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… the election promises to be an interesting one, with but one disturbing element, yet one which I believe we are becoming unhappily accustomed to in Jamaica. That is the question of violence

The Gleaner (newspaper), 21 June 1959.

In recent years, one of the most striking trends to emerge in international relations has been the rapid rise in the use of electoral processes to legitimise governments. This development has rested on a belief that democratic governance, provided through periodic and credible elections, offers the most effective mechanism for managing political and social tensions without recourse to violence. The viewpoint has been consistently endorsed by the international community, with former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan declaring that ‘there are many good reasons for promoting democracy, not least—in the eyes of the United Nations—is that, when sustained over time, it is a highly effective means of preventing conflict, both within and between states’. Indeed, the belief that democracy and elections are key drivers of peaceful governance has prompted an unprecedented promotion of democracy across the world as a specific means of conflict prevention.

Whilst electoral processes are only one part of a functioning and stable democracy, they do create the foundations for democratic governance. As Robert Pastor once remarked, ‘to many, democracy should be more than free and fair elections, but it cannot be less’. Indeed, credible elections are vital to democracy due to their capacity to highlight issues of national concern, provide an opportunity for public dialogue and debate, give voice to the electorate, and select representatives who reflect the will of the people and who have a legitimate mandate to govern. When conducted fairly, therefore, elections provide a predictable and rule-bound method for channelling conflict constructively, reducing the need for political stakeholders to pursue violent …