

SPEECH

Ghana: Reducing the incidence of violence in elections 2016 and beyond

Keynote Address by Dr. Mohamed Ibn Chambas, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) at the National Colloquium on the Security of the upcoming General Elections in Ghana, at Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Center (KAIPTC), Accra, 07 September 2016.

*Distinguished guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

Allow me to express my gratitude to the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Center (KAIPTC) for associating the United Nations to this valuable and important National Colloquium. While commending the KAIPTC for this initiative, I wish to acknowledge the various actions undertaken along the years by the Centre to promote peace and stability before, during and after the upcoming 2016 elections. Also, I would also like to thank all parties involved in the organization of this important milestone.

I am indeed pleased and honored to be part of this occasion today. I have been asked to present an overview on ways and initiatives aimed at reducing election-related violence. This is a subject that connects to one of the core goals of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel, which is to prevent and reduce electoral violence. In effect, as this Colloquium assembles key national stakeholders to discuss ways of ensuring peaceful Presidential and Parliamentary elections here in Ghana, it is important to analyze the root causes of electoral violence, and to examine best practices to prevent such occurrence.

In that regard, my presentation attempts to:

- 1) Advance a modest conceptual framework to look at the issue of elections and violence;
- 2) Discuss elements that have the potential to raise the risk of election-related violence;
- 3) Analyze the role and elements of the electoral process in reducing the incidence of violence;
- 4) Provide a few examples of West African countries that have recently held peaceful elections;
- 5) Share a few thoughts on ways of ensuring peaceful Presidential and Parliamentary elections in Ghana.

I. Conceptual framework

Ladies and gentlemen,

Elections are an essential part of the democratic process and organization, and a means to manage political competition and conflict in a peaceful way. However, when the political process fails in this regard, elections can be the spark that leads to violence, resulting, in the worst case, in significant loss of lives, as has occurred in a number of places all over the world. On too many occasions across our continent, we have seen how electoral processes that are meant to peacefully select peoples' representatives can become sources of discord. (As we speak, Gabon is the latest case in point).

As such, election- related violence is, most fundamentally, a form of political violence. The root causes of political violence are most often: (1) Systemic, long standing and unresolved grievances, either real or perceived, and a conviction that they cannot be resolved through the existing political order ; and (2) means of last resort by governments, political or community leaders to attain victory at the polls. .

Electoral violence can take many forms, such as intimidation of adversaries, voters or electoral agents, assault of opponents, or even assassinations. Acts of violence can be targeted against people (communities, candidates, organized groups ...) or symbols (campaign materials, vehicles, offices, polling booths ...). Electoral violence can be distinguished from other types of violence, as its goal is to influence the electoral process. It may be aimed at the conduct of voters, candidates, officials, or other players, or be carried out to delay or otherwise disturb the polling process, in order to affect the end results.

Over the last years, there has been an increasing focus on the issue of elections and violence, with much attention paid, by election practitioners and politicians, to improvements in the election process and its monitoring, with a view to reducing the potential for violence. Most studies indicate that elections are not, as such, the primary source of violence. However, given that the fundamental goal of the electoral process is to gain political power, often against a background of long- standing grievances or sentiments of exclusion and disenfranchisement, they can be a catalyst or trigger of violence in response to underlying conflicts.

As we have experienced, the causes of election-related violence are multifaceted and vary from country to country. However, some common factors can be identified. I would like to continue by analyzing underlying parameters that make election- related violence more likely. The presence of some of these factors, singularly or in combination, means that the risk of election-related violence could be higher, but it does not mean it is inevitable.

Political violence appears to be more likely in the following contexts:

(a) Contexts of transition

When a country is transiting from war to democracy and elections are seen as the culmination of the implementation of a peace agreement, the risk of election-related violence is higher. In such situations, disarmament and demobilization may be incomplete, societal division may run deep, and the economic and social effects of war often remain strong. When a country is experiencing a period of transition from authoritarian or single-party rule to multi-party politics, political uncertainty, lack of democratic consolidation or the presence of "façade" democracy can make a country more vulnerable to outbreaks of violence.

(b) Weak or inadequate state structures

A weak or inadequate state structure may be reflected in a variety of ways, including a poorly developed political party system, weak democratic institutions including a dysfunctional judicial system, and high levels of systemic corruption. In some cases, the security forces may be overly politicized, ethnically biased, or simply be unprofessional. These elements may enhance insecurity, compromise law and order, and encourage the proliferation of small arms and the hiring of militias by political actors, raising the potential for violence.

(c) Social Divisions & lack of adequate power-sharing arrangements

In a similar vein, societies that lack policies and institutions that promote power sharing are also much more likely to encounter obstacles in the democratic process. Arrangements to balance power adequately amongst diverse groups and to ensure their participation in decision-making may be absent or insufficient, leading to inherent instability, enhancing sentiments of exclusion and discrimination, thus raising the stakes to seek redress by influencing the electoral process.

(d) Economic inequality

Excessive economic inequality and corruption can produce high levels of discontent and clear grievances among marginalized groups. High levels of economic inequality often go hand in hand with unemployment among youths feeling disenfranchised, who are susceptible to recruitment with the intent of fomenting violence or threatening opponents.

II. Elements that have the potential to raise the risk of election-related violence

After this brief overview of a conceptual framework, let us have a look at some elements that have the potential to raise the risk of election-related violence:

(a) Electoral systems

Electoral systems determine how power is allocated among contenders. While no single system is considered “best”, proportional systems appear to be better suited for countries affected by social divisions, especially along ethnic, regional or religious lines, as they tend to reflect more accurately the diversity of society. Electoral systems can also create or accentuate other cleavages, for example through the division into constituencies, and have an impact on the way candidates and political parties craft their appeals to the electorate. In this context, elections can bring to the fore deep rooted grievances, resulting in political violence if the electoral system itself is seen to reinforce real or perceived inequalities or marginalization.

(b) Real or perceived electoral manipulation

Contestants disappointed by electoral outcomes often claim they have been robbed of their win. In some cases, they indeed have been fraudulently excluded from power. In other cases, they may have misunderstood the process. Most often, allegations of fraud are convenient excuse for poor performance. In any case, real or perceived fraudulent

outcomes can spark violence, orchestrated by parties and candidates, or carried out by their supporters or fringe elements.

(c) High stakes

In some contexts, winning public office is a means to provide a livelihood not just for an individual, but for associated clans, factions, ethnic groups, or political parties. Winning elections can be important to maintain patronage networks, control resources, and dispense jobs, public services, or lucrative government contracts. This can lead to highly factionalized politics, often along regional, sectarian or ethnic lines, where the control of the state provides economic opportunities and entrenches social cleavages. In a worst case scenario, it can result in a refusal to hand over power after defeat at the polls.

(d) Zero sum politics

In a similar scenario, when political parties and groups in society fear loss or exclusion, especially if they expect to lose repeatedly and become “permanent minorities”, they may turn to disrupt elections. Incumbents, who seek to maintain a grip on power but fear defeat, may use violence and intimidation, particularly if it is the first time they are being seriously challenged. These problems are particularly acute where being in opposition is seen as being excluded from access to resources.

(e) Close outcomes

When there is uncertainty about the outcome of an election, particularly when margins of victory are small, there is a greater likelihood that allegations of fraud will lead to frustration and, potentially, to violent clashes.

III. The role and elements of the electoral process in reducing the incidence of violence

A poorly conducted election process does not necessarily lead to a disputed outcome, and eventually to outbreak of violence. However, an effective and credible process can reduce the chances that an election - whatever the outcome - will ignite simmering tensions. Experience gained by the United Nations and others over the last decades indicates that the following elements can reduce the potential for election-related violence:

(a) Broad trust and confidence in the fairness, impartiality and general competence of the election management body and other related institutions

There are different models of Election Management Bodies, which may be independent commissions, or be entities within line ministries. While there is no particular model to be recommended as such, as each case responds to different settings, every effort should be made to ensure that senior members of the election management body are selected through an impartial and consultative process in order to build trust and confidence with the public and major stakeholders.

(b) A consultative approach that binds in stakeholders throughout the electoral process

The importance of a consultative approach begins with the development of and agreement on an electoral legal framework. A process that consolidates inputs from a wide range of stakeholders and is concluded well in advance of the Election Day is more likely to encourage the conduct of a peaceful election. A consultative approach by the election management body remains important throughout every stage of the electoral process, binding in stakeholders and creating a sense of joint responsibility for the electoral process. Regular consultations with political parties are a particularly important aspect in this regard.

(c) A level playing field for all participants

Throughout the process, the legal framework needs to ensure a level playing field, which is in respect of human rights and considered inclusive and equitable. This implies, during the conduct of an election, that authorities do not interfere in the process and political competition is neither restricted nor obstructed. This also means, for example, that the registration process of political parties and candidates should be open and inclusive. Contenders must have equal opportunities to campaign, and have equitable access to state media. As well as other actors, media, police, and security forces need to be seen as neutral. Overall, it is vital that the authorities demonstrate political will for an election to be conducted in a credible manner.

(d) Adequate measures to enfranchise all eligible voters, without overt or systemic discrimination

While no voter register is one hundred per cent accurate, the importance of a credible voter register cannot be over-emphasized. Equally, the process of constituency delineation must be seen as free of political manipulation, to avoid allegations of discrimination, unreasonable exclusions, restrictions and disqualifications.

(e) Transparency in all phases of the process & safeguards against fraud

In order to ensure public confidence, transparency in all stages is another precondition. The election management body needs to ensure that its decisions are published in a timely manner. During polling and counting, detailed results need to be swiftly displayed at each level of the process, broken down to the lowest level (usually polling station level, but sometimes counting centre level), to enable an independent audit to be conducted and results to be traced from the lowest to highest levels. At each stage of the process best practices and safeguards exist to enhance transparency and reduce the possibility for fraud, including for voter identification, secrecy of the ballot, numbering of ballot papers and the secure handling of polling materials, to mention just a few.

(f) A fair and timely dispute resolution system

Despite the best precautions, disputes will always occur. As a means to build and maintain trust among stakeholders, an efficient, timely and transparent complaints and appeals process, enjoying public confidence, is an important aspect of a credible election process. Where this is not the case, contestants can be reluctant to seek redress through formal procedures.

IV. Examples of West African countries that have recently held peaceful elections

Ladies and gentlemen,

Democracy in Western Africa has shown significant improvements in the last years. Of these, I would like to highlight a few:

(1) Nigeria (March 2015)

On the 28th of March 2015, Nigerians went to the polls to elect a president. Defying expectations, West Africa's most populous nation went through this crucial stage in its history without any significant violent incidents. In fact, as we all know, Africa's leading economic power used to be torn apart by ethnic and religious conflicts that resurfaced with each presidential election. But in 2015, Nigeria organized peaceful elections whose results were accepted by the entire political class. The outgoing President Goodluck Jonathan accepted his defeat to Muhammadu Buhari, a retired General and former military head of state, and leader of the opposition coalition. How did Nigerians manage to do this?

It all began with a consensus concerning the voters register. In time, the Independent Electoral Commission updated the voters' register, and inter alia deleted nearly 4.1 million deceased voters. The electoral campaign certainly had its fair share of reciprocal accusations of attempts at fraud, but candidates remained moderate and adhered to their public commitments for peace. Civil society created "citizen watch organizations", and the international community deployed observation missions that helped mitigate problems by issuing early warnings. In March and April 2015, in my capacity as Special Representative of the Secretary General for West Africa, and High Level Representative to Nigeria, I travelled repeatedly to the country to engage with national stakeholders with a view to defusing tensions. .

In a precarious security environment including terrorist attacks, the government implemented an effective security strategy, involving difficult decisions. For five days leading up to the elections, the borders were closed, and car and motorcycle travel was forbidden on Election Day. Therefore, 68 million voters expressed their choice by getting to the polls on foot.

The manner in which the final results were announced conveyed a sense of transparency. The presentation of results in a public parade of eminent professors, who served as presiding officers, added an element of reassurance. And, like their leaders, Nigerians accepted the final verdict because they could be confident in the transparency of the vote.

(2) Togo (April 2015)

Following Nigeria, Togo also held presidential elections on the 15th of April 2015. Contrary to those held in Nigeria, the polls were won by the outgoing president, Faure Gnassingbé. In 2015, Togo made a break with the past. It would be recalled that, for example, the 2005 elections saw between 400 and 500 deaths and thousands wounded. Here again, the role of the National Independent Electoral Commission was crucial, as was that of the Constitutional Court. In a consultative process, parties agreed on the electoral calendar and formed a consensus on the voter register. Prior to the announcement of the results, I visited Lomé from 27 to 30 April with the objective of consulting with all stakeholders to defuse tensions. I

met with key national stakeholders, including the Independent National Electoral Commission and main opposition candidate Jean-Pierre Fabre. That was done in close coordination with the African Union, ECOWAS and international observer missions present in the country. Admittedly, the opposition initially contested the outcome, but protested peacefully and ultimately accepted the election results.

(3) Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso (October and November 2015)

Guinea and Ivory Coast both held elections in October 2015, which were followed by polls in Burkina Faso on the 29th of November. Also these polls were marked by the absence of violence, strengthening democracy in West Africa. In all three countries, the various players first began by sitting down to discuss, and despite tensions reached a consensus concerning the electoral register, a subject that, as we have seen, is often fraught with debate. From then on, each stakeholder acted responsibly. The electoral management bodies were committed to ensuring an impartial organization of the polls; political parties showed restraint in their campaign declarations; jurisdictions were vigilant and diligent; police forces ensured security for all. As a result, citizens felt that they could express their votes in peace and tranquility, which they did with great enthusiasm, despite a legacy of past electoral violence in these three countries. The African Union, the European Union, ECOWAS, la Francophonie, the United Nations, and diplomatic and other international partners closely monitored and supported the whole process.

(4) Benin and Niger (February and March 2016)

At the start of this year, Benin, known for its democratic credentials and peaceful transitions, was once more in the spotlight. Boni Yayi, outgoing president after two terms, passed the baton to the people's chosen candidate, Patrice Talon. As an indication of the country's democratic culture, Lionel Zinsou, the candidate of the former ruling party, called the victor to congratulate him only hours after the closing of polling stations and before the publication of the initial trends. This was not the first time that the losing candidate in Benin called to congratulate the winner. Here again, the Electoral Commission has been proactive in the management of allegations of fraud. Also at the beginning of the year, Niger held the second round of its presidential elections, which occurred peacefully without incidents. In Niger in particular, the support by the International Community played a useful and effective role. In both countries, I met at several occasions with presidential candidates, political parties and electoral management bodies in order to encourage a swift resolution of contested issues.

In conclusion, in all those seven countries electing new presidents, despite tensions, there were little signs of violence before, during, or after the polls. We are convinced that such will be the case in Ghana, long credited as a democratic role model in West Africa, which we will now look at more closely.

V. Thoughts to engage discussions on ways of ensuring peaceful Presidential and Parliamentary elections in Ghana

Ladies and gentlemen,

Ghana will be experiencing a general election in exactly three months' time. A president will be elected, and new Members of Parliament will be chosen. The stakes are high, and the outcomes could be close. The candidates, the political parties, and the voters will not tolerate any slippages. Before dealing with threats of violence to this election, allow me to return to the country's current assets.

(1) Ghana's structural assets

Very much to its credit, Ghana is a country of inter- religious harmony and without ethnic or related contests. Citizens can freely express their opinions without fear of repression. It has a proven democratic background, built on strong institutions, a respected judiciary, and the respect of human rights principles. Since the adoption of its new constitution in 1992, it has continued to have an impact on the sub-region through its democratic leadership and its peaceful transitions of power.

Ghana's peace architecture is one of the inspirations that Nigeria drew upon for its 2015 elections, which led to the creation of a National Peace Committee in Nigeria. The multi-level structure of the Ghana Peace Council offers a robust framework to detect and counter any threats to peace.

Ghana has successfully completed the first phase of the 2016 elections. In fact, thanks to the preparedness and diligence of the Electoral Commission, political dialogue, and guidelines provided by the Supreme Court, national stakeholders have been able to reach a consensus on the voters' register. This creates a sound foundation for the next steps of the electoral cycle. With all this evidence before us, it would seem that Ghana is on the path to emulate the same success as seen in the other West African countries.

(2) Ensuring peaceful Presidential and Parliamentary elections in Ghana

The second main phase of the electoral cycle generally begins with the start of the campaign period, and ends with the polling itself. Its success depends on all stakeholders: the Electoral Commission, the judiciary, political parties, security agencies, and the voters.

On this note, I congratulate the Electoral Commission for its action, and I want to encourage it to further intensify its efforts, particularly in relation to communication as a critical element as we are moving forward.

During this phase, the political parties are expected to constantly and publicly reaffirm their commitment to a fair process. The 2016 elections are not a matter of life or death. I urge the political parties to desist from attacks on personalities, and focus on relevant issues affecting the life of Ghanaians. The election campaign should be an opportunity to debate issues and perspectives instead of trading words.

I want to remind the political parties to resort to the legal justice channels in order to address any grievances, as prescribed by the law. Equally, political parties and their candidates should not cease to publicly declare their firm commitment to abiding by the verdict of the polls. That is why I encourage the initiative of the National Peace Council to organize a peace summit to sign a collective peace accord.

The third and final phase of the electoral process begins with the declaration of the provisional and final results, and ends with the swearing-in of the newly-elected officials. If there are no unresolved issues left over from the first two stages, it could safely be expected that winners and losers will accept the results, thus crowning the democratic process. It is the civic duty of political leaders to educate citizens and supporters in order to prevent their militants from causing discord.

I know that the views I'm proffering here are shared by members of civil society, religious leaders, and traditional chiefs. It is their neutrality that allows them to act as a link between politicians and society, so that the pursuit of political objectives does not create social or religious ruptures to the point of pitting groups against one another. Civil society, religious leaders and traditional chiefs are the ones to send out early warning signals to prevent an escalation of tensions and any occurrence of election-related violence.

Whether or not the electoral campaign and Election Day end peacefully, finally also depends on the counting and tabulation of the ballots, which can uphold or destroy the validity of the process. Three elements are of the utmost importance: the correlation between the polling stations results and those displayed at upper levels; the speed at which the results are tabulated and officially displayed; and the transparency of the whole process.

It can naturally be expected that some mistakes will take place and that some results will be disputed, but a rapid and open display of the tabulation will quickly dispel most of the concerns that could otherwise spark disruptions and violence in the streets.

Until now, I have held back on two last sensitive points:

First, I would like first to mention the vigilantes' formations that, as we hear, are being employed by some political parties to ensure the protection of their candidates and their assets. You will agree with me that any such private security organs, which also seem to be engaged in a variety of unlawful acts, thoroughly discredit the whole electoral process. If no clear decisions and measures are being taken, the existence and proliferation of militias will create a vicious circle. The proposed Peace Summit and Accord should be very clear about this issue and recommend specific action against this menace.

The last point I would like to touch on concerns the press and the use of incendiary language.

Ladies and gentlemen from the media, in this period in particular, your action is important as well as delicate. Your responsibility for the success of the entire process can hardly be under-estimated. As you are keenly aware, whenever you publish information, whenever you make a statement of fact, be only guided by your professionalism. You are the guardians of truth for the people of Ghana, do not allow yourself to be manipulated by any other interests. In this crucial role, be aware of the pernicious effect of promoting subversive declarations and counter-declarations.

Media professionals, you are performing an important watchdog function, and as investigative journalists, you may bring to light sensitive issues, triggering corrective action by concerned partners, including the Electoral Commission. I am convinced that the trust put in you by those gathered here today, as well as the entire international community, is well deserved. Equally, I want to reiterate calls to the political leaders to show restraint when

communicating through the media while respecting the right to information and the important work of journalists.

On the other hand, any attempt by the media to incite violence rather than presenting facts and stimulating discussions should also be denounced by civil society and be sanctioned by the judiciary. This is not meant to muzzle freedom of speech and expression, not at all, but to be alert and aware that, during this short and tense political contest, messages can easily be misunderstood as incitements for mob action and violence in the streets.

I would like to strongly advocate that before the December 7 election, two crucial steps must be taken: Firstly, to invest in early warning capacities of the Peace Council at the regional and, especially, the district levels. It is where troubles often originate, and where they need to be addressed. Secondly, to form an alliance with credible media watchdog institutions, such as the Media Foundation for West Africa - and others- whose monitoring program publicly exposes violators of good conduct.

VI. Conclusions and way forward

Ladies and gentlemen, in conclusion, allow me to state again that:

While political violence is often sparked by a single event, such as an election, the particular event is rarely the root cause.

Electoral violence can manifest itself in various forms (assassination, kidnapping, scuffles and brawls, offence and defamation) that are meant to impact on the electoral process and ultimately influence the results of the polls. It is essential that each and every concerned individual assumes his or her role to prevent such an occurrence from happening in 2016.

In order to accomplish this, political parties must know that they have a primary role in educating their supporters to promote a culture of peace, dialogue, and consensus. The Electoral Commission, the judiciary, and other republican institutions must be strengthened in the accomplishment of their mission and in the neutrality of their task. I commend civil society, religious leaders, and traditional chiefs for their important role in this national endeavor.

Going forward, in conclusion, reducing the risks of violence in 2016 and beyond should include the following: a) assessing the pertinent long-standing political and societal grievances; b) making efforts to address, to the extent possible, such underlying grievances before the election; c) limiting the potential of mobilizing those grievances into political violence; d) fine-tuning the electoral process, particularly through: building public trust and confidence especially towards the election management body; encouraging a consultative approach that fosters joint responsibility for the process; facilitating a level playing field for participants; ensuring transparency in all aspects of the process; and guaranteeing a dispute resolution process that is fair, expeditious, and accessible.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is my hope that you found some of the views and perspectives presented helpful to further identify ways to ensure peaceful Presidential and Parliamentary elections.

The international community is impressed by your collective commitment and remains convinced of the strength of Ghana's democratic tradition, and stands ready to contribute its share so that this election again represents the true aspirations of the people of Ghana.

Thank you very much for your kind attention,

I am looking forward to fruitful deliberations.

END.

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