ELECTIONS AS A MECHANISM OF PEACE. THE CASES OF LIBERIA AND THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

Claudiu-Bogdan Aldea *

Abstract

The paper analyses the normative and empirical capacity of elections to function as a peace mechanism in the early stages of the recovery period. Accordingly, the analysis is based on a theoretical framework that draws attention to the timing of elections in post-conflict societies. Moreover, in order to operationalize such theoretical aspects, the paper focuses on two relevant case studies: the 1997 elections in Liberia (perceived as post-conflict) and the 2020-2021 elections in The Central African Republic (early peace process – not void of conflict). Accordingly, the paper poses the following research questions: How was the prospect of organizing these rounds of election received by the parties involved in the conflict? How did these rounds of election relate to the peace process? Do elections represent an adequate mechanism to achieve positive peace in post-conflict societies?

Keywords: elections, peace studies, post-conflict development, peace building, systemic violence.

* PhD Student at the Faculty of European Studies, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Email : aclaudiubogdan@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Early rounds of elections in the peace process came to occupy a significant position in the repertoire of numerous peacebuilding initiatives. This step-up of elections as a peacebuilding tool is attributed to two factors. On the one hand, elections are perceived as a way of transforming violent conflict into political warfare and, in this way, of reducing the extent of armed violence on the ground. On the other hand, elections also represent exercises that offer authentic experience in relation to democratic practices and institutions. However, elections as a whole represent a complex phenomenon, with numerous relevant dimensions that have to be taken into consideration.

Accordingly, Brancati, Snyder, Flores and Nooruddin extensively focus on the importance of election timing. In this sense, they provide quantitative analyses that explore the problematic aspects of timing of elections in post-conflict societies. The major observation is that, in most cases, early voting rounds actually prove to be more damaging than healing for the peace process and the society as a whole. In order to operationalize, test and understand these considerations, our study brings forward two significant case studies: the 1997 elections in Liberia (which are considered to have taken place in a post-conflict framework although violence has not ceased) and the 2020-2021 elections in the Central African Republic (which have taken place in a heavily-militarized context, not at all void of violence). Through these case studies, the paper tries to answer three research questions. Foremost, how was the prospect of organizing these rounds of election received by the parties involved in the conflict? For this question, we will attempt to clarify the ethical and practical considerations, related to party campaign, propaganda, civic society and the involvement of rebel groups in disturbing the electoral process. Secondly, how did these rounds of election relate to the evolution of the peace process? To accurately address this issue, the paper focuses on elections as part of a wider framework in the peace process, ranging from

the specific provisions of peace agreements to Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) initiatives. Lastly, do elections represent an adequate mechanism to achieve positive peace in post-conflict societies? By analysing raw data in relation to violent events and the shifts in the dynamic of these two civil wars, the paper exhibits the extremely problematic implications of early rounds of elections and their overall impact on the peace process and long-term developments.

2. Theorizing Post-Conflict Timing of Elections

When discussing the phenomenon of post-war elections, timing seems to appear as the most important element. Why does timing matter when organizing post-conflict elections? This part aims to answer this question by focusing on two extremely important works that detail this issue from a quantitative point of view. Foremost, Brancati and Snyder[1] aim their attention towards the most important causes behind organizing early rounds of elections in countries that experienced post-war transition. Secondly, Flores and Nooruddin[2] adopt a more comprehensive perspective, assessing the most optimal and efficient timeframe to organize post-conflict elections.

Early rounds of elections pose significant problematic aspects in societies that experience post-conflict transitions. However, why do certain actors and institutions push for organizing elections rather early in the peace process? Fundamentally, elections can be perceived as a part of the democratization effort, highlighting "the central role of political democracy"[3] throughout peacebuilding and state-building processes. In other words, by promoting democracy through elections, the political

---

[1] Dawn Brancati and Jack L. Snyder, "Rushing to the Polls: The Causes of Premature Postconflict Elections", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 55, no. 3, 2011.

[2] Thomas Edward Flores and Irfan Nooruddin, "The Effect of Elections on Postconflict Peace and Reconstruction", *The Journal of Politics*, 74, no. 2, 2012.

[3] *Ibidem*, p. 558

actors who sought to achieve their goals via violent means and the civil society would come into contact with legitimate polity and power-sharing structures. However, the issue of early elections is more complex than that, as it poses significant political, social, security and operational factors. Therefore, rather than addressing issues with a fragile political and security climate, elections could deepen grievances among combating sides, prolonging violence. Moreover, "ill-timed, badly designed, or poorly run elections can actually undermine the broader process of democratization"[4]. Subsequently, aside from these aspects, failed elections can prove destructive for the symbolic and normative value of democratic practices as a whole. Plainly put, a failed episode of elections as a democratic mechanism could weaken the expectations and undermine the trust of the actors involved in the peace process (even civil society) in democracy as a system and principle of organization.

Accordingly, an explicit focus should be directed towards the adequate timing of early rounds of elections, as in "postconflict societies, elections may thus serve as flash points for further conflict, rather than instruments of conflict resolution"[5]. Consequently, Flores and Nooruddin propose a differentiation of the post-conflict system in which elections are organized: "new democracy" and "established democracy"[6]. Moreover, this categorization is based on two parameters that impact the evaluation of the early rounds of elections: economic growth and a recurrence of violence[7]. Aside from this hypothetical framework, the empirical dimension of the analysis points towards two fundamental results. Foremost, elections tend to be more problematic in new democracies, rather than in established

---

[4] Benjamin Reilly, "Elections in Post-Conflict Societies," in Edward Newman and Roland Rich (eds), *The UN Role in Promoting Democracy between Ideals and Reality*, New York: United Nations University Press, 2004, p. 115.

[5] Thomas Edward Flores and Irfan Nooruddin, "The Effect of Elections on Postconflict Peace and Reconstruction", p. 558.

[6] *Ibidem*, p. 564.

[7] *Ibidem*, p. 562.

democracies. Secondly, in new democracies, elections generate positive effects on the peace process if they are held at a later timeframe (of at least three years in the recovery period), while for established democracies, elections generate positive effects even if they are held at an earlier timeframe (in year two of the recovery period)[8].

Moving on, Brancati and Snyder practically propose the same framework: timing of elections is fundamental and the "less time that elapses between the end of a civil war and the onset of an election, the more likely civil wars are to reoccur"[9]. However, the study also identifies several relevant factors that bring a certain degree of stability to early rounds of elections in post-conflict transition phases: the involvement of the international community and power-sharing formats[10] (as they legitimize the process and provide inclusiveness). Nonetheless, the major conclusion of this quantitative research is that "postconflict governments, in the face of strong international pressure to hold elections, hold elections to prevent rebels from returning to war"[11]. This is extremely significant, as it shows that most of the times elections are perceived as a mechanism to deter a return to systemic violence (short-term perspective), rather than a mechanism to promote and build democracy and democratic practices (long-term perspective).

Consequently, timing of early rounds of elections in post-war societies is fundamental. However, both the timing and the nature and characteristics of the initiative prove to be essential. Basically, elections are part of a wider framework of the process as they are embedded into a coherent system of peacebuilding and state-building initiatives (nature of initiatives) and into a specific timeframe (timing of initiatives). Throughout this paper, we will try to move away from a strictly quantitative analysis

---

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 565.

[9] Dawn Brancati and Jack L. Snyder, "Rushing to the Polls", p. 471.

[10] *Ibidem*, p. 472.

[11] *Ibidem*, p. 475.

and focus on two specific case studies. Accordingly, our research traces the evolution of the processes that impacted the early rounds of elections in Liberia and The Central African Republic (not in a post-conflict environment, as violence is still prominent, but in the early stages of the peace process) and the consequences these rounds of elections generated. Therefore, the paper adopts a qualitative methodology to address the issues pertaining to the nature of the initiative, aspect that involves several parameters (such as access to voting, unethical political propaganda and the issue of population displacement).

3. The Abuja Accords and the 1997 general elections in Liberia

The paper focuses on the election framework and the relevant steps in the peace process set up by the two Abuja Accords. The two Abuja Accords followed to better address the realities on the ground: the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) was losing ground and other factions became more influential. In this sense, all these warring sides manifested a massive spoiling potential that had to be taken into consideration. The first round of negotiations that occurred on August 19, 1995, Abuja I, had to be adapted as to provide a certain degree of stability. In this sense, power was divided in order to secure peace. Accordingly, "Abuja was a lavish banquet to whet the appetite of Liberia's avaricious warlords"[12], as they acquired significant gains in terms of political power (which could be expanded into other domains). The implementation of Abuja I by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) and the United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) proved deficient and lacking, despite significant gains, such as being an inclusive accord that offered warlords and strongmen extensive leverage. However, armed conflict has not completely ceased and ECOWAS expanded ECOMOG's

---

[12] Adekeye Adebajo, *Building Peace in West Africa: Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2002, p. 60.

mandate and, with international aid, the road was paved for Abuja II. Abuja II proved to be broader and better structured, however it unfortunately generated the "unsustainable warlord peace of 1997"[13]. The peace initiatives conducted by ECOWAS and UNOMIL focused mostly on elections, which were perceived as an adequate means of reaching long-term, sustainable peace. However, on themselves and without other peace and state building initiatives, elections cannot guarantee the end of armed conflict. Abuja II represented a comprehensive accord but it lacked immediate and extensive focus on deeper issues, such as peacebuilding, large-scale DDR programmes and reforms of the security sector.

Accordingly, this early round of elections[14] proves to be a peculiar case that occurred in an extremely tense political climate, with a questionable and fragile stability of the security environment. The elections in Liberia represented a landslide victory for Charles Taylor and its National Patriotic Party (NPP) with 75.33% out of the total number of votes. There were significant specificities related to the Liberian elections. The exacerbated militarization of the parties participating in the elections had a significant impact on the elections as a whole. Foremost, three military strongmen (or even warlords) participated which precipitated the security environment: Charles Taylor (The National Patritoic Front of Liberia - NPFL), Alhaji Kromah (United Liberation Movement of Liberia K - ULIMO-K) and George Boley (Liberia Peace Council - LPC). In addition, these elections exhibited the extended continuation of identity-centred (especially ethnic and religious) discrepancies, as "Alhaji Kromah (ALCOP) and George Boley (NDPL) fronted ethnically-based Mandingo and Krahn parties, founded on smaller groups who were two of the main beneficiaries

---

[13] Emmanuel Oritsejolomi Ikomi, *Implementation of Abuja II Accord and Post-Conflict Security in Liberia,* abstract, Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, 2007, p. V.

[14] All numbers regarding the results of the 1997 Liberian elections are adapted from "Elections in Liberia," African Elections Database, <https://africanelections.tripod.com/lr.html>, accessed on November 14, 2022.

of the Doe regime"[15]. However, the role of ethnicity in these elections was limited, as Charles Taylor managed to gain multi-ethnic support, superseding ethnic or tribal affiliations. These factors generated mistrust and a general feeling of smaller groups having a limited capacity to enact actual changes on the political stage. Nonetheless, the elections were overall described as fair, just as the neutral observer 'Friends of Liberia' stated, "despite problems, this process was free, fair and transparent"[16]. However, other problematic issues emerged that affected the electoral process.

Candidate and Party	Number of votes	Percentage of votes
Charles Taylor (NPP)	468.443	75.33%
Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf (Unity Party - UP)	59.557	9.58%
Alhaji Kromah (All Liberian Coalition Party - ALCOP)	25.059	4.02%
Cletus Wotorson (Alliance of Political Parties - ALLIANCE)	15.969	2.57%
Gabriel Baccus Matthews (United People's Party - UPP)	10.01	1.61%

Table 1. Table showing the first five parties in the 1997 Liberian elections
in terms of votes received

First of all, there were obvious discrepancies and asymmetries among candidates in terms of influence, authority and power. These issues pertain to ethical and principle-related factors, rather than legal ones. Charles Taylor was a "long time controller of a large slice of the country and with immense resources at his disposal"[17]. The NPFL headed by Taylor

---

[15] David Harris, *Civil War and Democracy in West Africa: Conflict Resolution, Elections and Justice in Sierra Leone and Liberia.* London: I.B. Tauris, 2012, p. 158.

[16] "Liberia: Election Commentary", University of Pennsylvania – African Studies Center, August 16 1997, <https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Urgent_Action/apic_81697.html>, accessed on November 14, 2022.

[17] David Harris, "From 'Warlord' to 'Democratic' President: How Charles Taylor Won the 1997 Liberian Elections", *The Journal of Modern African Studies,* 37, no. 3, 1999, p. 438.

was the most significant warring side, with numerous advantages and relations that provided leverage. Facing an extremely weak and limited civilian opposition, Taylor used his influence extensively throughout the campaigning process. In addition, its military position played an important role as the DDR process stagnated. The NPFL's and NPP's established structures and authority meant that their campaign reach was much wider and, paired with psychological reactions (such as manipulation, intimidation and pressure) translated into an uneven 'battle' from the very beginning.

Moving on, population displacement and the issue of refugees affected electoral considerations. ECOWAS did not accept to set-up voting polls in refugee camps in neighbouring countries and so "an estimated 800,000 Liberians in refugee camps would have to return in order to vote"[18]. The actual number of refugees who successfully returned and participated in the 1997 election round remains unknown. Subsequently, refugees had limited resources to embark on a return journey and the acute degradation of the security environment dissuaded people to return. Lastly, there was a significant issue pertaining to society's collective consciousness, that is Taylor's "apparent dominance over the security question"[19]. Plainly put, Charles Taylor was perceived as the actor with the wider impact on the security framework. The collective opinion was focused around "that fear of pre-election violence and a post-election return to conflict in the event of a Taylor electoral defeat"[20]. This incentive could partially explain the landslide victory: Taylor was perceived at the same time as the most capable in ensuring security and as the most capable of compromising security due to its influential position. In other words, his electoral victory was a necessary evil throughout the peace process.

---

[18] Terrence Lyons, "Peace and Elections in Liberia", in Krishna Kumar (ed.), *Postconflict Elections, Democratization, and International Assistance*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998, p. 182.

[19] David Harris, "From 'Warlord' to 'Democratic' President", p. 452.

[20] David Harris, *Civil War and Democracy*, p. 157.

However, such a perspective questions the democratic essence of elections. Furthermore, the civic wave coalesced and founded the Alliance of Political Parties. However, in spite of promising inclusion and efficient measures, this alliance soon collapsed[21]. Thus, it is clear that, from the very beginning, the civilian opposition remained extremely limited. As the civic groups failed to harness significant support throughout a war-torn population, the NPP remained the most influential group in the wake of elections. Nonetheless, the main opposition group was the Unity Party, which nominated Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as candidate, the director of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) Regional Bureau for Africa.

Secondly, the 1997 elections in Liberia manifested several operational implications and problems. This issued ranged from electoral engineering to the severely limited timeframe at hand for ECOWAS and UNOMIL to organize the elections. As per the provisions of Abuja II in August 1996, the timeline for the elections was scheduled for May 1997 (later delayed until July 1997). In such a timeframe limited to less than a year, ECOWAS faced significant obstacles. Foremost, this restrictive deadline did not allow for any adequate state-building to invest in relevant institutions. Refugees were not actually repatriated and aside from collecting weapons, the demobilization and reintegration stagnated and limited themselves to superficial and surface-level measures. Accordingly, the "structures established by the Abuja Accords could not hold for long, and a rapid conclusion to the transition, either through an election or another political breakdown and resurgence of violence, seemed unavoidable"[22]. Another significant aspect was that "due to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, it was decided to administer one election using country-wide proportional representation to elect the president and to allocate legislative seats"[23]. Electoral engineering was meant to fit within the limited timeframe as

---

[21] Terrence Lyons, "Peace and Elections in Liberia", p. 181.

[22] *Ibidem*, p. 184.

[23] David Harris, "From 'Warlord' to 'Democratic' President", p. 452.

organizing a national census was impossible. Moreover, the fragile security framework did not allow inaction, as potential issues and obstacles could emerge at any time, and so an electoral consideration prohibited a more complex and better suited design of the electoral process. However, other significant aspects were just absent, such as deadlines for party registration and other legal requirements[24]. Lastly, these operational shortcomings also included an inadequate (or totally absent) voter education, given that illiteracy represented a serious problem throughout the population. Fundamentally, "many voters understood their choice to be that between Taylor or war"[25].

4. The 2020-2021 general elections in war-torn Central African Republic

The peace process in the Central African Republic has unfolded in a rather unstable and slow manner. The fragmentation of the warring sides, massive population displacement and inter-communal tensions impeded the efficient development of peace efforts. Subsequently, the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic[26] (also known as the Khartoum Agreement) signed on February 15, 2019, represents the foundation for the latest peace efforts coordinated by the African Union (AU) and United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA). The Khartoum Agreement does not explicitly focus on elections (as it was the case with the Abuja Agreements in Liberia), but it sets forth a series of principles to enhance the security framework and set-up a monitoring mechanism to supervise the implementation of the peace agreement.

---

[24] Terrence Lyons, "Peace and Elections in Liberia", p. 183.
[25] *Ibidem*, p. 191.
[26] United Nations Security Council. *Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic,* February 15, 2019.

Accordingly, Article 21 states the need and commitment to establish an inclusive government. Such measures were aimed at promoting cooperation and inclusion and their aim was to improve the security of the country. However, significant measures in the security domain represented highly controversial topics. For example, three strongmen associated with abuses have been appointed in 2019 as military advisers to the prime-minister. Ali Darassa Mahamat (*Unité pour la paix en Centrafrique* – Union for Peace in the Central African Republic, UPC), Mahamat Al Khatim (*Mouvement patriotique pour la Centrafrique* – Central African Patriotic Movement, MPC) and Bi Sidi Souleymane (*Retour, Réclamation et Réhabilitation* - Return, Reclamation, Rehabilitation, 3R) came to hold influential positions, despite leading "armed groups responsible for widespread atrocities in recent years, including war crimes and possible crimes against humanity"[27]. Consequently, elections had been organized in a context not void of conflict (not just social and political tensions, but widespread violence), with numerous controversial aspects. In spite of all these factors (including the coronavirus pandemic), constitutional provisions forced the government to organize elections.

As we can observe in Image 2[28], these elections reaffirmed the political state of affairs, with Faustin Touadéra being re-elected (approx. 54% of votes). However, irregularities dominated the 2020-2021 round of elections in the Central African Republic. Foremost, in terms of organizational and operational factors, these elections proved problematic from certain points of view (voter turnout, population displacement, voter education). In terms of voter turnout, the numbers highlight a historic low: only 35.25%

---

[27] "Central African Republic: Don't Reward Warlords," Human Rights Watch, April 14, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/24/central-african-republic-dont-reward-warlords#>, accessed on November 20, 2022.

[28] All numbers regarding the results of the 2020-2021 Central African Republic elections are adapted from Central African Republic Constitutional Court. *Decision No. 003/CC/21 - Announcing the Final Results of the First Rounds of the Presidential Election of December 27, 2020*. January 18, 2021.

out of the registered population decided to cast their ballot. In raw figures, 655.054 out of 1.858.236 registered voters expressed their vote. Moreover, another significant aspect is related to invalid votes. Plainly put, 8.49% of the total votes have been invalidated due to irregularities, representing an all-time high[29]. Moving on, the civic group *Réseau Arc-en-ciel* highlighted a voting practice widely present in Bangui, practice through which voters were able to cast ballots in a different polling station than the one where they were registered. Accordingly, in Bangui, "the mission noted a large number of derogation votes (81.45% of the cases). Such a vote was possible with deregistration certificates issued by the ANE[30] carrying the signature of the outgoing President"[31] (translation ours).

Candidate and Party	Number of votes	Percentage of votes
Faustin-Archange Touadéra (Mouvement cœurs unis - MCU)	318.626	53.16%
Anicet-Georges Dologuélé (L'Union pour le renouveau centrafricain - URCA)	130.017	21.69%
Martin Ziguélé (Mouvement pour la libération du peuple centrafricain - MLPC)	45.206	7.54%
Désiré Kolingba (Rassemblement démocratique centrafricain - RDC)	22.157	3.70%
Crépin Mboli-Goumba (Parti africain pour une transformation radicale et l'intégration des États - Patrie)	19.271	3.21%

Table 2. Table showing the first five parties in the 2020-2021 Central African Republic elections in terms of votes received.

---

[29] All the numbers regarding electoral participation are adapted from "Central African Republic," International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/75/40>, accessed on November 20, 2022.

[30] *Autorité Nationale des Élections* – National Elections Authority

[31] "Déclaration préliminaire du Réseau Arc-En Ciel (RAC) sur les élections présidentielle et législatives couplées du 27 Décembre 2020 en République Centrafricaine," Réseau Arc-En Ciel, December 30, 2020, p. 6.

Moving on, population displacement heavily affected the operational dimension of the elections. As of October 2022, approximately 484.000 people are estimated to be internally displaced, while approximately 746.000 found refuge in neighbouring countries[32]. In addition, in spite of this major displacement crisis, other significant problems have been running deep throughout the Central African society. Food insecurity and natural disasters represented profound dysfunctionalities of the society. Accordingly, without mechanisms to address such structural factors, elections represent a simple smoke screen, a shallow measure that complements fighting on the ground between rebel groups and governmental forces with political 'warfare'. In this sense, the process of voter education has been completely absent, as various political or military leaders politicized shortcomings of the authorities throughout the peace process. This lack of democratic exercise that involves getting in touch with electoral culture (such as, disciplined and productive debates, structured electoral programmes and transparent governing platforms) exhibits the unprofessional and lacking implementation of elections. Moving on, in relation to ethical and practical aspects, this round of elections has been heavily contested by the rebel groups. In this sense, armed violence and intimidation define the 2020-2021 round of elections. Nonetheless, it displayed a remarkable political opposition (including the civil society), but such elements were shadowed by the contestation of authority and power in the territory by rebel groups. These violent groups contested both the idea and the results of elections. This, again, had a double impact, affecting the campaign reach of certain parties and also the electoral process as a whole. For example, the rebel group 3R perturbed the registration and electoral process in Niem-Yéléwa

---

[32] "Regional Response - Central African Republic Situation," Operational Data Portal - UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/car>, accessed on November 20, 2022.

and Aba in Nana-Mambéré and Koui and Ngaoundaye in Ouham-Pendé[33]. This represents just one singular case in a wave of perturbation and bans of voter registration and participation. Thus, all these aspects undermine the very democratic essence of elections (not impartial, transparent and representative).

5. The success of these rounds of elections as a mechanism of peace

Drawing on the considerations mentioned above, the rounds of elections both in Libera and the Central African Republic did not function efficiently as a peace mechanism. If we focus on the raw number of violent events[34], Liberia manifested an upsurge of violence, as it can be seen in *Figure 1* below, while, in the case of the Central African Republic a decrease is observable in the period following elections, as in *Figure 2* below. Nonetheless, this decrease cannot be based on elections alone.

In the case of Liberia, elections were mostly seen as a necessary evil to legitimize the authority of Charles Taylor and mark an end to a bloody civil war. In that case, without sufficient international and internal efforts, the other peace initiatives (such as DDR, transitional justice, state building) were doomed to collapse. Despite being democratic, elections are useless if most sides do not acknowledge their legitimacy. Charles Taylor selectively conducted DDR efforts, which meant that the security framework did not improve and the conflict reignited. The sole 'achievement' of the 1997 round of elections in Liberia is that of derailing the timeframe of the civil

---

[33] Chief Bisong Etahoben, "Central African Republic: 3R Rebels in Accused of Perturbing Electoral Registration," HumAngle Media, September 1, 2020. <https://humanglemedia.com/central-african-republic-3r-rebels-in-accused-of-perturbing-electoral-registration/>, accessed on November 20, 2022.

[34] The numbers in *Figure 1* and *Figure 2* are adapted from Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) <www.acleddata.com>. accessed on on November 22, 2022.

In terms of conflict-related events, the methodology contains the following categories: battles, violence against civilians, explosions/remote violence, riots, protests and strategic developments (including agreements, arrests, looting and non-violent transfer of territory).

war. Accordingly, although the literature makes a distinction between the two wars, "in reality that war continued throughout Taylor's presidency even if at times it was a latent rather than actual conflict"[35]. Thus, the civil war was not over, as forms of abuse (such as, discrimination, localised but organised violence, repression) continued to be present and the potential of descent into large scale conflict was relatively high (potential that manifested into the second major round of violence starting with 1999 and ending in 2003).
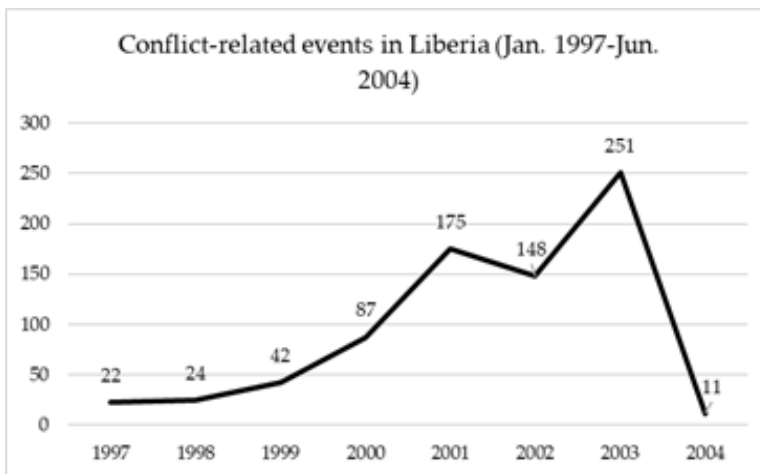

Figure 1. Graph showing the dynamics of violence
in Liberia prior to and after the 1997 elections

In the case of the Central African Republic, the patterns of violence are not surprising. The period immediately preceding the elections witnessed a significant increase in conflict-related events, as it can be seen in *Figure 2* (September, October and November 2020 vs December 2020). Although there was a decline in the raw numbers of violent events in the post-election period, the dynamics of the war had been intensified. In

---

[35] Gerry Cleaver and Simon Massey, "Liberia: A Durable Peace at Last?," in Oliver Furley and Roy May (eds.), *Ending Africa's Wars: Progressing to Peace*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, p. 185.

December 2020 when the elections were scheduled, "a number of rebel groups that had signed the Khartoum peace agreement announced their disengagement from the agreement and formed a new rebel coalition, the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC)"[36]. Through the Declaration of Kamba Kota signed by two wings within Anti-Balaka, UPC, MPC, 3R and *Front populaire pour la renaissance de la Centrafrique* (Popular Front for the Rebirth of Central African Republic – FPRC), the CPC was formally created. Its sole mission and coalescing factor was the opposition to the 2020-2021 round of elections. Accordingly, it came to control significant territory and is associated with serious human rights abuses.

In this sense, these elections generated a dynamic (spiral) of violence that posed significant risks one the one hand for human security, as the CPC controlled significant pieces of territory and, on the other hand, for the very implementation of the peace process as a whole[37]. Accordingly, we can state that elections have been wrongfully prioritized over more significant and plainly imperative aspects of the peace process (such as sustainable security conditions, reconciliation efforts and capacity-building of governing institutions). Moreover, aside that violent tensions increased prior to elections, the results of the vote had been harshly contested and the conduct criticized. The political tensions meant new fracture lines that complemented the violent altercations on the ground. Political opposition groups articulated more-or-less electorally-inclined criticism to draw attention to the shortcomings of the implementation of the Khartoum Agreement[38]. In addition, this continuous politicization manifested both among rebel groups and on the political stage.

---

[36] Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2022 Country Report — Central African Republic. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2022, p. 7.

[37] Peter Knoope, Stephen Buchanan-Clarke, and Valerie Arnould, "Going the Extra Mile for the 2020 Elections in the Central African Republic," *Egmont Africa Policy Brief,* no. 32, 2020, p. 5.
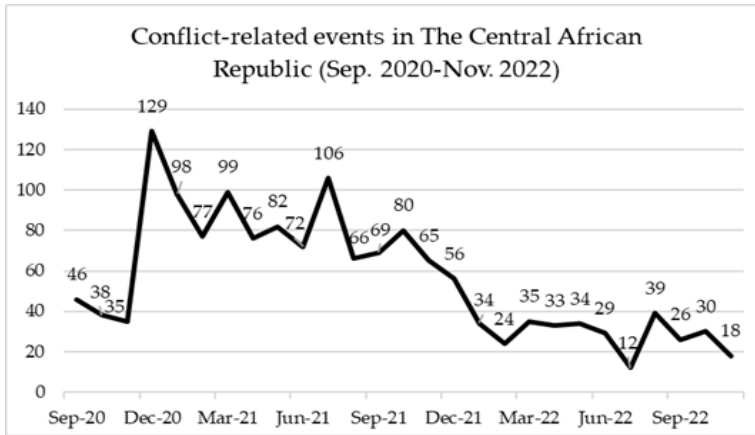
[38] *Ibidem*.

Figure 2. Graph showing the dynamics of violence in
The Central African Republic prior to and the 2020-2021 elections

Accordingly, the degradation of the security framework, the shifting dynamics of rebel groups, the contestation (both violently and politically) of the legitimacy of the 2020-2021 elections are "hardly the best conditions for building national consensus and implementing the political agreement signed between the government and 14 armed groups in Khartoum in February 2019"[39]. Consequently, the considerations set forth in the first part of the paper (that organizing early rounds of elections in the recovery period actually prove more damaging than beneficial on the long-term) are validated in our case studies. The Central African Republic represents a significant example in which inadequate timing and flawed implementation of an electoral round impacted the entire peace process. This is significant, given that the Khartoum Agreement managed to establish a fragile but palpable feeling of security (with a decrease in violence and conflict-related events). Accordingly, "this «quick-fix» approach to elections in post-conflict situations has created more problems than it has

---

[39] Paul-Simon Handy, "Car Elections Expose the Depth of the Country's Crisis," Institute for Security Studies Africa, January 13, 2021, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/car-elections-expose-the-depth-of-the-countrys crisis?utm_source=BenchmarkEmail&utm_campaign=ISS_Today&utm_medium=email>. accessed on November 24, 2022.

solved"[40]. The dynamics of the Central African civil war have intensified since the 2020-2021 elections. Moreover, the level of violence reached early pre-elections levels only at the start of 2022. Nonetheless, the decrease in violent events can be attributed to numerous factors (the involvement of foreign actors, including Rwanda, and the use of Private Military Contractors, such as the Russian Wagner Group).

Elections alone, however, have no normative and practical capabilities as a mechanism of reducing violence. Subsequently, in order to function as a peace mechanism on the long run, both institutional consolidation (relevant state functions) and norm development (civic responsibility, voter literacy) are essential.

6. Conclusions

Throughout peacebuilding initiatives, early elections in the recovery period were prioritized as an efficient way of ending (or at least significantly reducing) systemic violence and moving conflicts from the ground towards the political stage. Moreover, elections are perceived as a democratization and democracy-promotion tool, by providing legitimate governing frameworks. However, this attractiveness of early voting rounds manifests numerous illusions and challenges.

Accordingly, the paper focused on two relevant cases in peace studies: the 1997 elections in Liberia and the 2020-2021 elections in the Central African Republic. In doing so, we attempted to showcase how these elections were anticipated on the ground and what were the expectations of the actors involved. In the case of Liberia, the involvement of combating sides was significant, with a limited influence of civil society. The reach of these militarized group depended on their leverage capabilities, showcasing profound imbalances and questioning the ethical (and democratic) character of elections. In the case of the Central African

---

[40] Benjamin Reilly, "Elections in Post-Conflict Societies", p. 132.

Republic, the ethical dimension of election was also challenged but based on different parameters. Namely, military groups violently rejected the idea of elections, disrupting the electoral process (historic low turnout). Moving on, we placed these elections in a wider and more complex context. In this sense, the analysis explored the significant peace agreements that preceded the voting rounds. For Liberia, the paper focused on the two Abuja Agreements, their inefficiency of addressing core issues and the extensive benefits given to rebel groups. For the Central African Republic, the paper focused on the Khartoum Agreement and the controversial security considerations brought forward.

Lastly, we focused on the capacity of elections to function as a peace mechanism in relation to our two case studies. In the case of Liberia, violence consistently escalated until 2003 (when the Comprehensive Peace Agreement brought an end to violence). These elections only legitimized the rule of Charles Taylor who was not committed to peacebuilding or democratization (selective DDR, clientelist relations of power). For the Central African Republic, the risks of these elections were immense, threatening the fragile security framework set forth in 2019. Accordingly, violence increased after the elections and the dynamics of the combating sides had intensified. Overall, we concluded that these elections manifested profound flaws and escalated the dynamics of the conflicts (rather than providing an end to violence and opening the road towards democratization).

Bibliography

1. Adebajo, Adekeye (2002), *Building Peace in West Africa: Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
2. Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) (2002), www.acleddata.com, accessed on November 22, 2022.

3. Bertelsmann Stiftung (2011), BTI 2022 Country Report — Central African Republic, Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung.

4. Brancati, Dawn; Snyder, Jack L. (2011), "Rushing to the Polls: The Causes of Premature Postconflict Elections", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 55(3), 469–92.

5. "Central African Republic" International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, https://www.idea.int/data-tools/country-view/75/40, accessed November 20, 2022.

6. "Central African Republic: Don't Reward Warlords", Human Rights Watch, April 14, 2019. https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/04/24/central-african-republic-dont-reward-warlords#, accessed on November 20, 2022.

7. Central African Republic Constitutional Court (2020), *Decision No. 003/CC/21 - Announcing the Final Results of the First Rounds of the Presidential Election of December 27, 2020*.

8. Cleaver, Gerry; Massey, Simon (2006), "Liberia: A Durable Peace at Last?" in Oliver Furley and Roy May (eds.), *Ending Africa's Wars: Progressing to Peace*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 179–199.

9. "Déclaration préliminaire du Réseau Arc-en ciel (RAC) sur les élections présidentielle et législatives couplées du 27 Décembre 2020 en République Centrafricaine" ["Preliminary statement of the Rainbow Network (RAC) on the coupled presidential and legislative elections of December 27, 2020 in the Central African Republic"], Réseau Arc-En Ciel, December 30, 2020.

10. "Elections in Liberia." African Elections Database, https://africanelections.tripod.com/lr.html, accessed on November 13, 2022.

11. Etahoben, Chief Bisong (2020), "Central African Republic: 3R Rebels in Accused of Perturbing Electoral Registration."

HumAngle Media, September 1, 2020, https://humanglemedia. com/central-african-republic-3r-rebels-in-accused-of-perturbing-electoral-registration/, accessed on November 20, 2022.

12. Flores, Thomas Edward; Nooruddin, Irfan (2012), "The Effect of Elections on Postconflict Peace and Reconstruction", *The Journal of Politics*, 74 (2), 558–570.

13. Handy, Paul-Simon (2021), "Car Elections Expose the Depth of the Country's Crisis", Institute for Security Studies Africa, January 13, 2021, https://issafrica.org/iss-today/car-elections-expose-the-depth-of-the-countrys-crisis?utm_source=Benchmark Email&utm_campaign=ISS_Today&utm_medium=email, accessed on November 24, 2022.

14. Harris, David (2014), *Civil War and Democracy in West Africa: Conflict Resolution, Elections, and Justice in Sierra Leone and Liberia*. London: I.B. Tauris.

15. Harris, David (1999), "From 'Warlord' to 'Democratic' President: How Charles Taylor Won the 1997 Liberian Elections", *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 37(3), 431–455.

16. Ikomi, Emmanuel Oritsejolomi (2007), *Implementation of Abuja II Accord and Post-Conflict Security in Liberia*, Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School.

17. Knoope, Peter; Buchanan-Clarke; Stephen; Arnould, Valerie (2020), "Going the Extra Mile for the 2020 Elections in the Central African Republic", *Egmont Africa Policy Brief*, 32.

18. "Liberia: Election Commentary", University of Pennsylvania – African Studies Center, August 16 1997. https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Urgent_Action/apic_81697.html, accessed on November 14, 2022.

19. Lyons, Terrence (1998), "Peace and Elections in Liberia", in Krishna Kumar (ed.), *Postconflict Elections, Democratization, and International Assistance*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 177–194.

20. "Regional Response – Central African Republic Situation", Operational Data Portal – UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/car, accessed on November 20, 2022.

21. Reilly, Benjamin (2004), "Elections in Post-Conflict Societies", in Edward Newman; Roland Rich (eds.). *The UN Role in Promoting Democracy between Ideals and Reality*, New York: United Nations University Press, 113-134.

22. United Nations Security Council (2019), *Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic*. February 15, 2019.