How to hold elections safely and democratically during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Executive summary

The COVID-19 pandemic poses major challenges for those charged with overseeing electoral processes, but the innovative ways in which practitioners are addressing these challenges indicate that elections can be safely held even under pandemic conditions. These innovations also represent opportunities for strengthening electoral practices and making them more resilient to a variety of other risks.

This briefing draws on existing experience of elections held during the COVID-19 pandemic and previous health crises to address five areas of vulnerability: inclusive and accountable electoral management, poll worker safeguarding, inter-institutional collaboration, feasible and effective election observation, and the risk of electoral violence.

The analyses indicate that there are a large number of things that electoral practitioners can do to hold elections safely under pandemic conditions. Most of these are techniques that have been employed previously in some form, and we caution against the introduction of entirely new and untested approaches at the current time. The most useful innovations are those such as widening poll-worker recruitment, inter-institutional coordination and hybrid election observation that build on existing practice.

The analyses also highlight the importance of not losing track of the need to bolster the transparency, accountability and security of electoral practices. Far from there being a trade-off between making elections safe in pandemic conditions and achieving these other aims, we argue that efforts to maximise electoral integrity and to preserve electoral peace will also help to ensure that democratic elections can be safeguarded from the risks associated with COVID-19.

Our principal recommendations fall into three categories: those targeted at electoral administrators, those aimed at election observation organisations, and general recommendations that are relevant to administrators, observers and electoral assistance providers.

Recommendations for electoral administrators:

- The public and vulnerable groups should be consulted during election preparations.

- Complaints systems should be fully made available to citizens and electoral stakeholders to report problems during the process.

- Parliamentary committees should be used to oversee the work of electoral management bodies (EMBs).

- EMBs must use their websites and social media presence to provide accurate information about the voting process and should monitor social media for

misinformation campaigns.

- EMBs should also take strong measures to address disinformation and hate speech during election period that could cause harm to electoral stakeholders.

- EMBs must maximise transparency and provide clear records of their meetings held to prepare for elections during COVID-19.

- The effective management and safeguarding of poll workers require planning well ahead. The fast-evolving pandemic may well necessitate measures tailored to local needs, depending on severity of lockdowns and COVID-19 infections.

- Polling stations should be widely distributed so as to reduce the mixing of infected and non-infected individuals from different geographic areas; this may in some cases require the addition of supplementary polling places and a consequent reduction in the number of voters who attend each facility.

- EMBs and national task forces formed to deal with the COVID-19 crisis should ensure that each institution's tasks and responsibilities related to issuing guidance, planning, and implementing preventive measures for elections are clear and well-delineated.

- Regardless of its level of involvement with a national task force, EMBs should strive to obtain advisory, logistical, and operational support from other groups while maintaining political neutrality and communicating transparently to citizens.

- As it is ultimately their responsibility to hold elections safely, EMBs must coordinate with competent public health authorities to inform decisions regarding dates of elections and preventive measures to be taken, working to build political consensus around these decisions and taking a firm stand against actors who push for decisions that can put voters and poll workers at risk to advance their political interests.

Recommendations for electoral observers:

- The travel restrictions and health and safety protocols associated with COVID-19 threaten to make traditional forms of international election observation impossible. International observers should carefully weigh up the strengths and weaknesses of the four main strategies open to them.

- The response of international observers will be most effective if they approach this as an opportunity to strengthen their work for the long term, rather than simply introducing COVID-19 sensitive guidelines and protocols to respond to the current health crisis. Many of the changes that are likely to be required during the pandemic were already highly advisable.

- International observers should prioritise innovation, look for new ways to harness technology and build stronger partnerships between domestic and international groups. This will allow the industry both to respond effectively to new challenges and to build back better.

General recommendations

- Electoral practitioners should, where possible, build on strategies that have already been used in the context in question, rather than implementing new techniques and technologies from scratch.

- In parts of the world with a history of significant electoral conflict, elections may be at increased risk of violence during the pandemic, and practitioners should ensure that measures are employed to enhance electoral security in contexts where disruption is likely before, during and after polling day.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is a major health crisis that touches on all aspects of social, economic and political life. States where elections are scheduled during the pandemic face important choices as to when to hold the poll, what measures to put in place to reduce the risk of infection associated with electoral processes, and how to mitigate the potential impact of election-related tensions that may be exacerbated by the circumstances of the pandemic and associated restrictions.

A number of organisations have already made considerable strides in addressing procedures for making polling safe during pandemic conditions.[1] We do not seek to duplicate those efforts; instead we examine some of the aspects of elections that have received less attention but are nonetheless vital to the conduct of free, fair and credible elections: inclusive and accountable electoral management, poll worker safeguarding, inter-institutional collaboration, feasible and effective election observation, and reducing the risk of electoral violence.

Drawing on the experience of electoral events that were held in the first several months of the pandemic and also the experience of elections held during previous health crises, this briefing offers an overview of how practitioners have approached the choices they face and the lessons that can be drawn from their experience. The sections that follow draw on experience in different ways, and they therefore vary slightly in format, but they all conclude with recommendations for practitioners that will hopefully contribute to making elections held during the pandemic safe and democratic.

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1   The Election Management Network (www.electoralmanagement.com), the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (www.idea-int) and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (www.ifes.org) have all published a range of valuable analyses and briefings on the challenges of conducting elections under pandemic conditions.

Part 1: Electoral administration

Managerial transparency, accountability and inclusiveness

Ensuring accountable electoral management is vital to maintaining the credibility of elections; the circumstances of the pandemic pose additional challenges that can be addressed by further strengthening the inclusiveness and transparency of electoral administration.

EMBs, as publicly funded bodies that deliver an essential public service, should demonstrate that they follow good principles of public management (James 2020a; James et al. 2019). This involves not just providing high-quality services to citizens, but careful due process, which in turn can bring about better-run elections that inspire popular confidence.

Although elections are often held to a high standard, research suggests that EMBs tend to have mixed success in achieving these goals during 'normal' times. Realising transparent, high quality management of the electoral process becomes especially important during a pandemic, however. There is a risk that public confidence in the electoral process could be undermined. For example, if there are discussions about postponing an election then a perception might develop that the incumbent is trying to use the pandemic to undermine democracy and maximise their chances of winning the election (James and Alihodzic 2020). Citizens might also experience problems exercising their democratic right to vote if their concerns are not identified and accommodated.

There are four areas of pressing concern managing elections during the pandemic: public participation, accountability mechanisms, public communication and transparency.

Public participation

Public participation in electoral administration has both normative and instrumental benefits. Involving citizens in the design of public services has a normative value because citizens have a right to have their voices heard about how services are run. The instrumental value is that it can improve efficiency and effectiveness through the identification of problems and can help to identify the specific needs of minority and vulnerable groups (James 2020a, 62). These are rarely achieved, however, since decision making networks tend to be relatively closed. EMB interaction tends to be with the government, the media and political parties, while ideas for electoral reform are least likely to come directly from citizens, research shows (James 2020a, 157-8). This can create insular bubbles in which the needs of other actors are not considered.

Interactions with civil society could therefore create a much richer 'needs list'

during the pandemic. Mechanisms for consulting the public or vulnerable groups include: holding focus groups, consulting with stakeholder organisations, online surveys of samples of the population and open online consultations.

Accountability mechanisms

Individual-level mechanisms for redress should be made available in case citizens, parties and agents experience problems with the delivery of elections (James 2020a, 62-3). Complaints systems can be developed so that citizens can register their dissatisfaction if they find that their polling station opens late, for example. Likewise, party agents should have clear ways in which they report the behaviour of electoral officials or inappropriate behaviour by other candidates. These systems should be clearly established, if they are not already, because they will improve citizen/stakeholder confidence, but also provide important information gathering systems for electoral officials about the frequency and nature of problems during the electoral process.

Organisational-level accountability mechanisms are also important so that EMBs can be held to account for their performance by other organisations. These include (i) upwards to the international community, (ii) horizontally to other state institutions such as courts and legislatures to provide checks and balances and (iii) downward to domestic non-state actors such as the news media, political parties, civil society and the electorate (Norris 2017, 12).

One effective method for EMBs to be held to account at the organisational level is through parliamentary committees (James 2020a, 157-8). Parliamentary committees can hold enquiries into how an election has been run to identify problems and enable immediate lesson-drawing. For example, the Attorney-General and Minister for Justice of Queensland in Australia initiated an inquiry on the running of the Queensland 2020 local elections. The elections were held on 28 March, the inquiry was initiated on 22 April and it had reported by 2 June (Martínez i Coma forthcoming; Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee 2020).

The use of parliamentary committees will improve accountability, but will also raise awareness amongst legislators of the importance of the issue. This could avert the late passage of legislation which can be a significant barrier to running elections effectively (James 2020b; James and Clark 2020). Committees can also call witnesses to update parliament on how plans are proceeding for forthcoming elections. In addition, committees which allow evidence submissions from the public enable a wider set of stakeholders from civil society groups to academics to share their concerns about the delivery of the election.

Public communication

Electoral authorities are required to communicate clear information about how the voting process works. The websites of EMBs are one crucial way in which this information can be conveyed. Previous research shows that this is not always provided in full by electoral authorities (Garnett 2017). The provision of full and accurate election information is especially important during a pandemic and processes might change to extend voting hours, introduce new procedures for postal voting or requirements for social distancing. There is also a heightened

risk of misinformation being spread by parties and actors who wish to discourage participation in areas where support for their opponents is concentrated (Reppell, Martin-Rozumiłowicz and Mohan 2020). Checking the accuracy of websites, providing public broadcasts via TV and radio and playing a proactive role in monitoring and responding to social media are therefore important actions for EMBs to undertake in collaboration with social media companies.

Transparency

Transparency is an important aspect of high-quality public services (Garnett 2017) and should be applied to the running of elections during the pandemic. Information should therefore be made publicly available via electoral management websites about how EMBs are working with other actors during the pandemic, who they have consulted with and how the election is likely to be run. This should include the publication of meeting minutes, planning documents relating the elections and live streams of consultations. The US Electoral Assistance Commission, for example, has a designated area of their website devoted to COVID-19 which includes resources for electoral officials but also recordings of public hearings.[2] No similar information was available on the website of the UK Electoral Commission or Cabinet Office websites.[3] This gives the impression of closed-decision making.

Recommendations:

- The public and vulnerable groups should be consulted during election preparations.

- Complaints systems should be fully made available to citizens and electoral stakeholders to report problems during the process.

- Parliamentary committees should be used to oversee the work of EMBs.

- EMBs must use their websites and social media presence to provide accurate non-partisan information about the voting process and should monitor social media for misinformation campaigns.

- EMBs should also take strong measures to address disinformation and hate speech during election period that could cause harm to electoral stakeholders.

- EMBs must maximise transparency and provide clear records of their meetings held to prepare for elections during COVID-19.

[2]   https://www.eac.gov/, date accessed 10th July 2020.
[3]   As of 10th July 2020.

Part 2: Polling
COVID-19 and extra demands on poll workers

Running elections is highly labour-intensive. Poll workers in particular, play a vital role in building confidence around electoral processes (Hall et al. 2009). Their role will be ever more important during forthcoming elections as they will meet and interact with voters, issue ballots and oversee polling stations during a challenging public health crisis. Many will suggest the pandemic is an opportunity for online voting or extended postal voting. Online voting is far from widely accepted or used, and while postal voting is much more widespread, most jurisdictions still have a legal obligation to provide vote in-person services. Even with voting machines, there is a need for poll workers to guide voters on polling day. Here we highlight five key risk and threats to how poll workers will cope with the pandemic circumstances and offer key recommendations.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic imposes a severe threat to poll worker recruitment to administer the various forthcoming elections

Recruiting enough workers has always been one of the major challenges of many electoral administrators. In some countries, as in the UK, poll workers are civic-minded volunteers, paid a little for their long day at the polls. In other countries, poll workers are state employees who are seconded to run elections (as in India) or selected because of party allegiance or membership. Elsewhere, as in Germany, Spain and Mexico, poll workers are citizens who are compelled to undertake the task as a civic duty akin to jury service, and not paid much, if at all (Clark and James 2020).[4]

Given the low pay, many may not volunteer to work on polling day, or fail to turn up to work. They may judge the risk of catching COVID-19 too high. If widespread, this could make elections very hard to deliver properly. Thus, administrators need to plan well in advance, and will most likely to need to over recruit, while increasing substantially the monetary incentives.

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[4]   In Mexico, poll workers receive around $20 for their efforts. In the USA, estimates have ranged from $100-$164. In the UK, poll clerks are paid around minimum wage for a 16-hour work day (Burden and Milyo, 2015; Cantú and Ley, 2017; Clark and James, 2020).

Poll workers face much higher health risks of administering elections during the ongoing pandemic

There are no widely available international statistics on the typical profile of poll workers. However, we know that in the UK's 2015 general election, poll workers had an average age of 53, and 39.3% were over 60, with 30.5% retired from work and the oldest being 82 years of age (Clark and James 2017). In the USA in 2018, 58% of poll workers were over 60, and 27% over 70.[5] These age demographics mean that poll workers face higher chances of suffering more severe consequences of COVID-19, an issue that administrators should bear in mind when recruiting.

There is therefore a clear need to investigate ways of recruiting younger poll workers. One approach might be to emphasise the civic and social incentives behind volunteering to work on polling day. Civic incentives revolve around learning more about the electoral and political process, and how representatives are elected, while social incentives are oriented more towards social capital explanations for why people volunteer. Initial research in the UK suggests both may be important in recruiting poll workers (Clark and James 2020).

To mitigate the potential risks, administrators need to offer clear public health measures at the polling station and adequate health protection. Countries have had a variety of ways of doing so. Poll workers in Wisconsin in April 2020 were given surgical masks and latex gloves. Hand sanitiser was made available for voters, alcohol wipes used to disinfect surfaces, and signs provided for social distancing. Israel had special medically supported polling stations for the symptomatic, with full PPE for staff. Singapore and South Korea had temperature screening, face masks for polling staff, additional polling stations in Singapore and a requirement for voters to wear masks and gloves in South Korea. In the UK, shifts of poll workers are being considered in case PPE becomes too cumbersome to wear for a 16-hour workday.

A key recommendation would be to establish a minimum standard of measures proven to be medically efficient in reducing health risks of contracting COVID-19. Promoting and mandating the use of face masks for both voters and poll workers would be a good start, ensuring strict social distancing in poll queues, and frequent sanitising routines in polling stations. Additional measures may be needed in polling areas where contagion is more prevalent. Testing poll workers for COVID-19 ahead of elections would be crucial not only for their own health but to prevent spreading infections to voters and other election workers.

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5   American poll workers are disproportionately female, something also found in the UK where over three-fifths of poll workers are women. There can be issues of descriptive representation, with overwhelmingly white poll workers being noted in the racially diverse USA for example (Burden and Milyo 2015, King and Barnes, 2019). Also: Early Voting Information Center, Reed College, https://twitter.com/early_vote/status/1280291250898268160/photo/1 [accessed 17/7/2020].

Social distancing and extra health precautions will demand more time for voting and from poll workers

Given the extra health precautions and distancing needed at the polls, voting will take longer. It is important to provide adequate time to citizens and poll workers so that the election can be conducted safely. Extended polling station hours, further early voting provision and increased levels of postal voting may all need to be considered and implemented. Voter accessibility might be enhanced in the longer term if additional polling stations are introduced to help with social distancing, as in Singapore, or extended early voting is established as a permanent feature.

Different modes of working – such as shifts, staff rotation of tasks etc. – might all be considered while also taking into account the different waves of the pandemic and severity of lockdowns. Such measures will require considerable investment. It may be necessary to increase the number of polling places in order to reducing mixing between people from geographic areas with different levels of infection. It is extremely important to underline that social distancing and public health measures will also be necessary at counts, thereby potentially extending the wait for verified results.

Poll workers continue to face electoral violence risks

In addition to the COVID-19 health risks, poll workers face other important threats. As discussed in section VI below, elections held during the pandemic also face risks of electoral malpractice, including electoral violence in some regions. In Mexico, for instance, drug-related violence and electoral violence in past elections has shown to depress the likelihood of working on election day (Cantú and Ley 2017). Even lower-level aggression in advanced democracies has been evident, for instance in the UK over recent referendums (James and Clark 2019; 2020). It is possible that, were face masks deemed mandatory, poll workers would have to police and deal with protests from those who object.

Thus, in addition to mitigating the health risks to poll workers, administrators also need to provide sufficient security to reduce the risk of electoral violence and guarantee the integrity of all those involved.

Poll workers need adequate and new forms of training to cope with the old and new challenges of holding elections

Outside the UK and the USA, little is known about poll worker training. American poll workers get on average 3.5 hours training, for instance, but can still be mistaken about electoral law (Burden and Milyo 2015). In the UK, although most poll workers are satisfied with the briefing from their local election services team, between 15-19% still feel electoral law too complex to understand quickly and easily (Clark and James 2017). The continuing uncertainty around pandemic guidance and requirements will undoubtedly amplify poll worker difficulties several fold.

Thus, training will need to provide poll workers with adequate information on both electoral law and public health regulations. It will have to consider different training in different areas within countries depending on the local severity of the COVID-19 infections and lockdowns. Training requires investment and assessment as to its effectiveness, both in electoral law and public health measures and compliance.

Despite the challenges, we conclude that the pandemic also provides opportunities to improve elections on the ground, with some suggestions above related to the five challenges that administrators will face in recruiting, training, procuring for the health and safety of workers.

Recommendation:

Our central recommendation for managing and safeguarding poll workers is to plan well ahead and bear in mind that the fast-evolving pandemic may well require tailoring measures to local needs and at short notice, depending on the severity of lockdowns and COVID-19 infections.

Part 3: Administrative Collaborations

Potential benefits and drawbacks of collaboration between Election Management Bodies and National Task Forces

The relationship between EMBs and national task forces put in place to respond to the COVID-19 crisis is of particular importance to the success of elections held during the pandemic.[6] This coordination is crucial not only for collaboration in the planning and timely implementation of safe procedures but also for effective communication with citizens to improve perceptions of safety and to promote political participation. This inter-institutional relationship (or lack thereof) can also pose obstacles to electoral administration, however, from political dependence and lack of decisional autonomy to an erosion of public trust in elections.

Drawing on the work of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems with EMBs around the world, we present in this section a series of initial considerations regarding the potential impact of national COVID-19 task forces on EMB's work, focusing on potential benefits and challenges that might result from inter-institutional cooperation.

Different COVID-19 task force models and their relationship to EMBs

Given the pervasiveness of the effects of COVID-19, several countries have established response teams or task forces at the national level involving a wide range of stakeholders, from government officials to public health professionals and representatives of the private sector. Depending on the level of authority and mandate of these national task forces, electoral officials that plan and administer elections amid the public health crisis are likely to see their work affected by them, either directly or indirectly. In some cases, EMBs may be an integral part of the task force and have a voice in its decision-making process, while in others, they may only passively receive guidance from above. Although the number of examples available for analysis is still low, some patterns are starting to emerge from the different inter-institutional working arrangements established in countries that have held elections recently or that are preparing for upcoming elections

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6   We will here primarily focus on how various COVID-19 task force models can impact an election commission's abilities to organise credible elections that are safe to voters and election officials.

Potential benefits to EMBs

An EMB's direct participation in, or close coordination with, a country's COVID-19 task force can generate several operational benefits, potentially contributing to the administration of elections during the pandemic. In addition to directly facilitating the organisation of electoral events, a constructive engagement with the task force can also reinforce the election authority's credibility by showcasing its ability to coordinate with other institutions and to deliver safe and credible elections under challenging conditions.

Improved COVID-19 planning capacity

EMBs are the leading national entities in terms of planning elections, employing a large number of election administration experts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, these election experts face the challenge of planning and implementing electoral activities in a context that imposes serious public health risks. They have to incorporate new considerations and additional tasks into an already heavy workload that includes organising voter registration drives, training tens or thousands of temporary electoral workers, and packing and distributing electoral material for delivery to polling stations. With close collaboration between the EMBs and task forces and effective utilisation of relevant public health expertise from other institutions, EMB staff are less likely to be overwhelmed with new tasks and the selection and implementation of preventive measures is more likely to succeed. Competent public health professionals can couple their expertise with the technical knowledge of electoral authorities to develop a solid COVID-19 risk assessment and risk-mitigation plan. This joint work should lead to adjustments to procedures, the development of safety protocols, the selection of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) and other supplies, and the identification of necessary human resources such as ad-hoc personnel.

Timely access to sufficient and appropriate PPE

Senior officials representing a country's public health sector and its procurement agency are often members of the national task force. By utilising their expertise and existing procurement mechanisms, election officials can swiftly identify the types, specifications, and quantity of PPE needed, as well as hand sanitisers and other cleaning materials required to move forward with elections. The EMB can also take advantage of its collaboration with the task force to explore alternative avenues for timely and cost-effective procurement of COVID-19 material. It can combine its procurement needs with those of the country's public health sector, or gain access to existing supplies or the ministry of health's long-term agreements with suppliers. At a minimum, health authorities can share information about reputable national and international suppliers and PPE specification requirements, saving the EMB time, if not costs.

Effective public information campaign

Integrating public health messages into election information campaigns requires both a solid grasp of the COVID-19 and how it spreads and an understanding of how to effectively communicate epidemiological concepts and terminology to various segments of the electorate. National task forces can initiate collaborations

between the EMB's public information teams and the ministry of health, even if these officials themselves are not members of the task force. This new avenue could facilitate the development of more appropriate messaging and effective designs, or open up new channels of communications used by the ministry of health but unknown or inaccessible to the EMB prior to the crisis.

Public perception of EMB improved

In general, an EMB's credibility as a responsible and professional institution could be enhanced should the election authority be a visible member of a COVID-19 task force that is widely perceived as successful in implementing its mandate. As mentioned above, if the EMB's planning and operational delivery of a COVID-19 mitigation plan benefits from its membership in the task force, the EMB's standing as a credible election body could be further strengthened as well.

Potential challenges and risks to EMBs

Although coordination and collaboration between EMBs and national task forces can facilitate processes and improve the overall conduct of elections during the COVID-19 public health crisis, this relationship can in some instances also pose significant risks to the EMB.

Communication and decision-making bottlenecks

Successful collaboration between public institutions requires effective communication and a clear delineation of tasks and decision-making responsibilities. Because COVID-19 task forces are, by nature, ad-hoc institutions, the rules and logic of their engagement with EMBs and any division of labour might not be obvious. If clear channels of communication are not established early in the process, institutions might misunderstand each other's tasks and end up not completing tasks that they thought were the other institution's responsibility. Alternatively, both institutions may believe a specific task is their responsibility and duplicate work, which might lead to contradictory measures or directives, creating confusion among citizens. To avoid these issues, EMBs and national task forces can make arrangements such as, for example, 1) the national task force issues general guidance for the prevention and mitigation of COVID-19 transmission and the EMB becomes responsible for applying such guidance to the specific context of elections; or 2) the national task force works in consultation with the EMB and its electoral experts to understand the electoral process and issue guidance specifically for electoral activities.

Operational delays caused by the inclusion of additional actors

Even if the responsibilities are well-delineated and communicated, the inclusion of new actors at different stages of electoral planning might still pose time-management problems. As more people must be consulted or review measures and procedures before approval, some decisions might take longer, delaying tasks related to operational implementation. As electoral calendars are usually tight, these delays can cause significant disruptions to election activities.

Perception of political dependence and reputational issues

As national task forces are usually led by or at least involve prominent government figures, close collaboration with them during the crisis might be seen by some as a violation of the political independence and autonomy of the EMB. In contexts where COVID-19 has been politicised and political groups have different perceptions of the threat posed by the disease, any measures taken in coordination with governmental task forces might be perceived as benefitting the government. In some circumstances, these perceptions might be accurate, and the EMB might indeed be subject to political interference, especially when incumbents abuse states of emergency to advance their political interests. It is also possible that, where the coronavirus is being used for different narratives by different political groups, any decisions made by the EMB on preventive measures will be seen as partisan, whether or not they align with the government's guidelines.

Whether political interference in elections is real or assumed, it damages the image of the EMB and might erode trust in the electoral process and results altogether. Finally, the reputation of the EMB – and potentially trust in the safety of elections – can also be damaged if there is a known collaboration between the EMB and the national task force but the performance of the national task force is seen by the public as weak. In this case, negative views of the task force could also affect public perception of the EMB's performance.

Inter-institutional coordination and collaboration are well-known challenges in both developing and developed countries. These challenges become even more accentuated when one of the institutions is a new temporary body, with a mandate that is not yet clear, and which needs to work and make decisions quickly to address major threats to citizens. In this sense, COVID-19 task forces, irrespective of format, face significant challenges. EMBs, which already work under tight time and financial constraints, also have new important obstacles to overcome during the public health crisis.

As discussed in this section, collaboration between these two institutions, if done properly and in a favourable political environment, can be extremely beneficial to both. Combining EMBs' expertise and experience of electoral processes with the public health knowledge of other members of the task force; the human, financial, and material resources provided to the work group; and the authority to make speedy decisions, is likely the best recipe for safe, successful elections. As also mentioned, however, several factors can undermine the effectiveness of this collaboration, and even leave the EMB's image – and, by consequence, public trust in elections – more damaged than it would have been if the work of the EMB and the national task force had not been linked.

Recommendations:

- EMBs and national task forces formed to deal with the COVID-19 crisis should ensure that each institution's tasks and responsibilities related to issuing guidance, planning, and implementing preventive measures for elections are clear and well-delineated.

- Regardless of its level of involvement with the national task force, EMBs should strive to obtain advisory, logistical, and operational support from other groups while maintaining political neutrality and communicating transparently to citizens.

- As it is ultimately their responsibility to hold elections safely, EMBs must coordinate with competent public health authorities to inform decisions regarding dates of elections and preventive measures to be taken, working to build political consensus around these decisions and taking a firm stand against actors who push for decisions that can put voters and poll workers at risk to advance their political interests.

Part 4: Election observation

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, almost all national elections were observed by independent election observers. In countries where election outcomes have historically been controversial, these efforts typically involve an international and domestic component. Internationally, groups such as the European Union, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Organisation of American States and the Carter Centre were present at over 70 per cent of elections held between 2006 and 2012. Domestically, civil society groups including religious bodies and trade unions groups typically come together to create a domestic monitoring organisation. Such efforts are in addition to the presence of party agents working for the main political parties and candidates, and in some cases the systematic positioning of journalists by major media houses. The questions facing observers during the COVID-19 pandemic is whether these approaches are still feasible.

Traditional methods of election observation are heavily dependent on spending considerable 'time on the ground', with the deployment of long-term observers, numerous meetings in the capital city, and the posting of pairs of observers to sample polling stations. Given these practices, the kind of social distancing requirements introduced by many governments to halt the spread of COVID-19 present significant challenges for election observation.

Most obviously, if airports are closed and long quarantine periods are put in place, international observers will not be able to attend elections at all. The movements of significant numbers of individuals across national borders and within countries also poses an obvious health risk to both the observers and the people that they meet. Less obviously, much of the data that informs observation missions – from newspaper coverage through to the tracking of incidents of political violence – may not be collected if organisations and individuals are prevented from doing their work. There is also a significant risk that political leaders will seek to manipulate the pandemic to undermine observation efforts, especially in countries in which democracy has not been consolidated. This is what happened in Burundi, where a late requirement that international observers should observe two weeks quarantine meant that they did not travel. Their absence significantly aided the ruling party's attempt to pass a problematic process off as a high quality and credible election.

In some cases, it may be hard to tell whether these kinds of barriers are the results of administrative shortcomings or represent a deliberate attempt to evade scrutiny. Indeed, even where electoral commissions are committed to democratic norms and values, the adoption of the kinds of innovations detailed elsewhere in this

report are likely to generate fresh challenges for observers. Postal and electronic voting, for example, can allow citizens to socially distance while casting their ballot, but may create opaque systems that require different strategies to ensure effective oversight. These challenges are considerable, but they are not insurmountable, and the fresh thinking they require may strengthen election observation in the long run.

International observers have at times been criticised – sometimes unfairly – for failing to detect or call out electoral manipulation. In particular, the fact that observers did not condemn elections in Kenya (2017) and Malawi (2019) that were subsequently found to be flawed by domestic courts resulted in complaints from opposition leaders and civil society groups. This suggests the need to further strengthen the approaches that international observers utilise – or at the very least to address the way that they are perceived. The need to radically rethink traditional models in order to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic creates an opportunity for the observation sector to build back better. In particular, international observers are likely to find that they need to work more collaboratively with domestic observers, and that they need to find new ways to source data during COVID-19. Doing so will not only ensure that elections continue to be effectively monitored, but can also lay the foundations for the evolution of more balanced and innovative approaches to observation.

The options facing international observers

There are four main strategies that international observers can use to respond to the pandemic. They can choose not to observe; to operate as usual in cases where COVID-19 has been largely contained; to recruit expatriates based in the country; and to operate virtually, using new methods to crowdsource data, or remotely, through new partnerships with domestic groups, which act as their 'eyes and ears'. Each of these approaches has strengths and weaknesses that are set out in detail below.

Although some of these options may appear to represent a significant break from existing practice, versions of all of them have already been deployed in non-COVID-19 contexts. Observers have been prevented from attending elections, or certain parts of a country, when security risks are severe, as has at times been the case in Afghanistan. European Union missions in some African countries, and the smaller teams that are sometimes deployed by the embassies of specific countries, have at times employed a limited number of expats to assist their work. Indeed, even the more radical option of observing virtually or remotely is not completely new – a Carter Center mission to the 2018 elections in Sierra Leone combined a four-person expert group with a strong partnership to domestic monitors conducting a parallel vote tabulation (PVT), to provide critical information to the larger

observer groups sponsored by the African Union, Commonwealth, ECOWAS and European Union. Responding effectively to COVID-19, therefore, might not require the invention of completely new strategies, but rather a more consistent application of recent innovations.

While it is useful to evaluate these options as four separate strategies, they are not mutually exclusive. International observers might try to recruit some of their team in-country while working more closely with domestic groups and utilising new technology. This point is significant because there are good reasons to think that observation missions need to move in this direction anyway. When it comes to technology, elections are becoming increasingly digitised and the organisations responsible for examining adherence to the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation are actively developing guidelines on how to observe online campaigning. When it comes to domestic monitors, there has at times been a tendency for international missions to coordinate and engage more with each other than with their domestic counterparts. Developing new ways to oversee technology and work hand-in-hand with domestic monitors would not only help international observers to respond more effectively to the pandemic, but could also lay down a blueprint for how to develop a more sustainable observation industry for the future.

1. Don't observe

International observers can decide not to send a standard mission team to elections and to play no formal role in the process. This was effectively what some organisations chose to do for Malawi's presidential election re-run on 23 June 2020. Two very significant types of risk were eliminated: first, the health risk to international observers and those that they come into contact with; and second, the reputational risk of issuing inaccurate statements due to unreliable or incomplete data from limited observation.

However, not observing also exacerbates a different set of risks. Perhaps most significantly, it may encourage incumbent governments to adopt more overt and damaging rigging strategies. In the May 2020 elections in Burundi, for example, there was no significant attempt by ruling party leaders to rein in the intimidation of opposition supporters and candidates. The absence of documented evidence by international observers reduces the willingness of the international community to speak out in cases of election rigging – especially if there is not a credible domestic group that can supply this information. At the same time, the absence of observers may also undermine public confidence in controversial elections that were actually legitimate.

Given the way in which authoritarian leaders have manipulated the pandemic to consolidate their own authority, it would be a dangerous development for global democracy if international observers were to completely vacate the electoral stage.

2. Observe 'traditionally'

Where elections are held in countries in which COVID-19 has been brought under control, international observers may be tempted to observe as they have in the past. This would minimise disruption and enable observers to collect their own data, reducing concerns about the reliability of information. Yet continuing to operate

as normal would generate a number of risks and may also represent a missed opportunity. For one thing, continuing to rely on traditional models means that observers may ultimately find that they are unable to monitor elections in countries where the number of cases remains very high, such as the United States. Even when observers can deploy personnel, the need to respect quarantine regulations will significantly increase the costs and logistical challenges of international missions. The severe health risks generated by international team members from countries with high numbers of cases such as the United Kingdom and United States travelling to countries with relatively low numbers of cases – such as many African countries – would raise serious ethical questions and require the imposition of strict new health protocols.

Leaving aside health and logistics, traditional methods of observation are also likely to be significantly less effective in the current environment. In countries such as South Korea and Uganda, campaign rallies and public meetings have been replaced by digital campaigns. In some cases, this has come about through the voluntary compliance of parties and candidates, while in others, such as Uganda, it has been mandated by the government or electoral commission. As a result, an increasing proportion of electoral activity – including campaign spending, voter mobilisation, hate speech and so on – will take place online and will not requires observers who are deployed on the ground to be monitored. At the same time, the pandemic is likely to spur the growing use of digital technology for processes such as voter registration, identification, and in some cases even voting itself. This will increasingly shift the focus of electoral manipulation – and efforts to prevent it – away from manual processes towards digital ones. One of the greatest risks for international election observation is to stand still while the world changes.

3. Observe with expat staff

When traditional ways of working are unavailable or undesirable, international observers have another option: recruiting expatriates – foreign nationals resident in the country – who are already on the ground. Again, there are both advantages and disadvantages to this option, and the balance between them will vary depending on the context. One advantage is that this model is likely to be much cheaper and greener, given that expensive and carbon-intensive international flights would not be required. International observers would also gain access to a larger pool of people some of whom may have valuable language skills – a significant asset in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, for example, where the official language typically masks a high degree of linguistic diversity. Expats who have lived in a country for a long period of time may also have a deeper and more nuanced understanding of local political dynamics and be less put off by the prospect of spending an extended period of time in-country. Thus, international observers could leverage this shift in their operating model as an opportunity to increase the geographical and temporal breadth of observation, as well as its sensitivity to local context.

However, there are also real disadvantages to adopting this approach. The most significant of these relates to impartiality, both real and perceived. The UN *Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation 2005*, states that: 'No one should be allowed to be a member of an international election observer mission unless that person is free from any political, economic or other conflicts of interest' (United Nations 2005, Paragraph 6). Impartiality is critical, not least because the perception that international observers are less partisan than domestic monitors lends their verdicts greater impact on citizens' assessments of electoral

integrity (Bush and Prather 2018). Their impartiality may be called into question by employing expatriates who have become embedded in local political debates – even if they have no direct connection to a specific political party – and so may not be seen to be genuinely impartial. This risk will be heightened during elections in which the rights of foreign nationals are a live campaign issue. Moreover, in some cases – for example some Commonwealth countries – expats may also enjoy the right to vote, which would render them ineligible according to the rules employed by most international observation groups.

Another disadvantage associated with the recruitment of individuals already on the ground concerns protecting staff from harassment and reprisals during and after an election. Some recent elections have been characterised by significant violence against domestic election observers. In Mozambique, for example, Anastacio Matavel, a prominent domestic observer, was murdered in the lead-up to the 2019 election (BBC 2019). International observers currently enjoy the privileged position of being able to leave a contested electoral environment, but this would not be true for expatriates. More broadly, recruiting expats and then continuing with a traditional model of observation would suffer from all of the limitations identified in Option 2. International observers therefore stand to gain from adopting some of the more innovative options available if they move to observe virtually and through partnership.

4. Observe 'virtually' and through partnership

A more radical alternative for international observers is to reduce the significance that they place on deploying their own staff on the ground and to instead observe 'virtually' and through partnerships with domestic organisations. While international donors already fund the efforts of domestic civil society groups, and international observers do engage with their domestic counterparts, this rarely takes the form of a true partnership. In addition, some international missions are reluctant to rely on data collected by domestic groups due to a perception that they are not objective. Partly as a result, domestic monitors have in some cases arrived at significantly different – and often more critical – findings than their international counterparts. Such discrepancies are problematic given that international observers tend to dominate media headlines, while divergence between the statements of observers can be strategically exploited by authoritarian leaders (Arceneaux and Leithner 2017).

A more integrated strategy could have three different elements, which might be deployed as a package or in different combinations, and some of which can clearly be combined with more traditional methods of election observation.

- **Partnership**. Working with domestic monitors and civil society groups, helping to fund their activities and then sharing the data collected, would reduce the need to have large numbers of international observers. Such partnerships could be established either by forming bilateral partnerships with individual groups, or by supporting election 'situation rooms' in which a number of different

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7   For more information see https://thecommonwealth.org/media/news/commonwealth-secretariat-supports-peace-and-dialogue-mala-wi-upcoming-polls

groups pool resources and data. Given that domestic groups typically deploy many more individuals to many more polling stations, working in this way would enhance the geographical coverage of international missions as well as strengthen the resource base of domestic groups.

- **Virtual monitoring**. With an increasing proportion of electoral activity taking place digitally and online – especially during the pandemic – it makes sense for international observers to place greater emphasis on monitoring online spaces such as Twitter and Facebook. Given that most newspapers are available digitally, or can be quickly scanned, traditional media can also be monitored remotely.

- **Crowdsourcing**. Crowdsourcing (and then verifying) data from individuals on the ground – as the Ushahidi platform famously did to track the violence surrounding Kenya's 2007-8 general elections – can be a cost-effective way of mapping the extent of electoral manipulation. Along with working in partnership with local groups with existing networks and virtual monitoring, crowd sourcing data can also insulate observers from the risk of being shut out of certain areas due to local lockdowns – so long as access to the Internet is maintained throughout the electrical cycle.

While this full package of strategies has not yet been employed in any one election, for Malawi's 2020 presidential re-run the Commonwealth Secretariat utilised both partnership and virtual monitoring. More specifically, they partnered with the National Initiative for Civic Education (NICE) and local civil society organisations such as the Public Affairs Committee (PAC) and the 50-50 Campaign to support local citizen observation and an election situation room. Through these domestic organisations, the Commonwealth was able to gain access to the data collected by over 6,000 observers and volunteers across the country, who provided real time reports on pre-election, election day and post-election day developments via a specially created WhatsApp group.[7] In this way, the Commonwealth effectively accessed valuable information on a scale that would have been impossible for a 'traditional' mission, while strengthening domestic processes.

Of course, no one approach is a silver bullet, and there are clearly risks associated with this strategy. Local partners may be perceived to be partisan, and so collaborating with them may compromise the efforts of international missions to demonstrate their independence and neutrality. It may also be challenging for international missions to maintain quality control if they are physically absent from a country or are only operating a skeleton team. This may raise concerns about the quality of information that is collected, which in turn may undermine public confidence in international observers and their findings. This would be a significant cost, as international observers have worked very hard over the past decade to adopt increasingly rigorous and systematic methods in order to insulate themselves against accusations that they cherry pick evidence.

Adopting a more collaborative strategy may also generate fresh coordination challenges such as unnecessary duplication of work, especially if different international observation missions do not communicate effectively and separately contact the same domestic organisations. It is also true that domestic organisations usually lack the kind of access that is afforded to international observers, who find it easier to arrange meetings at short notice with high level political leaders and electoral officials, and to gain access to important electoral spaces and data. However, these issues are manageable. Identifying domestic groups known to be more neutral are professional, enhancing their capacity and agreeing protocols

for data collection ahead of time can help to ensure that the information that is collected is accurate and reliable. Posting a small number of international staff to help oversee the observation process can also help to strengthen personal relationships, build trust and facilitate access for domestic groups. The up-front costs of shifting to this approach will probably be higher than some of the other options, but the long-term benefits of this approach are likely to considerably outweigh the investment.

Observing the future

Maintaining an effective and credible system of election observation requires international missions to adapt and innovate. In addition to seeing the COVID-19 pandemic as a global crisis and a major challenge, international observers should therefore also see the current situation as an opportunity. Of course, there is no need to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Once the threat of the COVID 19 pandemic recedes, there are good reasons for international observers to go back to deploying international staff. Senior international figures can help to share expertise, coordinate among the international community, and increase the space available for domestic groups to operate. But future deployments may look very different. The ever more sophisticated way in which elections are being manipulated means that observing a small number of selected polling stations is likely to be increasingly ineffective. Moreover, the fact that international observers only cover a tiny proportion of polling stations, most of which are already covered by domestic groups, suggests that these resources could be better invested elsewhere.

A more efficient and effective approach could be to develop a virtual and partnership-based model of observation during the pandemic, using this as the foundation for a new model of observation that would see a greater complementarity and specialisation of roles. Domestic groups, with their vast numbers and existing presence on the ground, have clear advantages when it comes to data collection at the polling station level. International groups can utilise their access to comparative expertise to strengthen the capacity of domestic groups and develop new ways to effectively observe digital processes. Working collaboratively and sharing data will enable both sets of organisations to come to more accurate and reliable conclusions. Importantly, such an approach would enable international observers to use their access to the global media and the international community to amplify the voice of domestic monitors and ensure that their recommendations are prioritised.

Some groups are already implementing aspects of this approach, and demonstrating its benefits. Most notably, non-governmental observation bodies such as the trio of American organisations – the Carter Center, the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute – have worked closely with domestic observers for some time. These partnerships have, in some cases, included working through the network of domestic observers, providing funding, and collaboratively implementing a PVT to assess the credibility of the official results. However, these efforts have not always involved paying close attention to election technology and social media, or culminated in smaller and less high-profile international missions. Further extending and institutionalising these kinds of approaches will better enable observers to respond to growing concerns about global knowledge and power inequalities and to the need to ensure that Western institutions do not crowd out the voices of the very citizens that they are working to empower.

Recommendations:

- The travel restrictions and health and safety protocols associated with COVID-19 threaten to make traditional forms of international election observation impossible. International observers should carefully weigh up the strengths and weaknesses of the four main strategies open to them.

- The response of international observers will be most effective if they approach this as an opportunity to strengthen their work for the long term, rather than simply introducing COVID-19 sensitive guidelines and protocols to respond to the current health crisis. Many of the changes that are likely to be required during the pandemic were already highly advisable.

- International observers should prioritise innovation, look for new ways to harness technology and build stronger partnerships between domestic and international groups. This will allow the industry both to respond effectively to new challenges and to build back better.

Part 5: Elections and the risk of violence

The COVID-19 pandemic and the unprecedented social, economic and political crises have been accompanied in many parts of the world with dramatic increases in riots, protests and other forms of violence (Gutiérrez-Romero, 2020). In countries where there has been a history of violent elections, considering strategies for mitigating possible heightened risks will be relevant when elections are being planned.

Drawing on the experience of 10 countries that held national elections between March and June 2020, we present evidence on the link between lockdowns and electoral conflict. We then draw lessons from these elections and provide insights into old and new forms of coercion, intimidation, electoral fraud and other forms of malpractice that might emerge in some contexts. Our main findings are that in some cases pre-election lockdowns have been characterised by political repression, and that elections held during the pandemic have involved, on average, high levels of protests, riots and violence against civilians. In short: elections convened under pandemic conditions may be at heightened risk of conflict, especially if elections have been violent in the past.

Evidence

We list in Table 1 the ten countries analysed here, including the dates when lockdowns began and elections were held. For instance, Guinea held parliamentary elections on 22 March, just before announcing its lockdown, and after postponing the election four times from the original date of January 2019. Most other countries have held elections after their lockdowns. An interesting case is Mali that held elections on 29 March amid the imminent threat of the pandemic and armed conflict after postponing the election three times since November 2018.

To gain leverage on the question of whether lockdowns and recent elections may have triggered conflict, we use the Armed Conflict Location and Events Data (ACLED). ACLED provides real-time data on political violence around the globe based on media and government reports, humanitarian agencies, and research publications (Raleigh et al. 2010).

Table 1. Dates of COVID-19 lockdowns and elections

| Country	Date Covid-19 lockdown	Date election 2020	Date of previous election	Total ACLED events* 1 Jan 2013 to 4 Jul 2020
Benin	03 Mar 20	17 May 20	13 Apr 16	188
Burundi	12 Mar 20	02 May 20	28 Sep 13	5,674
Guinea	26 Mar 20	22 Mar 20	28 Jun 15	993
Israel	15 Mar 20	02 Mar 20	15 De 13	1,795
Malawi	16 Mar 20	23 Jun 20	21 Jul 15	437
Mali	11 Mar 20	29 Mar 20	25 May 15	2,990
Mongolia	16 Mar 20	24 Jun 20	17 Sep 19	128
Serbia	15 Mar 20	21 Jun 20	02 Apr 17	1,534
South Korea	27 Feb 20	15 Apr 20	21 Jun 19	4,713
Suriname	14 Mar 20	25 May 20	29 Jun 16	32

*Includes battles, protests, riots, violence against civilians, explosions/remote violence, strategic developments.
Sources: Author estimates using ACAPS (2020), ACLED (2020) and Hale et al. (2020).

Figure 1 shows the extent to which lockdowns and recent elections are associated with changes in the probability of various types of conflict. In this figure, Panel B displays the probability of the state being directly involved as an actor in these conflicts, in its capacity of military, police, guards or government.

This evidence suggests that post-lockdown periods have in these cases been associated with statistically significant reductions in protest and important increases in violence against civilians. During post-electoral periods, by contrast, there have been significant increases in protests and slight reductions in violence against civilians. While these associations are based on a non-representative sample of ten cases only and they do not prove causal impacts, they are suggestive of possible causal effects. Further details of the regression analyses underlying this figure are provided in the Appendix.

Figure 1. Probability of having conflict after lockdowns and elections
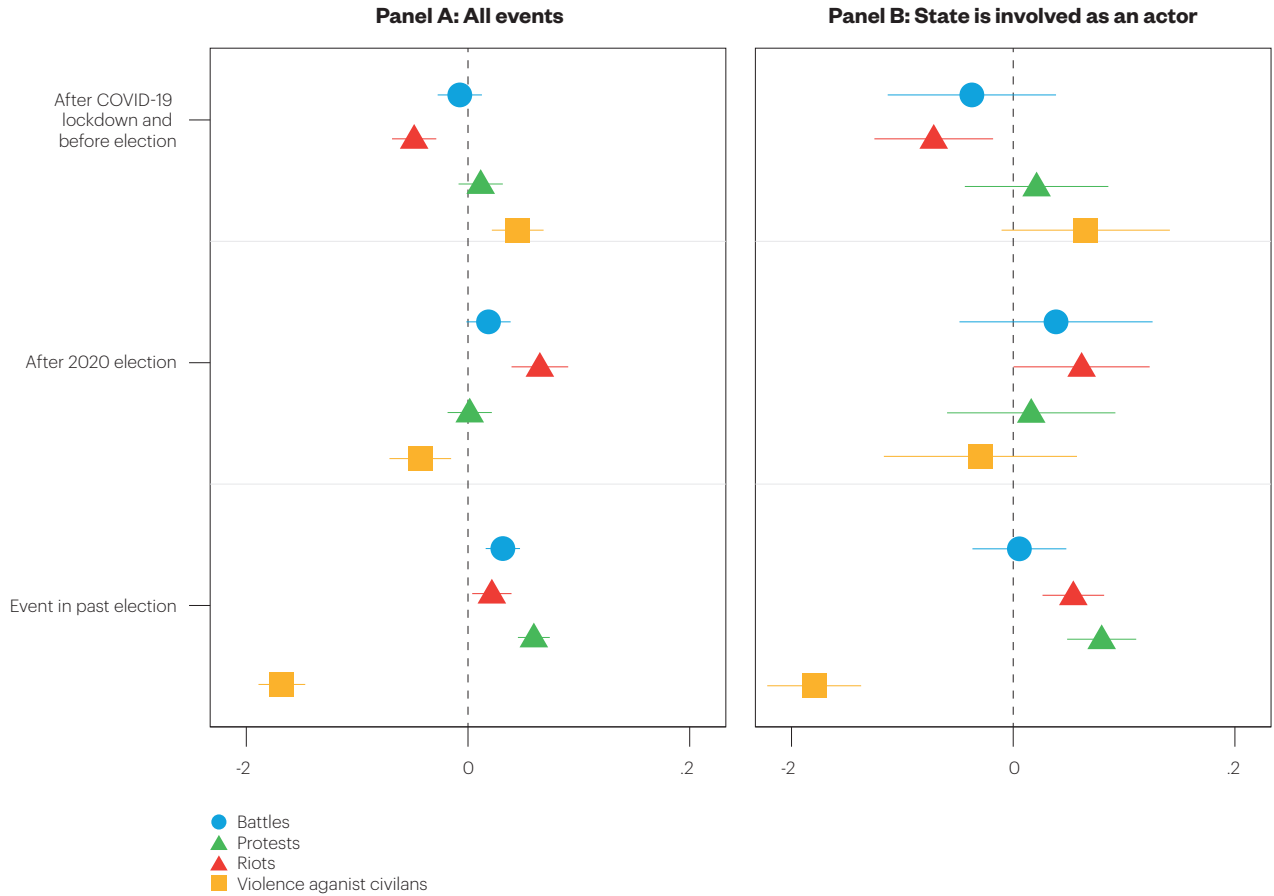
Source: Author estimates using ACLED events between 1 January 2013 and 4 July 2020 using panel fixed effects regression for Benin, Burundi, Guinea, Israel, Mali, Malawi, Mongolia, Serbia, South Korea and Suriname that have held elections in 2020. Horizontal bars are 95% confidence intervals.

In Figure 2, we track the various types of conflict on a daily basis for the ten countries analysed from 1 January 2013 to 4 July 2020. We depict the most recent election day by a vertical line. It is clear that there were very high levels of protest both immediately before and immediately after these elections. It is also clear that violence against civilians started to increase during the pre-electoral period and was high around election day but declined slightly during the post-electoral period. In Figure 2, all panels on the right depict the fatalities associated with these conflicts. Despite the low incidence, it is still alarming that the number of fatalities related to battles and riots have increased after elections. In some cases, of course, these changes may not be related to the pandemic, but elections held under pandemic conditions do appear to be linked to changing patterns in the use of force.

Figure 2. Violent events before and after 2020 elections in Benin, Burundi, Guinea, Israel, Mali, Malawi, Mongolia, Serbia, South Korea and Suriname
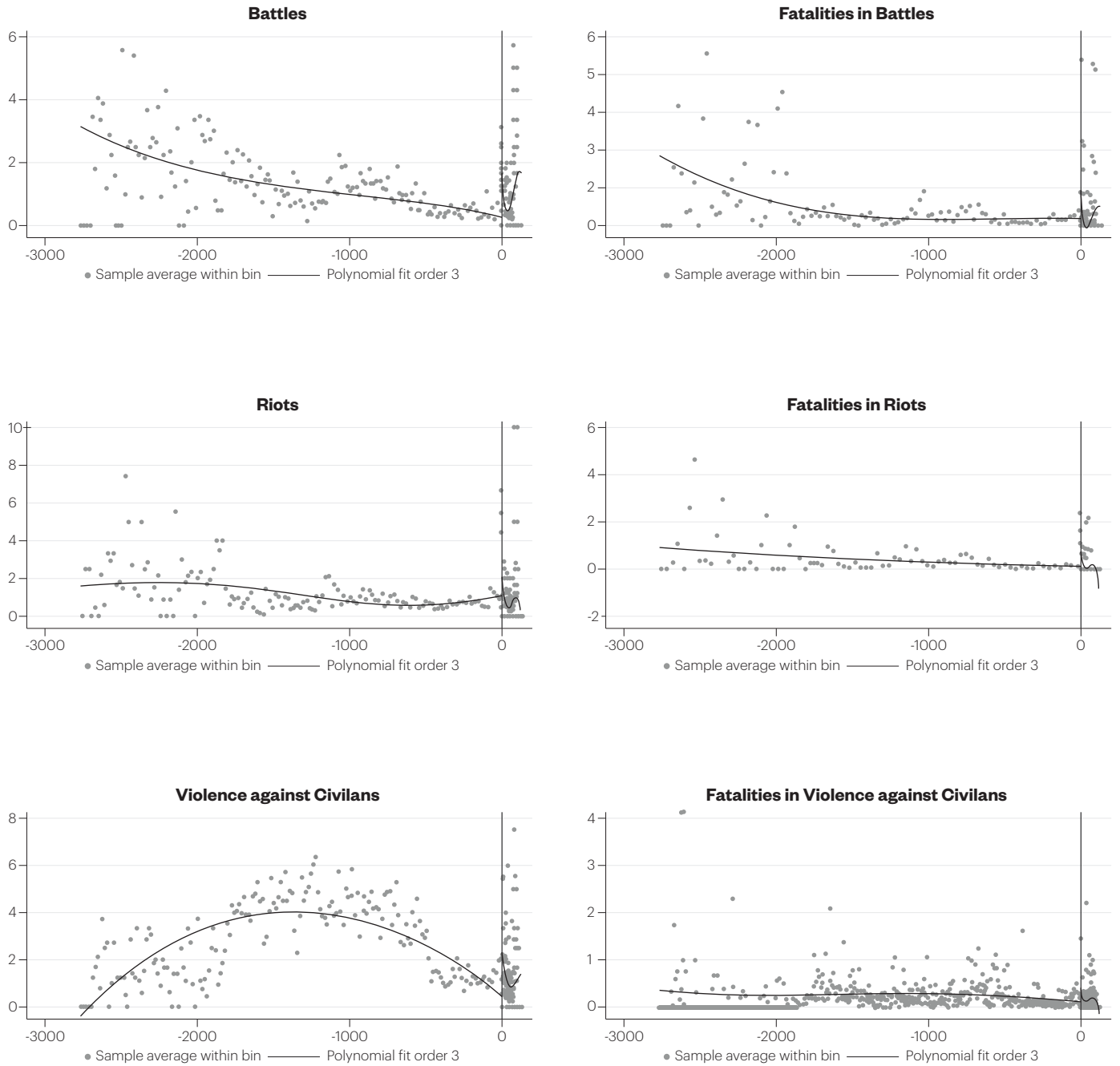
These analyses suggest several possible lessons for practitioners:

- The evidence indicates that governments may be using pre-election lockdowns to silence the opposition by dampening the activities through which voters protest against coercion and by increasing violence against civilians. In short, pre-election lockdowns appear to be characterised by repression, and also by the dampening of contestation. This suggests the need for electoral observers and electoral assistance providers to be attentive to the possibility that unusually quiet election campaigns signal repression, and to work with governments to guarantee that rights to freedom of association and freedom of expression are observed as far as is possible under pandemic conditions.

- Elections, not lockdowns, are associated with increases in protest in these ten cases. Although lockdowns elsewhere have been times of increased protest, the cases included here are, on average, characterised by depressed protest activity during pre-electoral lockdowns but increased protest immediately before and after election day. This suggests the need for careful election planning to avoid unnecessary unrest.

- Protests following disputed elections have the potential to increase COVID-19 infections, which may then and lead to further violence. We know from previous research that protests often follow elections characterised by misconduct and manipulation (Beaulieu 2014; Birch 2020; Daxecker 2012; Gutiérrez-Romero 2014). Thus poorly-run elections may trigger a vicious cycle for incumbent governments, generating violence which worsens the pandemic and leads to further violence. This reinforces the need for practitioners to ensure careful electoral security planning in conjunction with pandemic-specific measures.

Though we do not yet have sufficient data to explore all the relevant aspects of electoral violence during the pandemic, we can also speculate on the basis of our current knowledge that several other dangers might also arise:

- COVID-19 anti-poverty packages could be abused for vote-buying by incumbent parties, who may strategically deliver these funds to government supporters and delay distribution to groups associated with the opposition. This phenomenon could increase the risk of violent reactions from aggrieved groups.

- Social distancing and the excessive use of force could silence media outlets' coverage of different aspects of elections, including electoral violence.

- Localised lockdowns could be used to dampen turnout in opposition areas, as it occurred during the most recent Ebola crisis (*The Lancet*, 2019).

- Increased sanitary measures at the polls will in many cases require extending the period of voting for more than one day, as South Africa is considering doing and as happened in the 15 April Korean election, the Queensland election of 29 March and various US primary elections, where early voting has been encouraged (IFES 2020). Extra time allowed for voting might give opportunities for ballot stuffing, which could prompt post-electoral protests.

- Some countries could enforce strict lockdowns shortly after elections to silence the opposition and potential protests. That is, post-election lockdowns could potentially emerge as a repression tactic.

- COVID-19 has unleashed significant hate speech and incitement to violence against minorities, migrants, and other groups historically discriminated against around the world. Violence against women has also increased during the pandemic. These trends are likely to be exacerbated during elections leaving large groups vulnerable to electoral violence.

According to the evidence considered here, elections held during the pandemic appear in some cases to be at heightened risk of violence. We do not know of any pandemic-specific intervention that could easily reverse the upward trends in conflict suggested by these data. Previous research on electoral violence suggests that an independent electoral commission, a competent and impartial law enforcement apparatus, a robust civil society and informed public all reduce election violence, and these are all the more important under pandemic conditions.

Recommendation:

In parts of the world with a history of significant electoral conflict, elections may be at increased risk of violence during the pandemic. Practitioners should ensure that measures are employed to enhance electoral security in contexts where violence is likely before, during and after polling day.

Conclusion

The analyses presented in this briefing suggest that like most social and political processes, elections held under pandemic conditions present greater challenges than those held at other times. Yet the experience of elections carried out over the course of the past several months indicates that it is possible to hold safe and fair polls in most contexts. Such elections may be more expensive than normal (Asplund, James and Clark 2020), but the democratic value of elections will in most cases make polling worthwhile, even in difficult economic circumstances.

Indeed, the challenges of the pandemic may prompt electoral practitioners to reconsider and improve their practices in a number of areas, including inclusive and accountable electoral administration, the management of poll workers, and electoral observation. Electoral practice is an area in which we can realistically expect to be able to 'build back better' after COVID-19 has been conquered.

The experience of holding elections during the current COVID-19 pandemic will also be valuable in guiding electoral practitioners to develop practices that are resilient to future health crises. The changing climate and the steady encroachment of human activities on the natural world both work to increase the likelihood of epidemics and pandemics, which are in all probability going to become more frequent in future years. Electoral administration must adapt not only to the immediate threat posed by COVID-19, but also to a world in which any election period could coincide with a major outbreak of an infectious disease for which treatments are limited.

Even countries such as the UK, which have chosen to postpone elections, may be well advised to take on board the adjustments to electoral procedure that have been adopted elsewhere. As we have argued, such adjustments have a number of other benefits in making elections better.

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Appendix

This appendix contains ancillary data that underlie the figures presented in section VI above. Tables A1 and A2 present the regression models underlying the figures presented above. Table A3 shows the number of ACLED events in each of the ten countries analysed. The regression analyses show that:

- On average, the probability of experiencing violence against civilians after lockdowns has increased by 5%. The regression discontinuity graph shows this is bad news, as it reverses the downward trajectory of this kind of violence. Moreover, this small and rapid increase in violence against civilians, if it continues to further increase, could lead to the peak levels experienced years ago.

- On average, the probability of protests occurring after elections has increased by nearly 7%. The regression discontinuity graph suggests that right before these elections the incidence of protests was already quite high, the highest over the last seven years. Thus, an extra 7% on average is a substantial increase.

- The association between recent elections and battles although small at 2%, should by no means be underestimated. This small increase has reversed the downward trend in battles that these nine countries had experienced since 2013.

- Previous violent elections increase the likelihood that the state will experience protests and riots. These coefficients are quite substantial, with an increase probability of nearly 6% and 9% respectively.

Table A1. ACLED events between 1 January 2013 and 4 July 2020, panel fixed effects

Dependent variable	(1) Battles	(2) Protests	(3) Riots	(4) Violence against civilians
Event right after COVID-19 lockdown and before election	-0.0007 (0.010)	-0.051*** (0.012)	0.010 (0.010)	0.048*** (0.013)
Event after election 2020	0.020* (0.011)	0.068*** (0.014)	0.002 (0.011)	-0.044*** (0.015)
Event 60 days before or after the previous election	0.033*** (0.008)	0.024*** (0.010)	0.064*** (0.009)	-0.176*** (0.011)
Observations	19,239	19,239	19,239	19,239
Number of countries	10	10	10	10

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Significance level, *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Source: Author estimates using ACLED (2020).

Table A2. ACLED events where the state (police, military, guard, or government) is involved as an actor between 1 January 2013 and 4 July 2020, panel fixed effects

Dependent variable where the stage is involved as an actor:	(1) Battles	(2) Protests	(3) Riots	(4) Violence against civilians
Event right after COVID-19 lockdown and before election	-0.041 (0.042)	-0.075*** (0.029)	0.021 (0.036)	0.067* (0.040)
Event after election 2020	0.041 (0.048)	0.065*** (0.033)	0.018 (0.041)	-0.030 (0.046)
Event 60 days before or after the previous election	0.005 (0.022)	0.057*** (0.015)	0.083*** (0.019)	-0.189*** (0.021)
Observations	4,057	4,057	4,057	4,057
Number of countries	10	10	10	10

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. Significance level, *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

Source: Author estimates using ACLED (2020).

Table A3. ACLED events in ten countries that have held elections since March 2020

	Total	Benin	Burundi	Guinea	Israel	Malawi	Mali	Mongolia	Serbia	South Korea	Suriname
Panel A:					1 January 2013 – 4 July 2020						
Battles	1,647	26	437	54	39	3	1,086	N/A	1	1	N/A
Explosions/Remote violence	1,628	N/A	402	11	638	N/A	559	N/A	27	N/A	N/A
Protests	8,381	83	573	426	668	194	289	108	1,428	4,595	17
Riots	1,767	48	471	513	195	254	142	4	29	103	8
Strategic developments	1,337	12	686	45	187	9	341	16	21	9	1
Violence against civilians	4,479	36	3,190	85	58	35	1,036	N/A	28	5	6
Total	19,239	205	5,760	1,124	1,795	495	3,453	128	1,534	4,713	32
Panel B:					1 January 2020 – Right before 2020 elections						
Battles	101	4	15	2	N/A	1	79	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Explosions/Remote violence	84	N/A	4	N/A	45	N/A	35	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Protests	1,232	2	1	158	13	53	33	24	115	823	10
Riots	268	8	18	156	3	48	3	3	3	21	5
Strategic developments	112	3	45	18	17	1	15	7	1	4	1
Violence against civilians	310	6	166	17	1	7	105	N/A	1	5	2
Total	2,107	23	249	351	79	110	270	34	120	853	18
Panel C:					Right after 2020 elections						
Battles	145	4	6	11	2	N/A	121	N/A	N/A	1	N/A
Explosions/Remote violence	41	N/A	2	N/A	5	N/A	34	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Protests	1,168	1	1	35	88	1	27	N/A	111	904	N/A
Riots	133	7	22	51	23	N/A	19	N/A	2	7	2
Strategic developments	69	N/A	26	4	6	N/A	29	N/A	3	1	N/A
Violence against civilians	198	1	69	16	3	N/A	108	N/A	1	N/A	N/A
Total	1,754	13	126	117	127	1	338	0	117	913	2

Source: Author estimates using ACLED (2020).