

Kenya's National Elections: Violence Renewed or Crisis Prevented? Friends Committee on National Legislation

October 2011

In 2012, Kenya plans to hold national elections. These general polls will be the first since December of 2007, when the country's disputed presidential race provoked a deadly crisis that threatened to erupt into civil war. Ultimately, more than 1,000 people were killed and an estimated 500,000 displaced.

Many Kenyans have since worked tirelessly toward breaking their country's cycle of electoral violence, and the upcoming polls will mark a critical moment in the attempt to prevent crisis renewed. As the elections approach, the U.S. government should proactively take part in the effort to help prevent deadly conflict and support long-term peace—not only because of Kenya's longstanding economic and political partnership with the United States, but because of the crucial role Kenya plays in its wider region.

While much has been achieved in Kenya since 2007, many of the grievances most responsible for past electoral violence continue to plague its citizens. Tensions around issues including inequality, ethnic division, lack of land reform, corruption and high rates of youth unemployment remain. Though Kenyans peacefully approved a new constitution in 2010 that contains many much-needed reforms, political resistance to changes in the status quo continues. The government has also been slow to hold perpetrators of the 2007 post-election violence accountable, causing Kenyans to question the government's commitment to ending impunity and leading to an external investigation of the crimes by the International Criminal Court. violence and called for commitment to long-term reform, demonstrating how the tools of tools of diplomacy, civil society mobilization and international cooperation can be used to halt atrocities and restore peace.

At the same time, Kenya's relatively robust institutions and infrastructure provide much of the foundation necessary for long-term stability. Moreover, its past demonstrates that action to avert violence can be effective. Even in the midst of the growing conflict in late 2007, Kenyan civil society, regional African groups and the broader international community were able to respond with humanitarian assistance, citizen advocacy and rapid diplomacy. The efforts led to a peace agreement that both put an end to the immediate violence and called for commitment to long-term reform, demonstrating how the tools of tools of diplomacy, civil society mobilization and international cooperation can be used to halt atrocities and restore peace. Once again, the United States and greater international community have a significant stake in helping to ensure a peaceful outcome to the Kenyan election. Kenya has long-served as the anchor of U.S. policy in the region, and its strong economy, vibrant civil society and meaningful contributions to regional organizations and peacekeeping efforts make the country critical to East African and global stability. (...) By investing in grassroots peacebuilding and civic education, coordinating

preventive diplomatic efforts, encouraging greater accountability from the Kenyan government and preparing to respond rapidly to any violence that might occur, the United States can make concrete contributions toward preventing another crisis—well before the election begins. (...)

Moreover, the U.S. and the international community share a commitment under the “**responsibility to protect**” doctrine to help prevent violence *before* it occurs – not after it erupts.(...)

Kenya offers a case in which efforts to prevent deadly conflict before it erupts are not only needed, but possible. By supporting peacebuilding initiatives, pressing for a government that responds with equity and justice to the needs of its communities and ensuring that means of response to potential violence are in place, the U.S. can make practical and meaningful contributions toward a peaceful Kenyan election.

Read full
[policy brief](#)

.