

Joint Media Statement: Immediate action needed to reduce SA political violence

With elections fast approaching, specific strategies can reduce high levels of violence associated with political contestation.

Issued by Gun Free South Africa in partnership with the Democracy Works Foundation, Human Sciences Research Council, Institute for Security Studies and Society, Work and Politics Institute at Wits University on Thursday, 25 October 2018

A range of interventions to reduce the risk and lethality of political violence must be part of South Africa's preparations for 2019 national government elections.

Speakers at a workshop hosted by leading civil society organisations and the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) called for immediate steps to bring down the high levels of political violence in the country.

Delegates at the meeting hosted by the Human Sciences Research Council, the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), Gun Free SA, SALGA and the Society, Work and Politics Institute (SWOP) at WITS University heard that South Africa's ranking in the 2018 Global Peace Index has dropped because of the increase in violent demonstrations and political violence in the country. South Africa currently ranks as the 125th most peaceful country in the world out of the 165 countries studied.

South Africa's current political violence needs to be understood within a broader context of the country's long history of brutal violence said keynote speaker and executive chairperson of the Democracy Works Foundation Professor William Gumede. 'Because of this, democracy is our only hope,' he warned.

Analysis of political violence since 2013 by the ISS Crime Hub shows that the vast majority of the victims and perpetrators are members or officials of the African National Congress (ANC). More than 70% of killings occurred in KwaZulu-Natal followed by Gauteng, the Western Cape, Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga and North West Province. Most attacks took place in the victim's home or just outside it, or in their vehicles in the presence of relatives and/or friends, often children.

The nature of resource competition in South Africa shapes political violence, according to Professor Karl von Holdt, director of SWOP at Wits University. 'Violence is related to access to resources in local government. The dominant political party will experience most of this violence because it has control over most of those resources.'

Speakers and delegates identified a range of interventions to address the high levels of political violence. As an immediate step, political leaders from all parties should be more responsive to their constituencies and 'lead by example through strongly condemning all forms of violence and intimidation both in their actions and messaging', said Lizette Lancaster, manager of the ISS' Crime Hub.

Prosecutions of those accused of political violence, including the organisers, is another priority. 'Political parties themselves should be held accountable for violence committed in their name,' said Mia Swart, research director of the Human Sciences Research Council's Democracy and Governance Unit. 'This would address the current culture of impunity that is breeding the violence.'

Reducing the availability of guns is also urgent, according to Claire Taylor, specialist researcher at Gun Free South Africa. Taylor's analysis of political party killings from 2016 shows that 94% are gun-related. 'A gun-related assassination is eighteen times more deadly than if a knife is used, so limiting the availability of guns will save lives,' Taylor explained.

In the long term, political violence can be prevented through job creation, cutting patronage and corruption from the tender-awarding process at local government, and educating citizens and councillors on their rights and obligations to foster better communication and accountability.

Note to editors

The Monitoring and Responding to Political Violence workshop was held on 23 October and forms part of series of engagements aimed at:

- Contributing to a deeper understanding of the nature and extent of political violence in South Africa.
- Documenting how political violence impacts on government's ability to function at a local, provincial and national level.
- Identifying evidence-based interventions aimed at reducing the prevalence, risk and lethality of political violence in South Africa.

Ends