Electoral Violence

What is CSO’s role in electoral violence?

Elections represent key milestones in every democracy and are often events to be celebrated. In some countries without strong democratic traditions and a history of peaceful political transitions, elections can be deeply polarizing events that lead to violence, conflict, and, potentially, atrocities. Problems with election processes, such as procedural failures or insufficient security force planning can also trigger violence. Preventing electoral violence is a priority for the U.S. government.

The Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) analyzes contentious elections, focusing on the drivers of violence and their most likely victims. Through analysis, CSO identifies influential individuals and groups with the motive and means to carry out violence, as well as positive actors whose moderating voices can be mobilized to reduce tensions. This work is guided by CSO’s Electoral Violence Assessment Framework.

Where is CSO working?

CSO has conducted analysis and implemented programs to prevent or mitigate electoral violence in numerous countries including: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Burma, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guatemala, Kenya, and Nigeria.

Nigeria: In 2015, CSO worked with the U.S. embassy to map potential violent spoilers and reduce their ability to foster violence before, during, and after election day.

Kenya: In 2013, CSO helped amplify peaceful messages of religious, business, and civil society leaders in communities with the highest risk for election violence.

What methods does CSO use?

Planning: CSO helps embassies and regional bureaus determine risks for violence and devise diplomatic strategies to counter spoilers. CSO supports U.S. government interagency working groups on upcoming elections by determining key risks, identify vulnerable populations, and developing actionable plans to mitigate vulnerabilities.

Programming: CSO works with embassies to use diplomacy and programming to dissuade perpetrators and encourage positive actors to promote peaceful participation in elections.

Partnerships: CSO provides training and advisory support to foreign governments to enhance risk analysis, planning, coordination, and response efforts. CSO also has partnerships with leading academics and research institutions to cooperate on analysis and develop actionable best practices and lessons learned. CSO’s partners include the Africa Center for Strategic Studies and the Evidence in Governance and Politics research network.