Many factors determine the effectiveness of EVP programmes. EVP mechanisms should broadly include political parties and other stakeholders and provide a forum to receive, discuss and resolve election disputes before they turn violent (Taylor, 2018). Political parties and their followers often trust and accept the mandate of the mechanisms they are a part of (Opitz et al., 2013). Thus, where politics are characterised by clientelism, informal networks can be positively utilised for dialogue and confidence-building among different groups, thereby legitimising the elections (Henry, 2023). The doctrine of broad inclusion empowers the informal networks similarly to how the mass media checks the pillars of government in a functional democracy. The scope and timing of the EVP mechanisms matter. As electoral violence manifests pre-existing conflicts (Fischer, 2002; Höglund, 2009), permanent EVP mechanisms are highly effective (Claes, 2016). Höglund and Jarstad (2010) recommend five criteria for effective EVP mechanisms: (i) victims of election violence should be considered and cared for; (ii) monitoring and education need to be carried out on a long-term basis; (iii) conflict-mitigation measures should be included in the electoral process design; (iv) a balance between deterrence and confidence-building has to be found to ensure security; and (v) the strategy should be inclusive of multiple actors to improve peacebuilding during election times, and election-related activities need to be co-ordinated to identify policy gaps and arrest wasteful overlaps. Although EVP programmes meeting all these criteria are difficult to achieve, they capitalise on context-specific factors for effectiveness. Generally, EVP mechanisms should guarantee consultation and dialogue between election stakeholders, ensure inclusivity, discourage bias, and prioritise problem regions, particularly vulnerable communities (Szilagyi, 18 November 2016).

Technical and funding issues primarily affect the sustainability of EVP mechanisms (Travaglianti, 2016). Regardless of their importance and achievements, many EVP programmes terminate after the expiry of the funding period. Priorities and interests of funders change over time. So, it is the dictates of the payer of the piper that determine the tune in the theatre rather than the needs of the electoral environment. In addition, foreign-initiated or funded EVP mechanisms need to dictate less of the tune, consider the local contexts, and covet the support of respective stakeholders (UND, 2009). In the same vein, activists, civil societies (CSOs) and government institutions receiving foreign funding are observed to have run unco-ordinated programmes as they rat-race for their programme relevance for more funding (Taylor, 2018). Where the programmes are likely to alter the incumbent's advantage, sovereign entity regimes may use their leverage to orient such programmes to accommodate their interests (Henry, 2017). The recent embracement of election observation programmes by autocratic African regimes in recent days (Roussias & Ruz-Rufino, 2013) serves as a cautionary example.

The state of affairs may vary the effectiveness of EVP mechanisms. Therefore, indigenously designed or owned EVP mechanisms that score broad support of stakeholders are vital (UNDP, 2009).

There is a considerable link between the effectiveness of EVP mechanisms and their institutionalisation. Institutionalisation creates predictable and sustainable incentives and frameworks for behaviour and actions (North, 1991). The institutionalisation of values and norms developed in a particular setting will frame a base upon which actors structure their predictable actions (Theonig, 2009). It is also important to note that institutions are a product of history (Amenta & Ramsey, 2010). EVP mechanisms should draw from a conjunction of institutions, processes and events across time and space. Therefore, the outcome difference between EVP mechanisms across cases can be pegged on institutions' emergence, nature, and patterns that contextualise a place (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003). The institutionalisation of EVP mechanisms helps define their goals, mode of operation, continuity, contextualisation, optimal interaction with actors, and sustainability, leading to their effectiveness (UNDP, 2009; Höglund & Jarstad, 2010; Taylor, 2018).

Malawi is a unique case concerning the prevalence of electoral violence. According to rounds 1-8 of the Afrobarometer surveys, the country has recorded a notable decrease in the prevalence of electoral violence. This makes its elections among the most peaceful in Africa. This paper examines the contribution of EVP mechanisms in Malawi towards peaceful elections. The thesis of this paper is that EVP mechanisms in Malawi have effectively curbed electoral conflicts and violence. The paper contributes to the literature and practice on preventing electoral conflicts and violence. It stresses the importance of EVP mechanisms as a critical aspect of election in the Third Wave of democracy.

Malawi Political Context

Malawi became politically independent in 1964 and under a multiparty framework. It adopted a single-party system in 1966. Kamuzu Banda became its life president in 1977. The post-independent regime was characterised by personal rule, nepotism, attempted coups, state brutality against dissenters, imprisonments and civil unrest, which all led to popular demand for democracy (Posner, 1995; Chiponda, 2008). On 14 June 1993, Malawi held a referendum to either retain the single-party system or adopt a multiparty government system instead. Results show that 63% of the people voted for the multiparty system, and only 37% wanted to retain the one-party system. On 22 June 1993, the Parliament amended the constitution to legalise the formation of other political parties besides the ruling Malawi Congress Party (MCP), marking an official return to multiparty politics. Since then, Malawi has conducted six consecutive general elections: in 1994, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2019.

There has been a power transition between the parties in 1994, 2009, 2014 and 2019. Malawi is rated an electoral democracy by the Freedom House and considered a peaceful country. However, the country has a history of electoral violence (Kadima & Pottie, 2002; Chirwa,

2014). A comparative analysis of election observers' reports, media, academic papers and surveys, including that of the Afrobarometer, reveals a progressive decrease in electoral violence from 1994. A paper on the history of multiparty elections in Malawi noted that "disruptive campaigns, violence and voter intimidation in the 2004 and 2009 elections more subdued than was the case in the 1999 and 1994 elections" (Musuva, 2009: 235).

Surveys conducted by Afrobarometer (Round 1-8) have shown a decrease in the fear of violence in each subsequent election. The Afrobarometer findings in 2008 showed that 43% of Malawians feared becoming victims during electoral campaigns. In 2012 and 2014, the fear decreased to 39% and 29%, respectively. A 2017 survey showed a decrease of the violence to 27%. However, the fear spiked slightly to 31% in the 2020 survey. The increase can be attributed to the survey being conducted immediately after a heavily contested election. Voters still had fresh memories of the election and the ensuing events. This was, however, an outlier in an otherwise general decrease in violence and public fear. Malawi has a relatively low rate of electoral violence compared to the denominator in the continent. The results from Afrobarometer surveys (Round 1-8) are congruent with those of the Institute for Policy Research and Empowerment Centre (IPREC) study on the trend of electoral violence in Malawi. The study, based on the views of elections observers, media reports, and official documents from the police and electoral commission, reveals that open conflicts and violence distribution decreased consecutively from 35% in 1999 to 32%, 21% and 13% in 2004, 2009 and 2014 elections respectively (Chingaipe, 2016).

Data and methods

The paper is based on the data from the study conducted in Malawi in 2018. The study design was a field-based sample survey. The fieldwork covered the towns of Lilongwe, Blantyre, Balaka, Mulanje and Zomba. The sampling was that of non-probability and was obtained using purposive and snowballing techniques. The sampled units and their respective numbers were: the EMBs (3), Police Force (1), Political Parties (8), Members of Parliament (5), CSOs (8), International organisations (2), Multiparty Forums (3), Election Observer groups (3), academics/analysts (5), Traditional authorities (2), and national politicians/party leaders (6). Forty-six interviews were conducted in all. Primary data collection was done with in-depth interviews and participant observation. The researcher visited NICE offices in Balaka and Zomba to observe its activities. Physical and online documents relevant to the topic of the study were also credible secondary data sources. The primary data and secondary sources were subjected to content analysis to identify themes and establish meaningful related patterns and processes. The discussion of findings is based on the triangulation and corroboration of the data sources for greater validity of the results. The study adhered to an ethical code of conduct. The interview sheets and discussion excerpts were assigned codes to preserve the anonymity of respondents and the organisations they were affiliated with.

Effectiveness of Electoral Violence Prevention Mechanisms in Malawi

Malawi has several functioning EVP mechanisms. These include the Public Affairs Committee (PAC), National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE), and Multiparty Liaison Committees. The mechanisms are functional and operate in rural and urban areas in the entire country. The

PAC was born from the struggle for multiparty democracy. NICE and MPLCs were explicitly adopted to preserve the spirit of dialogue and consensus, which guided the transition to multiparty democracy. The EVP mechanisms in the country operate in four modalities: peace messaging, civic education, monitoring and mapping, and preventive diplomacy. Hereinafter is the analysis of the effectiveness of the three EVP mechanisms in Malawi.

Public Affairs Committee

The PAC in Malawi is as old as the reincarnated multipartyism in the country. It was formed in 1992 as an interfaith organisation to bridge the government and the people during the widespread outcry for a political transition from the then-authoritarian rule of Dr. Kamuzu Banda. It served as a mediator and facilitator of negotiations between the government and the opposition during the struggle for democracy. It has continued to play a vital role in resolving political and electoral disputes in Malawi through mediation and dialogue (MESN, 2014; Patel & Wahman, 2015). Hussein (2011:30) notes that “PAC has attained prominence as a result of its intervention in major political conflicts that have emerged in the multiparty dispensation, and also as a result of the important steps it has taken to promote peace and stability.”

The PAC is mainly composed of religious bodies. It has 24-member organisations and four affiliates. These include the Evangelical Association of Malawi, the Episcopal Conference of Malawi, the Malawi Council of Churches, the Muslim Association of Malawi and the Quadria Association of Malawi. PAC's composition gives it leverage and respect among political actors and the population in Malawi because it includes all major religious organisations (Phiri, 2001). It has 6,000 volunteers nationwide (Interview, MLW37, 23 June 2018). The members draw on religious teachings, wisdom, experience and guidance in pre-empting, lessening, and resolving political conflicts. The organisation has functional structures at national, regional and district levels. The structure and human resources in its scope of operation accord it impetus and a broader reach to execute its mandate. The PAC relies on its profile and capacity to engage with actors nationwide (Tamani, 26 April 2007; Hussein, 2011; Chirwa, 2014).

The 1999 general election in Malawi was marred by violence. Notably, the declaration of results triggered post-election violence in the opposition strongholds, Central and Northern regions. In Mzuzu, for example, the violence resulted in three fatalities, ten burnt mosques, vandalism and looting of shops, and hundreds of refugees (Freedom House, 1999; IRIN, 1999). The PAC's intervention was critical in ending the violence and bringing peace. It first reached out to the incumbent – United Democratic Front (UDF) and the opposition – MCP and Alliance for Democracy (AFORD). It encouraged the parties to participate in the dialogue to end the violence. After several days of ‘shuttle diplomacy’, the two sides agreed to dialogue. While the dialogues proceeded, PAC established interfaith committees comprising Christian and Muslim leaders to conduct mediation missions among conflicting parties in violence-affected areas. The dialogue at the national level ended with the opposition rescinding its decision not to recognise the electoral winner, the incumbent president Bakili Muluzi. The decision was pivotal in calming the post-election tensions at the national level (Tamani, 26 April 2007). The mediation committees held public meetings, successfully mediating local politicians and their

supporters at the local level. The PAC intervention calmed down the country considerably. More importantly, it facilitated the return of UDF supporters who had sought refuge elsewhere during the violence (Phiri, 2001).

The PAC's mediation role was also crucial in the 2004 general election. Clashes between opposition supporters and the police erupted after Bingu Mutharika, an incumbent president, was declared a presidential election winner. The PAC responded by creating a team of religious leaders and other prominent persons from the country. The team conducted separate talks with leaders of UDF and Republic Party, Bakili Muluzi and Gwanda Chakuamba respectively. The talks culminated in the agreement to participate in a round table meeting. The meeting concluded with the opposition and the government's declaration to solve the dispute peacefully. The agreement subdued political tensions, and the country returned to normalcy (Hussein, 2011). The PAC's role in the 1999 and 2004 elections was successful. However, its modality was strictly reactive. Literature on electoral conflicts and violence shows that the approach is prone to failure in the long term and may curtail the leverage of the EVP mechanism to resolve conflicts (UNDP, 2009; Collier & Vicente, 2014; Opitz et al., 2013; Taylor, 2018).

Intra and inter-political parties' tensions defined the pre-election period towards the 2014 election. The tensions were catalysed by the death of the sitting president, Bingu Mutharika, in 2012 and the subsequent ascendancy of Joyce Banda as the country's president. The opposition parties of DPP, MCP and UDF worried President Joyce Banda would not accept election results. They also expressed concern that the president used her powers to manipulate election results. Key to the tension were worries about whether the incumbent political party would accept the electoral results (Patel & Wahman, 2015). The PAC proactively initiated conflict management and prevention measures. The approach diverged from that of the 1999 and 2004 elections, where the intervention was reactive after the outbreak of post-election. PAC initiated a Lilongwe Peace Declaration (LPD) themed "*Taking a Stand Against Violence in Malawi during and after Election*" to resolve the tensions. The aim was to secure the commitment of political parties and their candidates against engaging in electoral violence. However, the contesting political parties and candidates were reluctant to concede to the LPD's initiative lest it sanctioned their deviant electoral conduct and strategies (PAC, 2015).

The PAC organised a roundtable for the election actors to discuss the LPD. However, very few of these accepted the invitation. Between 22 and 25 March 2014, PAC resorted to 'Shuttle Diplomacy' to meet with individual actors, who needed time for readiness to hold joint discussions with the others (Interview, MLW03, 7 June 2018). A team of six eminent people was simultaneously formed to lead the mediation activities. The United Nations, through UNDP, joined the efforts by training a team of six people on mediation skills (UNDP, 2014). The shuttle diplomacy brought political parties and candidates to an agreement to participate in the roundtable on LDP's terms. The roundtable concluded with '*A Goodwill Document*' signed by all political parties and their candidates. They committed to averting violence, defaulting to mediation and dialogue to settle the possible electoral disputes during and after the 2014 general election (PAC, 2015). PAC subsequently organised a national prayer event on 1 May 2014 at the Civo Stadium. All presidential candidates signed the LPD under the

supervision of religious leaders. The public, the international and local election observers, representatives of foreign countries, and organisations and leaders of contesting political parties attended the event. A respondent from an international organisation noted that “having the candidates and political parties committing to the LPD was a big step in restraining electoral violence in Malawi. It further vindicated the important role of PAC in the democratic processes in Malawi” (Interview, MLW34, 22 June 2018).

The signing of and commitment to the LPD by candidates and political parties were significant in Malawi's political history. Despite the high stakes, particularly in the post-election period, the peaceful nature of the 2014 elections is attributed to the LPD (MESN, 2014). The PAC deployed the proven practice in the 2019 general election and got all presidential candidates to sign the second LPD accord publicly to commit to peaceful elections. The 2019 election was marred by severe irregularities and the failure of the electoral commission to manage it. The opposition filed a court petition against the results rather than resort to violence. Despite a series of concurring demonstrations, the calmness the opposition and the government exhibited is also a vindication of the impact of the LDP EVP. The petition was concluded after more than seven months in favour of the opposition. Nevertheless, peace prevailed during and after the petition hearing, with actors observing the LPD. A study participant noted:

In 1999 and 2004, the PAC had a reactive approach to the conflict. They later learned from this experience that many things could have worked differently if they had intervened earlier. This motivated them to develop a different approach in 2014, which was more proactive, and to be fair, it worked more than most of us could have imagined (Interview, MLW28, 20 June 2018).

The PAC's conflict resolution and election prevention measures are institutionalised. Its proactive approach has been sustained. It also predicated on mediation and dialogue to convene actors and develop a shared understanding and action. It managed to deliver peaceful elections in 2014 and 2019 despite high stakes. The PAC enjoys a broader acceptance among Malawians with its record of delivering consensual transition (Chirwa, 2004; 2014). Similarly, PAC's draw of membership among interfaith groups and volunteer networks across the country legitimises it among the people of Malawi (Hussein, 2011; Patel & Wahman, 2015). Generally, its status and approach make PAC an effective and essential peace infrastructure in Malawi.

Multiparty Liaison Committees

The MPLCs were established in 2000 based on the experience of the 1999 general election and 2000 local government elections. During these elections, the commission lacked mechanisms to address many complaints from the grassroots level promptly. The MPLCs were, therefore, established to manage and settle electoral disputes at the local level on behalf of the Malawi Electoral Commission (MEC) (Mwafulirwa, 1 July 2013). Dr. Moffat Banda, the MEC commissioner, noted that “MEC is comprised of only eight commissioners and the chairperson. So, we cannot be able to move around and address electoral conflicts in all districts across the country. Hence, there had to be establishment of the MPLCs” (MBC, 27 November 2019).

Unlike other mechanisms in other countries, these are permanent in Malawi because they prevail beyond the election period.

The MPLCs monitor the adherence of the electoral stakeholders to electoral laws, investigate reports of suspect violations of electoral laws, monitor conflict indicators, and recommend rapid responses to conflicts. These activities position MPLCs as an alternative dispute-resolution mechanism. The disputes these committees deal with include violations of the code of conduct, intentional disruption of political rallies by rival parties, restrictions of or undue influence and arbitrary decisions by traditional leaders and chiefs regarding access to political parties to campaign venues, and use of defamatory and inflammatory speeches by candidates at the district level. However, the MPLCs cannot deal with criminal issues (MEC, 2005).

The MPLCs rely on a dialogue approach. Every committee member has equal rights. Similarly, the committees are guided by principles of mediation and dispute resolution rather than 'victorious justice' (Interview, MLW44, 28 June 2018). MPLCs often hold their dispute resolution activities openly and transparently. The public is allowed to attend the committee's meetings. The MPLCs mediate conflicting parties, issue warnings, enforce apologies from violating actors to the offended, and may suspend campaigns if the actor repeats electoral violations after several warnings (Mwale, 2010). The MPLCs must submit a report detailing issues and their resolution to the electoral commission. Those dissatisfied with the committee's decision can appeal at the MEC (Mwafulirwa, 1 July 2013).

MPLCs draw membership from a wide range of organisations. The members include political parties, youth wings of political parties, District Commissioners (DC), Chief Executives of Council (CEC), the Administrative Secretary, Officer-in-Charge of the Police, District Education Manager, a representative of PAC, two leaders of traditional authorities, and election returning officer and Criminal Investigation Officer (CIO). The committees may also admit members from other institutions depending on the prevailing conditions in the respective areas area's conditions. MPLC's membership includes various electoral stakeholders. Membership in political parties is vital since they are the primary actors in the election. The inclusion of party youth wings in the MPLCs is essential for them to have a legitimate platform for their expression. Else, the youth are often used as frontline accessories for the perpetrators of electoral violence operating in the shadows of the political landscape. In some cases, the youths themselves are the prime instigators (Laakso, 2007; Burchard, 2015). The membership of government officials, including the DC, CEC, CIO, and administrative secretary, grants the committee members and the public opportunities to clarify electoral processes and peace and order.

The membership of traditional leaders and the PAC in MPLCs makes the EVPs distinct from other African counterparts (Taylor, 2018). Their inclusion aims to "utilise the indigenous-based mechanisms, norms and traditional principles of contact and dialogue, conciliation, negotiation and mediation in the prevention and resolution of political conflicts" (Hussein, 2011: 28).

Traditional authorities in Malawi hold substantial power beyond what is prescribed in the law, making them paramount figures at the local levels (Chirwa, 2014). A respondent noted that “Chiefs are owners of land in villages. They can influence the eviction of individuals from village land. During funerals, people first consult the chief for permission and directions on where to dig a grave. If the deceased or an associated family member is in the chief’s bad book, the chief can use his power to deny such service as a punitive imposition (Interview, MLW11, 11 June 2018).

Traditional leaders are also often primary actors of electoral violence and malpractices (Patel, 2006). During the referendum in 1993 and the 1994 and 1999 general elections, chiefs were implicated in electoral fraud and malpractices, including assaulting rival party supporters (MEC, 1994; Commonwealth, 1994; Kadima & Pottie, 2002). These leaders are often used as accessories to advance those in the higher echelons of power and influence. A respondent noted:

Political leaders misuse chiefs. Chiefs take sides in the campaign for a specific candidate against the other. Previously, a chief would illegally declare to people that a constituency belongs to a specific political party or candidate; henceforth, others would not be allowed to campaign. Since Chiefs yield power in social and cultural affairs, some people would indisputably obey their orders, especially in rural areas (Interview, MLW43, 27 June 2018).

The MPLCs have been effectively resolving electoral conflicts and disputes at the local level. The success is due to their composition and methodology, which ensure inclusivity in managing elections. The study by Opitz and colleagues on why 2004 elections were peaceful despite close competition, administrative failures and high stakes involved found that:

Inclusive EMBs in Malawi can, to some extent, claim to have contributed to preventing violence from escalating during Malawi’s contested 2004 election. In light of high-stakes elections and deeply patrimonial politics around the president, the MPLCs allowed local stakeholders to resolve disputes collaboratively. The opposition, in particular, was thereby granted influence on electoral governance, which may have reduced its incentives to resort to violent means to challenge the poorly administrated electoral process (Opitz *et al.*, 2013:720).

Informal institutions exert a significant influence on politics and society in Malawi. Malawians regard their relationship with politicians highly (Anders, 2002). Political actors and voters accept the decisions of MPLCs due to their trust in them. The trust comes with the sense of their representation in them. MPLCs are touted as early warning mechanisms and infrastructure for peace (Interview, MLW40, 26 June 2018). The MPLCs detect and address tensions before they escalate to affect the electoral processes (Mwale, 2010). The international election observers’ report on the 2009 general election noted that the committees enabled the “electoral commission and the contesting political parties to consult each other on an ongoing basis and

(to) address any problems that arose. The MPLCs provide a forum to discuss political violence issues and find solutions to such issues” (EISA, 2009: 37).

The MPLCs curtail local politicians from propagating national tensions at local levels on the orders of unscrupulous national party leaders. The committees force these actors to prioritise the interests of their localities. This makes the MPLC a viable alternative mechanism for dispute resolution at the local level. A respondent asserted:

The work of MPLCs is underreported at the local level. Those of us who have been in Mangochi can tell a tale of how it was common for traditional Chiefs to threaten the opposition candidates and supporters. Since there was no forum to bring all of us together, we could not address these issues peacefully. The choices were to accept the injustice or fight. However, with MPLCs, if the Chief restricts the use of the campaign venue, I will name and shame him in the committee meeting in the presence of the MEC, the Government and the Police. It usually works, and I do not have to fight; it is peaceful! (Interview, MLW37, 23 June, 2018).

The presence of the commission, government officials, religious leaders, and law enforcement representatives helps reinforce the mutually agreed-upon decisions. Their knowledge of electoral and societal norms, including conduct, also guide proven practices for peaceful resolution of disputes. These qualities have made MPLCs the preferred channel for actors to address their issues.

The report on the 2014 general election concluded that “Despite the legislation providing sound mechanisms to address election related disputes, the Multiparty Liaison Committees (MPLC) were the preferred forum for seeking timely and effective remedy when resolving election related complaints during the pre-election period” (EU, 2014: 9). Thus, the characteristics of institutionalisation, inclusiveness, utilisation of local knowledge, and early warning contribute to the effectiveness of MPLCs to address electoral conflicts and violence at local levels (EISA, 2009; 2014; Mwale, 2010; Hussein, 2011; Opitz *et al.*, 2013; EU; 2014; Chingaibe, 2016; Taylor, 2018).

National Initiative for Civic Education

NICE was launched in 1999 to provide civic education in Malawi. Its chief objective is strengthening the democratic process in line with social and economic progress (Kabemba, 2003). NICE was originally based on the recommendation of a socio-anthropological study commissioned by MEC. The study intended to explain the incidents of violence and threats that impeded effective electoral participation in 1994, among other things (Interview, MLW01, 6 June 2018). After three decades of President Banda's autocratic rule, most Malawians lacked an understanding of democratic norms and values and could not embrace them (Interview, MLW28, 20 June 2018). The study proposed a concerted civic education program which would run independently from the government. Therefore, NICE was established to:

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Contribute towards strengthening the democratic process and good governance by providing countrywide civic education in a participatory, non-partisan, professional and permanent manner. In addition, it was responsible for providing the education that would facilitate behavioural and attitude change, and mobilise Malawians to participate in public life, which includes elections (Sangala, 2017).

As a programme, the scope of NICE spans beyond educating people on human rights. It strives to raise the awareness of the Malawians on the duties and responsibilities of citizens in a democracy. The activities of NICE are continuous and cover the entire country, contrasting the periodic civic education programmes limited to urban areas (Chirwa, 2014).

NICE operates as a Trust, which makes it an autonomous organisation. The Board of Trustees oversees its activities. These are selected through open and transparent public advertisement. The CSOs nominate the trustees and submit their names to the Malawi Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism (NICE, 2017) for their appointment. NICE has three implementing regional and thirty-one district offices. A salaried and permanently employed District Civic Education Officer (DCEO) supervises the office. The DCEO co-ordinates all NICE activities at the district level. It relies on a volunteer structure at the local level to implement. There are 200 volunteering Area Civic Education Co-ordinators (ACEC).

NICE also has 500 Zone Coordinators (ZOC) and 8,000 Para Civic Educators (PCE) across the country (Interview, MLW08, 9 June 2018). The implementation of NICE's programmes and activities emphasises consideration of local needs and contexts. The summary of NICE's methodology is "Walking with Communities" It relies on the right-based approach and training for transformation; it is learner-centric, of self-discovery, and is action-oriented. NICE employs a decentralised and bottom-up approach. This embodies the belief that different communities need different approaches to a solution. NICE emphasises identifying the needs of respective community members and integrating them into its programmes (Interview, MLW42, 27 June 2018).

There are three pillars to NICE's programmes: civic and voter education, peacebuilding, and election observation and monitoring. NICE conducts peacebuilding training for government officials, political parties and leaders (NICE, 2016). To facilitate the culture of dialogue, NICE has established dialogue forums clustered around age and profession. The forums include socio-economic groups such as farmers, students, civil servants, elders and the youth. Participants in the forums are first provided with needs-oriented education and programmes to raise their awareness of democratic participation and hold their leaders accountable. Secondly, they dialogue and debate issues independently initiated in the groups (Sangala, 2017). NICE runs a library in every district, where people can freely access information on various aspects of the Malawian political system. The information materials available in these centres include parliamentary Hansards, budget reports, copies of the Malawi constitution and various statutes, government reports, newspapers and other documents authored by NICE. These activities and programmes aim to enhance the tracking of development projects and empower electorates to hold office bearers accountable (NICE, 2015).

Limited civic competence or generally lacking civic awareness is one of the significant reasons for electoral conflicts and violence (Taylor, 2018). Cultivating new values and norms through civic education can subdue the culture of violence and make peaceful engagement and tolerance prominent in a polity (Carothers, 1997). A report commissioned by the Open Society Foundation revealed that by 2016, NICE had reached 12 million people with civic education (NICE, 2017). NICE has contributed significantly to embracing the democratic political culture in Malawi, resulting in peaceful elections (Interview, MLW01, 6 June 2018). In the 2004 and 2009 elections, for example, the Forum for Senior Party Leaders (FSPL), create managed to resolve electoral conflicts in the Ddzeza, Nsanje, Mulanje, Kasungu, and Likoni districts (Interview, MLW08, 9 June 2018). A study on EVP mechanisms in Malawi noted that:

In areas that are prone to election violence, NICE made concerted efforts to provide peace building education to local stakeholders. They also engaged with local police departments to sensitise officers on issues that could lead to violence. NICE members also participated in the MPLCs, working directly with the political parties to resolve conflicts at the district level (Taylor, 2018: 55).

The efforts have effectively prevented and managed electoral conflicts and violence. A respondent from the civil society noted:

In the 1990s, it was common for a chief to reject a political party and impose the decision on the people of his area. People did not know their rights, duties and position in the multiparty system. NICE has succeeded in rolling back this ignorance by making people aware, and it has to be credited for that. People are well informed of their democratic rights to decide independently of chiefs (Interview, MLW37, 23 June 2018).

The interview extract corresponds with the report commissioned by the EU evaluating NICE's impact on Malawi's electoral processes. The report noted a reduction in violence incidents in the Central region. Similarly, the increase in voter turnout of 70% in Malawi is attributed to the work of NICE. Also, in the 2014 election, NICE contributed to reducing the void votes from 4.5 per cent to an average of about 1 per cent. The report also showed that NICE managed to change the values and behaviours of people to accommodate democratic processes (NICE, 2016).

NICE's effectiveness is credited mainly to institutionalisation, coverage, and operation methodology. It operates continuously and permanently. It covers the entire country. It has existed for twenty-one years and has demonstrated total operational capacity. Its activities have continuity, impacting people's behaviour towards engagement in democratic processes. Most importantly, it operates independently of the government.

NICE programmes and activities observe inclusivity, local needs and community-centred principles. The modality facilitates locals, through their groups, to engage without barriers and ownership of the programmes (Interview, MLW01, 6 June 2018). Szilagyi (2016) maintains

that effective EVP mechanisms should prioritise the inclusivity of regions and vulnerable communities. Lastly, NICE has helped to build a culture of democracy in Malawi, a catalyst for an effective containment of electoral violence.

Conclusion

This paper analysed the effectiveness of EVP mechanisms in Malawi. It was based on data from interviews and a review of secondary sources. An examination of the PAC, MPLCs and NICE reveals they have significantly curbed electoral conflicts and violence. This contributes to Malawi as a unique African case in which the prevalence and magnitude of electoral violence have decreased since the first post-single-party election. The paper attributes the effectiveness of the mechanisms to their origin, design, composition and operational methodology. The three EVP mechanisms originated from the specific needs of the society rather than imposition from without. Also, their composition is broadly inclusive of election stakeholders. Moreover, the mechanisms enjoy legitimacy and acceptance among the political actors and the population. Notably, the mechanisms have comprehensive spatio-temporal coverage at the national and local levels in the country. Therefore, the EVP mechanisms in Malawi can serve as a blueprint for other African countries. By adapting the Malawian model to suit their specific contexts, these countries may be able to effectively combat electoral violence. Since patron-client networks play a significant role in African politics, EVP mechanisms that are inclusive, dialogic, and consensus-driven could be a suitable fit for other African nations. Besides, adopting and customising Malawi's EVP mechanisms aligns with the call for African solutions to African problems.

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