

# Elections, Power Transitions and the Risk of Atrocity Crimes

Genuine and credible elections present a crucial opportunity to reaffirm democratic norms, uphold the rule of law and enable people to have their voices heard. Rights-respecting electoral processes help to build legitimate governance, foster public trust in institutions and create societies more resilient to identity-based violence and atrocity crimes.

Yet, all too often elections shift from being a positive expression of democratic will to flashpoints for political violence and polarization. Despite a record number of people going to the polls in 2024 – with more than 60 countries, representing nearly half of the world’s population electing local, national and international representatives – many elections were marred by intimidation, violence and serious human rights violations, severely undermining the right to vote and to be elected. According to Freedom House, over 40 percent of the 66 countries and territories that held national elections in 2024 experienced election-related violence, including assassination attempts or assaults against candidates, attacks on polling places and the use of disproportionate force to suppress post-election protests.<sup>1</sup> Countries with elections had – on average – a 63 percent increase in national political violence, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project.<sup>2</sup> In authoritarian contexts, authorities also manipulated electoral processes to block genuine opposition and restrict voter choice.

This policy brief examines how electoral processes, particularly when held in conflict, repressive or polarized environments, can trigger serious human rights violations and possible atrocities. Drawing on insights from a June 2024 event hosted by the European Union and the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, the brief aims to identify early warning signs and context-specific risk factors for atrocity crimes throughout the electoral process and provides policy recommendations for the effective prevention, mitigation and response to election-related violence and atrocity crimes.

## **ELECTIONS, HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTIONS AND RESILIENCE TO ATROCITY CRIMES**

A meaningful and inclusive electoral process depends on the protection of key human rights, including the rights to equality and non-discrimination, freedom of opinion, expression, association and peaceful assembly and freedom of movement. These rights are central to ensuring that voters can make informed choices, candidates can participate freely and the electoral environment is fair and transparent.

Inclusive, transparent, competitive and accountable electoral processes strengthen the rule of law, bolster institutional capacity and provide non-violent pathways for managing conflict and competition. Key actors, such as electoral management bodies (EMBs), the media, the judiciary and security forces, play pivotal roles when operating free from political manipulation, ensuring that electoral disputes are resolved through lawful and peaceful means. However, when elections are manipulated, suppressed or held in repressive environments, they can compound existing grievances, deepen social divisions and serve as triggers for widespread violations, including atrocity crimes.

Understanding the conditions under which elections can either mitigate or heighten the risk of atrocities requires a comprehensive assessment of structural and dynamic risk factors, highlighting how electoral contexts can interact with broader societal vulnerabilities to create environments conducive or resistant to such crimes.

## **RISK FACTORS AND WARNING SIGNS OF ATROCITIES IN ELECTIONS**

Atrocity crimes perpetrated in electoral contexts are rarely isolated or spontaneous events. They typically result from deliberate decisions taken within an enabling

environment and are often triggered by specific flashpoints. Flawed or manipulated electoral processes, while not necessarily triggers for atrocities on their own, can interact with deeper societal vulnerabilities in ways that enable the commission of crimes.

Existing tensions, power struggles and entrenched systems of structural violence shape the ways in which election-related violence unfolds, who bears the brunt of it and how it may influence electoral outcomes. Preventing and responding to these threats requires understanding the interplay between structural risk factors – the long-term, underlying conditions that make a society more vulnerable – and dynamic risk factors – the short-term developments and triggers that can escalate tensions during the electoral cycle.<sup>3</sup>

The following analysis explores key structural and dynamic factors that influence atrocity risk and undermine resilience in electoral contexts. While not exhaustive, it draws on expert insights shared by the panelists to help identify when the threat of election-related violence and atrocities may be most acute.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Structural Risk Factors***

While elections themselves are not the direct cause of atrocities, they can act as catalysts, exposing pre-existing societal grievances, particularly in situations with existing instability, weak institutions or entrenched discrimination and marginalization. Even a well-administered election may fail to prevent violence if these underlying conditions remain unresolved, increasing the risk of atrocities.

### ***Legacy of Election-Related Violence and Atrocity Crimes***

In countries with a history of election-related violence or atrocities, future elections pose particularly high risk of recurrence, especially when past abuses are not adequately addressed through accountability, reparations, truth-telling, reconciliation or institutional reform.<sup>5</sup> Impunity for past crimes not only emboldens perpetrators but also signals to elites and political actors that violence remains a viable tool for gaining or maintaining power.

For example, in Côte d'Ivoire, when then-President Laurent Gbagbo refused to cede power during the November 2010 presidential elections, it triggered a post-electoral crisis. Security forces and rival militias loyal to either Gbagbo or the opposing candidate, now President Alassane Ouattara, targeted perceived ethnic and

political opponents, killing an estimated 3,000 people. Although Côte d'Ivoire underwent a transition of power and reconciliation process, long-standing ethnic and political grievances remain unresolved and most perpetrators of past crimes have not been held accountable. The 2020 election, marked by early warning signs such as sporadic political and inter-communal violence, hate speech and heightened tensions, revived fears of recurrence of the 2010-2011 crisis.

### ***Deep-rooted Inequalities and Systematic Discrimination***

Entrenched inequalities, systemic marginalization and discrimination based on shared identity characteristics can create deep societal divisions that serve as material causes of, and perceived justifications for, widespread and targeted violence. This is often reinforced by exclusionary ideologies that frame group identities in oppositional terms, dividing populations into “us” versus “them” rather than promoting inclusive belonging, and result in fears of winner-take-all outcomes, where communities affiliated with the winning candidates will receive a disproportionate share of benefits.

Perpetrators may be incentivized to target historically marginalized groups that pose a perceived threat to entrenched power structures. Pre-existing negative beliefs or societal norms about these groups can make their victimization seem more acceptable to the broader public. These attitudes and the underlying power imbalances are often deliberately weaponized around elections. For example, if ethnic or religious minorities are already viewed as undeserving of rights, there is likely to be less public outrage when their ability to participate in elections is suppressed.

### ***Weakness of State Structures and Institutions***

A strong rule of law and resilient state institutions are essential to preventing election-related violence and atrocity crimes. Elections serve as a barometer for broader democratic governance, reflecting whether legislatures enact robust legal frameworks, security forces act with professionalism and restraint and courts adjudicate disputes fairly and independently.<sup>6</sup> When governance, legal and security systems are weak, co-opted or lack independence, they are often unable, or unwilling, to protect populations, enforce electoral rules or respond to early signs of violence. This incapacity creates conditions conducive for serious abuses, elite manipulation and potentially violent power struggles. The fragility also enables impunity, exacerbates divisions and erodes public trust, especially during contentious electoral periods. Confidence and trust in electoral institutions matter, as weak judiciaries, law enforcement

and electoral commissions that lack the capacity, independence or political will are prone to bias and manipulation, turning elections into flashpoints for targeted violence or repression.<sup>7</sup>

In September 2024 South Sudan's parliament approved a two-year delay of the long-awaited elections, constituting the fourth postponement and extension of the transitional period. The absence of legal frameworks, credible electoral institutions and security sector reform underscores deep institutional weakness and raises serious risks of election-related violence and instability. The Commission on Human Rights in South Sudan has stressed that "only by nurturing an accountable system of government can a genuinely democratic society be built, which overcomes the history of violent power contestation." Political and military elites have exploited ethnic divisions and delayed reforms to maintain power, fueling mistrust and localized violence.

In situations where security actors are closely aligned with political elites, lack independence or operate with impunity, they can become tools for coercion. In Burundi, the ruling party's youth wing, the Imbonerakure, has operated alongside state security forces to harass, intimidate and commit abuses against perceived opponents over multiple election cycles.<sup>8</sup> In Venezuela, state security institutions and allied armed groups (colectivos) have been instrumental in suppressing dissent, detaining opposition figures and creating an environment of fear ahead of and during elections.

Courts and judges play a critical role in resolving electoral disputes and maintaining the credibility of electoral processes. They may be called upon to order recounts, validate or nullify results or rule on the legality of election procedures. When captured by ruling elites, these institutions can facilitate persecution and atrocity crimes.

Entrenched authoritarianism and lack of political pluralism also heighten atrocity risks. In authoritarian or hybrid regimes, elections are often held only under duress and manipulated to preserve the ruling elite's control. In Belarus, President Aleksandr Lukashenko's administration has systematically persecuted real and perceived opponents to maintain power, committing crimes against humanity, including political persecution and imprisonment.<sup>9</sup> The lack of political pluralism and ongoing repression have eliminated meaningful opposition, reducing elections to tools for reinforcing the Lukashenko administration.

When authoritarianism, weak institutions and other structural risk factors converge, flawed elections can

trigger widespread violence. In these contexts, the breakdown of state capacity and absence of democratic safeguards removes mitigating factors that help prevent atrocity crimes, leaving populations increasingly exposed to state-led or sanctioned harm.

### ***Civic Space Under Threat***

The suppression of civic space and fundamental freedoms during electoral periods is a critical warning sign. When governments stifle dissent, restrict peaceful assembly or target civil society, they not only undermine the integrity of the electoral environment but also create conditions that may enable or escalate identity-based violence. Restrictions on political expression and peaceful protest, especially when accompanied by arbitrary arrests or violent crackdowns, can be the tipping point for wider unrest, and, in some cases, serious human rights violations such as these may constitute atrocity crimes. In Myanmar, following the military's overthrow of the democratically elected government in February 2021, the junta has outlawed and violently suppressed political rallies and gatherings of more than five people as part of a sustained campaign to eliminate political opposition.

In Venezuela, the government has intensified persecution through its coordinated policies aimed at silencing dissent and maintaining power throughout two significant electoral cycles (presidential elections in July 2024 and parliamentary and regional elections in May 2025). Authorities have systematically targeted opposition members, human rights defenders, journalists and ordinary citizens with arbitrary detention, intimidation and short-term enforced disappearances.<sup>10</sup> Compared with other periods over the past decade, the patterns of repression are unprecedented, and leave populations at acute risk of crimes against humanity.

Government-imposed restrictions on digital freedoms can also significantly contribute to civic suppression. Tactics such as internet shutdowns, overbroad hate speech laws or digital surveillance are increasingly used to stifle dissent and silence opposition voices. While framed as efforts to prevent incitement, such measures are often misused to restrict expression, censor independent media and target already marginalized communities. In authoritarian or fragile states, vague legal frameworks are frequently weaponized to detain critics or suppress civic actors under the guise of "combating hate."

The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression has warned that this suppression poses grave

risks to electoral integrity.<sup>11</sup> When individuals cannot access reliable information or express political views freely, public trust erodes, political polarization deepens and violence becomes more likely. Voters need access to diverse information to make informed choices. Candidates must be able to campaign without fear or interference. Journalists and civil society actors play a crucial role in scrutinizing the electoral process, and their silencing removes essential checks on power.

### *Dynamic Risk Factors*

While structural factors create the conditions for electoral violence and atrocities, dynamic factors often determine when and how violence erupts. These are short-term developments or flashpoints that emerge before, during or after elections and can rapidly escalate tensions, especially in environments shaped by structural vulnerabilities.

The threat of atrocity crimes and electoral violence is often used strategically by incumbents, opposition actors and/or non-state armed groups to influence electoral processes – whether by shaping the timing of the vote, controlling who can participate or undermining public confidence in the results. Understanding these dynamics is essential to anticipating and mitigating acute risks during the electoral cycle.

### *Tipping Points and Flashpoints*

Tipping points are moments in the electoral cycle that can quickly transform a tense electoral environment into one marked by widespread violence, particularly when structural risk factors are already present. These moments trigger rapid escalation of existing grievances and mobilize actors who may otherwise remain passive during the electoral cycle. The sequence and nature of electoral flashpoints vary by context, but several patterns recur across at-risk settings:<sup>12</sup>

- Voter registration: Lack of transparency with the voters' roll, disputes over voter eligibility and registration procedures or perceptions that manipulation or intentional disenfranchisement has occurred may inflame pre-existing grievances, spark protests or repression and feed narratives of fraud, eroding confidence in the broader electoral process, as seen in Malawi (2025).<sup>13</sup>
- Mass protests during the campaign period: When demonstrations are met with heavy-handed responses, such as the arrest of opposition leaders or the granting of emergency powers to security forces, the risk of escalation increases significantly, as in

several electoral cycles in Bangladesh.<sup>14</sup>

- Election delays or cancellations: Postponements, whether due to genuine logistical, security or political reasons, can be interpreted as deliberate attempts to manipulate the process, as in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2016–2018).<sup>15</sup>
- Closing or militarization of polling places: The presence of armed actors can be used to intimidate voters, contributing to an atmosphere of hostility or fear, while the closure of polling locations may suppress voter turnout, disenfranchise certain groups and undermine trust in the process.
- Election results announcements: These moments are particularly high-risk when results are delayed, disputed or seen as lacking credibility, or when candidates themselves incite supporters to contest the results through protest or violence instead of legal channels. Perceptions of fraud or manipulation can deepen polarization and lead to spontaneous protests or mass violence, as occurred in Haiti (2010–2011)<sup>16</sup> and Belarus (2020).<sup>17</sup>
- Judicial rulings: Court decisions on disputed results, candidate eligibility or electoral laws may be perceived as partisan and spark unrest and heighten atrocity risks, as seen in Venezuela throughout successive elections.<sup>18</sup>

While many of these moments are triggered by political processes, the scale and severity of violence can be amplified by other risk factors and often depend on how actors respond. Excessive use of force by security services, mobilization of partisan armed groups or inflammatory rhetoric can turn tense situations into prolonged crises and heighten atrocity risks.

### *Hate Speech, Incitement and Targeting of Specific Groups*

Candidates and political actors, including public officials, religious figures and community leaders, wield significant influence over public discourse and shape the perceptions of their followers. When these actors utilize divisive or dehumanizing rhetoric targeting people based on identity characteristics such as ethnicity, race, religion, language, gender or sexual orientation, it can deepen societal fault lines, spread fear and erode trust in democratic processes. This frequently involves spreading misinformation, stereotypes and inflammatory narratives that portray certain groups as existential threats. This rhetoric not only undermines people's ability to make informed electoral choices but also stigmatizes entire communities and can incite violence.<sup>19</sup>

While hate speech can reflect deeper structural patterns of systemic exclusion, it frequently escalates during the

electoral cycle, taking on a more dynamic and inciteful role. In these environments, hate speech can act as a trigger, intensifying polarization and heightening the likelihood and normalization of identity-based violence. In Kenya's 2007-2008 electoral crisis, hate speech and incitement played a direct role in fueling mass violence.<sup>20</sup> Political figures were documented encouraging attacks, while radio stations and other media outlets spread inflammatory messages, particularly along ethnic lines, that helped incite mass violence and atrocities following the announcement of disputed results.

Electoral violence is also enabled when political leaders target actors who help safeguard the democratic process. Journalists, election officials, observers, human rights defenders, judicial personnel and opposition leaders are frequently targeted with hostile rhetoric. These narratives may falsely accuse them of spreading disinformation, committing sedition or terrorism or acting as foreign agents. In some cases, these abusive tactics have included legal harassment, arbitrary detention and physical violence and have led to forced exile. This not only weakens institutional checks and balances and electoral integrity but also silences observers who might otherwise help prevent escalation to large-scale violence.

### ***Information Environment: Technology-Enabled Threats***

Political actors have utilized propaganda, surveillance and disinformation campaigns during elections to manipulate public opinion, gain or retain power and suppress opposition or change voting behavior. When present in public discussion and political debate, disinformation can amplify tensions and divisions by disrupting the ability of the electorate to make informed decisions. Digital technologies, particularly the rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI), have accelerated the spread of narratives that weaponize societal grievances, undermine trust in democratic institutions and erode electoral integrity. These dynamics contribute to disenfranchisement and civic distrust, heightening the risk of election-related violence and atrocity crimes.

Surveillance technologies, including spyware and monitoring of online communications, have been used to intimidate and persecute civil society actors, journalists and political opponents. These practices create a chilling effect on civic engagement and political participation, particularly among marginalized groups already at risk of exclusion and violence.<sup>21</sup>

International IDEA has warned that AI may threaten information integrity, particularly around elections, with

profound implications for marginalized groups that heighten their vulnerability. When coupled with AI-generated content, the capacity of propaganda and disinformation campaigns to deceive the public may disrupt elections, intensify discrimination, undermine candidates and the legitimacy of state institutions and even trigger violence or escalate political unrest.<sup>22</sup>

AI-generated content, including deepfakes, manipulated audio content and chatbot-driven disinformation, has been used to target marginalized candidates. In Brazil and Mexico's 2024 elections, female and LGBTQIA+ candidates were disproportionately targeted with non-consensual, demeaning content that amplified political gender-based violence.<sup>23</sup> In Bolivia, electoral periods have been marked by disinformation, hate speech and racially charged narratives designed to delegitimize Indigenous political participation.<sup>24</sup>

### ***Militarization or Partisan Security Forces and Non-State Armed Groups***

While politicized security forces constitute structural risk factors, the way these forces, as well as non-state armed groups, are mobilized, armed or deployed during an electoral cycle can acutely escalate the risk of violence and atrocities. The presence or influence of non-state armed actors significantly increases risks as their activities may disrupt campaigning, inhibit participation in the electoral process or challenge the legitimacy of the results. Non-state armed groups may target polling places, campaign events, election officials or community leaders – creating fear and undermining participation.

In some contexts, state-aligned militias or partisan police units have been deployed to intimidate voters and candidates, restrict movement through roadblocks or disrupt opposition gatherings. "Unauthorized personnel," such as uninformed security forces, government officials or other politically connected actors, may be stationed inside or near polling stations to influence voter behavior. During Burundi's 2025 legislative and local elections, ruling party officials and the Imbonerakure intimidated, harassed and threatened the population, including coercing them to vote for the ruling party. These developments echoed repressive patterns observed during the 2020 general election, reinforcing a climate of political intolerance, impunity and state-led persecution – conditions highlighted by the UN Commission of Inquiry on Burundi as conducive to renewed crimes against humanity.<sup>25</sup>

Armed conflict, or the sudden influx of weapons during an election, can also destabilize the process further, particularly in areas where armed actors already exert

territorial control. State authorities may deliberately tolerate, coordinate with or arm these groups to secure political gains. Likewise, non-state actors may also view the elections as a critical moment to increase their influence or advance their policy agendas. These dynamics not only compromise the integrity of the election but also heighten the likelihood of targeted attacks or violence. After the Constitutional Court disqualified former President François Bozizé from running in the Central African Republic's 2020 elections, he allied with the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC), a new armed group opposing the government. The CPC launched coordinated attacks, set up roadblocks and targeted civilians to disrupt the vote and push for new peace talks.

### ***Role of Elites to Escalate or De-escalate Tensions***

The decisions, rhetoric and conduct of political elites often determines whether underlying risks will materialize and escalate. Political leaders, party officials and other influential actors shape the tone and direction of the electoral process.

Populist and authoritarian leaders often exacerbate societal divisions, scapegoating marginalized groups, fueling nationalist sentiment or inflaming grievances. As explained above, these tactics contribute to a volatile atmosphere where atrocity risks and the likelihood of pre- or post-election violence are heightened. Political authorities in hybrid or authoritarian regimes may use intimidation, vote-rigging or coercion and are often willing to resort to violence against their own populations when their authority is threatened.

Elite actors may undermine public confidence in the electoral process by manipulating EMBs (e.g., partisan appointments), voter registration systems (e.g., disenfranchisement through bureaucratic or technical barriers) and result announcement procedures and dispute resolution mechanisms (e.g., delaying results or stacking courts with loyalists). When these processes are perceived as biased or opaque, the risk of violent contestation increases, particularly if opposition groups believe peaceful avenues for redress are closed.

However, the role of elites is not only a source of risk – political and civic leaders also hold significant power to prevent violence, de-escalate tensions and foster restraint. Their responses to contentious issues, willingness to abide by constitutional norms and encouragement of inclusive participation can either mitigate or exacerbate the likelihood of mass violence. Candidates and party leaders play a central role in shaping the tone of political discourse and ensuring that

elections are conducted peacefully. Their commitment to democratic principles and peaceful contestation, especially in the face of defeat or delayed results, is often a decisive factor in avoiding escalation.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED**

Despite widespread recognition of the link between elections and atrocity risks, preventive action is often initiated too close to election day – when opportunities for meaningful impact have already narrowed – or early warning signs of election-related violence are ignored altogether. Additionally, while much preventive work on elections has traditionally focused on institution-building, adherence to democratic standards and monitoring electoral credibility, these measures, while essential, are not sufficient on their own.

Effective prevention requires early, long-term, holistic and context-specific engagement that addresses immediate triggers, as well as the deeper, structural causes of election-related violence and atrocities. Addressing underlying vulnerabilities and potential flashpoints is key to ensuring elections serve as a pathway to peaceful political competition. Preventing and mitigating election-related violence also demands enhanced collaboration among different sectors – from electoral management and human rights monitoring to peacebuilding, security and atrocity prevention. For example, atrocity prevention efforts ahead of Kenya's 2013 elections involved the government, international organizations, foreign governments, civil society, private sector groups – such as the Kenya Private Sector Alliance – and prominent individuals aimed at promoting peaceful elections and transition of power.<sup>26</sup>

The following recommendations draw from examples highlighted by the expert panelists on best practices and lessons learned for preventing, mitigating and responding to election-related violence and atrocities.

### ***For Civil Society Organizations***

- Conduct long-term, iterative civic and voter education to increase knowledge of electoral rights, rules and procedures, as well as promote non-violent conflict resolution.
- Mobilize youth- and minority-led initiatives to counter marginalization and foster inclusive, representative political engagement.

- For organizations serving as citizen observers:<sup>27</sup>
  - Train monitors to identify and report atrocity risk factors through an intersectional lens.
  - Share monitoring data with UN field presence – e.g., human rights officers,<sup>28</sup> UN Development Programme (UNDP) country offices or peacekeeping missions – to feed into broader reporting, including urgent incident reports to mobilize international response.
  - Use innovative monitoring methods and technology to collect, verify and analyze incidents. For example, Sri Lanka’s Centre for Monitoring Election Violence has utilized International IDEA’s Electoral Risk Management Tool alongside Google Maps to document incidents.<sup>29</sup>
- Partner with independent media to amplify accurate election-related information, counter hate speech, misinformation and disinformation, as well as engage in fact-checking collaborations to disprove false narratives during elections.<sup>30</sup> For example, ahead of elections in Ghana, journalists from multiple media houses formed a “situation room” to track reporting and social media content, rapidly issue corrections and ensure the public had access to verified, accurate information.<sup>31</sup>
- Mobilize informal and formal community-based platforms to mediate disputes and prevent localized violence from escalating.
- Take measures to combat hate speech and incitement, including legal protections for at-risk groups, through public statements and establishing social cohesion programs.<sup>32</sup>
- Sign codes of conduct for parties, campaigns and candidates that set shared rules for responsible campaigning, including commitments to avoid disinformation and harmful uses of digital tools.
- Design electoral processes to guarantee the meaningful participation of marginalized or underrepresented groups, both in process and outcomes so all communities have a stake in the election regardless of results.
- Support consultative legal reform by involving diverse stakeholders, including marginalized groups, in revising electoral laws well before elections to foster broad ownership and reduce the likelihood of violence.
- Leverage UN engagement and support through Resident Coordinators, special envoys, good offices, the Peacebuilding Commission, UNOPS, UNDP, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) field offices, Special Procedures and peacekeeping missions, where relevant, to jointly identify risks, build capacity, prevent or deter violence and respond collaboratively.
- Foster local inter-party dialogue platforms to identify and mitigate potential election-related tensions. In contexts with previous election-related atrocities, use dialogue and reconciliation efforts to prevent recurrence. For example, following Côte d’Ivoire’s 2010 post-election crisis, actors across the political spectrum established an interparty dialogue group with 50 local branches. These committees have successfully facilitated grassroots conflict prevention, early warning and peaceful participation in subsequent elections.<sup>33</sup>

### *For National and Local Authorities*

- Guarantee full access and security for election observers, media and civil society monitors.
- Sensitize state security institutions to electoral processes and institutionalize human rights training across security and law enforcement bodies, ensuring that these forces receive clear instructions and understand the use of force, in line with international human rights standards.
- Integrate early warning findings into impartial, proportionate security deployments for high-risk areas, avoiding heavy-handed measures that could escalate tensions.
- Transparently and impartially investigate any crimes committed throughout the electoral process, dismantle units involved in systematic rights violations and hold perpetrators accountable.
- Commit to non-interference of civic space and ensure that relevant legal frameworks uphold the right to freedom of opinion and expression, equitable access to media and participation in public affairs without discrimination.

### *For International Election Observers and Human Rights Monitors*

- Conduct continuous, context-specific monitoring across pre-election, voting and post-election periods that integrates:
  - Atrocity-specific indicators into observation tools, including a historical review of elections and related violence, a stakeholder matrix identifying possible spoilers and conflict mapping to identify potential or known hotspots.
  - Intersectional analysis to ensure the perspectives of women, youth and marginalized groups inform assessments of unique and

- overlapping risks.
- An assessment of sources of resilience by identifying “connectors” to pinpoint potential peace champions.<sup>34</sup>
- Establish hotline and rapid alert systems to receive and escalate early warnings to relevant national authorities and within respective regional or multilateral systems.
- Ensure monitors engage with local organizations, including traditional authorities and peacebuilding groups, to better understand local contexts, leverage their expertise and identify warning signs.
  - Alongside the efforts of citizen observers and human rights organizations, map incidents of violence and intimidation to target prevention efforts where they are most needed.
- Coordinate closely with other observer missions<sup>35</sup> and community peace networks to avoid duplication and ensure complete coverage of high-risk areas.
- Share joint briefings with security forces, EMBs and multilateral actors to ensure early warnings mobilize coordinated, appropriate responses.
- Abide by the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation and the accompanying Code of Conduct.

### *For International and Regional Organizations*

- Proactively consult and utilize reporting by human rights and civil society organizations, UN Special Procedures, peacekeeping missions, treaty bodies

and national and regional human rights mechanisms to inform electoral risk assessments and early warning.

- Ensure that election monitoring and political missions are coordinated with human rights and protection mandates to enable rapid diplomatic engagement when warning signs emerge.
- Share monitoring findings in joint briefings to encourage timely, unified responses from diplomatic, humanitarian and protection actors.
- Leverage diplomatic channels to signal consequences for electoral violence. For example, ahead of Nigeria’s 2015 elections, the International Criminal Court (ICC) Chief Prosecutor issued a clear warning that perpetrators of Rome Statute crimes would face prosecution in domestic courts or the ICC, sending a strong deterrent signal that contributed to a peaceful election.<sup>36</sup>
- Support national media and civil society organizations through training on election reporting and conflict-sensitive journalism, in partnership with UNESCO field offices.
- Train and professionalize state security institutions to uphold human rights during electoral processes, including on the use of force, crowd control, voters’ rights and gender equality. For example, in Liberia, a country that has faced significant challenges in its electoral processes, often marred by tensions and conflicts between political parties, OHCHR’s training for police has reduced confrontations and human rights violations, fostering a more peaceful electoral environment.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Freedom House, “Amid Unprecedented Wave of Elections, Political Violence and Armed Conflict Fueled 19<sup>th</sup> Consecutive Year of Decline in Global Freedom,” 26 February 2025. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/unprecedented-wave-elections-political-violence-and-armed-conflict>

<sup>2</sup> Clionadh Raleigh and Katayoun Kishi, “Conflict Index.” Available at: <https://acleddata.com/conflict-index/>

<sup>3</sup> According to International IDEA, the eight phases of the electoral cycle are: 1. legal and institutional framework 2. planning and implementation 3. training and education 4. registration 5. electoral campaign 6. voting operations and election day 7. verification of results 8. post-election.

<sup>4</sup> For example, International IDEA has identified 36 process-related (also known as internal or endogenous) and context-related (also known as external or exogenous) risk factors that can trigger election-related violence. See: <https://www.idea.int/electoral-risks-guide-external>

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Cooper, Lexi Merrick Boiro and Anis Samaali, *Electoral Violence in Context: A Guidance Document for Citizen Organizations Monitoring Violence in Elections*, National Democratic Institute, May 2025. Available at: <https://ndi.org/Electoral-Violence-Manual>

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Fomunyoh, remarks at the panel “Elections, Power Transitions and the Risk of Atrocity Crimes,” hosted by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 20 June 2024.

Available at: <https://www.globalr2p.org/elections-power-transitions-and-atrocity-crimes/>

<sup>7</sup> Edmund Yakani, remarks at the panel “Elections, Power Transitions and the Risk of Atrocity Crimes.”

<sup>8</sup> Tigere Chagutah, “Ten Years On: Reflections on the Silent Crisis in Burundi,” 9 July 2025. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/reflections-on-the-silent-crisis-in-burundi/>

<sup>9</sup> UN Group of Independent Experts on the Human Rights Situation in Belarus, “Truth, justice and reparations needed for Belarusian victims, UN Group of Independent Experts says in new report,” 10 September 2025. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/belarus-truth-justice-and-reparations-needed>

<sup>10</sup> Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “HC Türk updates Council on the human rights situation in Venezuela,” 27 June 2025. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/statements-and-speeches/hc-turk-updates-council-human-rights-situation-venezuela>

<sup>11</sup> Irene Khan, “Reverse the decline of freedom of expression to protect free and fair elections: UN expert,” 18 June 2025. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/Q6>

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, the list compiled by the ACE Project of factors that can act as triggers throughout an electoral cycle. Available here: <https://aceproject.org/factors-that-may-trigger-electoral-violence>



<sup>13</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Malawi: Police Look on as Peaceful Protesters Assaulted,” 1 July 2025. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/07/01/malawi>

<sup>14</sup> Pearl Pandya, “The Violent Politics of Bangladesh’s 2024 Elections,” 4 January 2024. Available at: <https://acleddata.com/report/bangladeshs-2024-elections>

<sup>15</sup> International Crisis Group, *Time for Concerted Action in DR Congo*, 4 December 2017. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/democratic-republic-congo/>

<sup>16</sup> Deborah Sontag, “Election Violence Flares in Haiti,” *The New York Times*, 8 December 2010. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/americas/09haiti.html>

<sup>17</sup> Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, “Atrocity Alert No. 216: Mali, Belarus and World Humanitarian Day,” 19 August 2020. Available at: <https://www.globalr2p.org/atrocity-alert-no-216/>

<sup>18</sup> Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, “Atrocity Alert No. 382: Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory, DR Congo and Venezuela,” 14 February 2024. Available at: <https://www.globalr2p.org/atrocity-alert-no-382/>

<sup>19</sup> Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Hate speech and incitement to hatred in the electoral context*, May 2024. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/hate-speech-electoral-context>

<sup>20</sup> Abdullahi Boru Halakhe, “R2P in Practice:” *Ethnic Violence, Elections and Atrocity Prevention in Kenya*, Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, December 2013. Available at: [https://www.globalr2p.org/Kenya\\_OccasionalPaper](https://www.globalr2p.org/Kenya_OccasionalPaper)

<sup>21</sup> Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, “The right to privacy in the digital age,” A/HRC/51/17, 16 September 2022.

<sup>22</sup> Sebastian Becker Castellaro et al, *Artificial Intelligence and Information Integrity: Latin American experiences*. Available at: <https://www.idea.int/artificial-intelligence-and-information-integrity>

<sup>23</sup> Sebastian Becker Castellaro et al, *Artificial Intelligence and Information Integrity: Latin American experiences*.

<sup>24</sup> Bryan Wood, “Could Bolivia’s current politics be fueling indigenous discrimination?” 25 November 2019. Available at: <https://www.pbs.org/could-bolivas-politics-be-fueling-indigenous-discrimination>

<sup>25</sup> Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, “Atrocity Alert No. 204: Burundi, Syria and Rwanda,” 20 May 2020. Available at: <https://www.globalr2p.org/atrocity-alert-no-204/>

<sup>26</sup> Stanley Foundation, *The Power of the Private Sector in Preventing Atrocities and Promoting the Responsibility to Protect*, October 2016. Available at: <https://stanleycenter.org/publications/PowerofthePrivateSector>. For criticism, see International Alert, *Mobilising the Private Sector for Peace: The*

*role of private sector actors in peace and conflict dynamics in Kenya and Somalia*, March 2022. Available at: <https://www.international-alert.org/PCA-Policy-Report.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Citizen observation involves monitoring all stages of the electoral cycle. Unlike international observers, citizen observation is typically conducted by NGOs or civil society organizations over a longer period.

<sup>28</sup> According to OHCHR, human rights monitoring differs from general election observation, which focuses on technical aspects of the electoral process. In contrast, human rights monitoring emphasizes specific populations or issues and involves advocacy and intervention to address rights violations.

<sup>29</sup> International IDEA, “Monitoring election related violence in Sri Lanka,” 22 May 2015. Available at: <https://www.idea.int/election-related-violence-sri-lanka>

<sup>30</sup> Two new digital tools developed by UNDP, namely iVerify and eMonitor+, are used in several countries to identify and counter mis/disinformation and hate speech in electoral contexts.

<sup>31</sup> Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, *Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention Episode 31: Christopher Fomunyoh*, 15 March 2024. Available at: <https://www.globalr2p.org/evap-episode-31-christopher-fomunyoh/>

<sup>32</sup> Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, *Hate speech and incitement to hatred in the electoral context*.

<sup>33</sup> Jonah Brody, “Promoting Community Dialogue in Cote d’Ivoire,” 2 April 2024. Available at: <https://www.ndi.org/promoting-community-dialogue>

<sup>34</sup> Sarah Cooper, Lexi Merrick Boiro and Anis Samaali, *Electoral Violence in Context: A Guidance Document for Citizen Organizations Monitoring Violence in Elections*.

<sup>35</sup> There are a variety of international observers managed by a multitude of actors, such as the European Union, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, African Union, Economic Community of West African States, Organization of American States, UN and Carter Center, among many others, with different mandates, scopes and deployments. For an overview of election observation, see <https://aceproject.org/ace-en/focus/international-election-observation>

<sup>36</sup> International Criminal Court, “Statement of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Fatou Bensouda, ahead of the general and state elections in Nigeria,” 2 February 2015. Available at: <https://www.icc-cpi.int/statement-prosecutor-international-criminal-court-fatou-bensouda>

<sup>37</sup> Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Training police helps safeguard human rights in Liberia’s elections,” 23 December 2025. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/training-police-helps-safeguard-human-rights>