

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT, GOVERNANCE UNCOVERED – EPISODE 52

Controlling Territory, Controlling Voters: Book Interview with Michael Wahman

Hello and welcome to Governance Uncovered, a podcast by the Governance and Local Development Institute at the University of Gothenburg. This podcast is supported by the Swedish Research Council.

In today's episode, we are joined by Michael Wahman, Associate Professor at Michigan State University's Department of Political Science.

Host Ellen Lust and Michael discuss his book "Controlling Territory, Controlling Voters," recently published by Oxford University Press. Michael's research leading up to this book, which spanned seven years, delves into the complex topic of electoral violence in Zambia and Malawi.

The interview delves into the concept of electoral violence, examining its manifestations and its broader impact on the electoral process. Michael's research highlights the significance of low-scale violence and the fear it instills among voters, especially women.

Furthermore, the interview explores the concept of geographically polarized electoral systems, a critical framework for understanding when and why electoral violence occurs. Michael explains how competition over territory, rather than individual voters, becomes a focal point in these systems, making election violence a tool for controlling space and shaping electoral outcomes.

Michael also provides some practical implications of his work, emphasizing the importance of taking low-scale violence seriously, working with domestic election observers, and finding local solutions to de-escalate election violence.

So, stay tuned for this engaging conversation with Michael as we uncover the hidden dynamics of electoral violence.

So thank you, Michael, for joining us today. It's really exciting to talk about your new book, *Controlling Territory, Controlling Voters*, which has just come out with Oxford University Press. It should be available in the UK and then very shortly in the US as well. So congratulations on a really excellent piece of work and scholarship. I want to mention that your your book is covering a lot of ground in terms of electoral violence, which is what we're going to be really talking about, but also that you spent about seven years of research on this, that this really actually brings together a lot of data, a lot of really, really an interesting insights and deep knowledge of Zambia and Malawi. So both congratulations on that, but I also want to highlight that because in short conversations, it doesn't always come through, but I think it's really important for people to to know and understand. And actually along those lines, maybe before we even launch into it, can you tell us a little bit about the process, the book, how you became interested in in the topic, but also what you did to get us to the point where we are now in terms of understanding electoral violence?

Well, absolutely, Ellen. First of all, let me just say thank you so much for for inviting me to to say a few things about my book. Of course, GLD has been a really great partner in, in the work that I've

done with this book. And I can, I can confidently say that I wouldn't have been able to do this without the the great support that I have had from from GLD. And many others. But we can come back to that later. So this actually didn't start off as a project on violence. So just after I had finished my PhD, I was lucky enough to receive some funding for a project from the Swedish Research Council that was on subnational variations in election quality. And the basic idea was, you know, I had done work in both Malawi and Zambia and I had really sort of noticed that there was a great subnational variation in the way that elections were conducted. And I was thinking is there a way that we can actually collect some some data systematically across different sub national units on on the conduct of elections. So that was how it started, and in that process, I became increasingly interested in the topic of election violence particularly. As I started working on Zambia with the scene to be growing concern, so that's where it started and I I really in the beginning of this, this this process I I had a very simple understanding of the drivers of election violence and I just anticipated like most other people that basically we're going to see islands in the places that are the most competitive. And I've started to look into this and I I realized that seems to be the other way around. So that really intrigued me. This has really been the sort of like soak and poke kind of work where I've gone in between the quantitative data and done a lot of qualitative work to try to figure out how can we understand these patterns of election violence that just seems so counterintuitive in many ways. And my aspiration while doing so was to really try to anchor it in the more sort of election research that I'm, I'm more accustomed to trying to to think about, if we think about election violence as a tool of electoral manipulation, how can we understand it given certain modes of electoral mobilization? So really try to incorporate theories of election violence with broader theories about electoral behavior and elections in Africa.

Excellent. I want to come to basically your understanding of electoral violence as a form of electoral manipulation. And in a moment, but first, just to give everybody a sense of what electoral violence looks like and and how it might manifest itself in Malawi and Zambia but elsewhere, can you describe what you mean by electoral violence?

Yeah. So I think it's important when we start talking about this, that electoral violence has been studied from two different perspectives. So one perspective is the more sort of conflict oriented perspective and one is the more sort of election manipulation, type of perspective. And since a lot of the initial work in election violence research was more conflict oriented. We often associate election violence with very high scale events, so you might think about cases like Kenya cultivar, Nigeria, places where a lot of people died during elections, and indeed, this is also what we see in a lot of the the data sets. One can count the number of fatalities or other things. But election violence can be much more than that. And election violence can be much more low scale. So when we talk about election violence, it's typically understood as a form of physical violence that is used in order to change electoral outcomes. And that can mean very low scale type of violence, including beatings, including the use of tear gas by the police. It could be including things like property damage and other things. And indeed, when we look at many African countries, this is the type of violence that is the most prevalent and the ones that probably affect election contests more than the very high scale examples that we've seen only actually in in a handful of cases. In fact, one of the things that we did during data collection was to ask Zambians how they understood the concept of election violence. And interestingly, we found that most people tend to associate this concept with much more sort of low scale expressions of violence than the more extreme examples.

And what I've noticed, at least in my experience, in these countries was that people talk about this, right? So that's it's not just about the actual manifestation of violence and an act, right, but that it creates and, I think we'll come to this, it creates a sort of an atmosphere or a climate of discussion about it and talking about it. You consider the, you know, kind of the implicit threats that exist when people talk about it or when rumors spread. Do you consider that to be violence?

Theoretically, I think it's definitely very close. The problem with that sort of violence is that it's so extremely hard to measure. But yeah, I think about the sort of manifested violence that we see the tip of the iceberg of Electoral environments that tend to be quite entrenched in, in coercion, intimidation. So oftentimes you actually don't have to perpetrate the actual act of violence, but the mere threat of it can really shape electoral environments and in meaningful and very detrimental ways.

No, and I like that metaphor, which you also use in the book, right. Of thinking of it as the tip of the iceberg because it gives us a sense that that what we see which may seem astounding in and of itself, is actually part of a manifestation of a broader system, and you make a claim or a case for the idea that, and we should think of what you call geographically polarized electoral system as a way of thinking about when we're going to see electoral violence and then later why we see it. Can you start just by describing what geographically polarized electoral systems means and what it looks like?

Yeah. So this is a concept that I used to describe a specific configuration of competition. So if we look at African elections over time, we see that African elections are becoming more competitive at the national level. This level of competition according to earlier research on election violence, to be conducive to to more violence, because there is more uncertainty. However, if you go a little bit beyond the national aggregates and look at how does competition play out across space, we actually see that in many countries where the level of national competition has increased, there has either been no change in the level of local level competition or there has even been decline in the level of local competition and electorally polarized electoral system is one that combine high levels of national competition with low levels of local competition and this type of electoral system actually describes the majority of African countries at this point, at least. If we look at those that are more competitive in nature at the national level. And I argue that we really, in order to understand election violence in this, in this type of elections, we really have to think about what does competition look like in these cases and what role does space fill in understanding the way that election violence is used in these systems where you might say that regionalism is the is the most important structuring cleavage of electoral competition.

And so tell us more about how do we understand then why we get electoral violence in places that seem to be essentially monopolized or or have very little competition within them?

So what I would argue is that we have to take a step back, right? So we have to start really by asking why do we see these patterns of competition to start with, what is it that creates this local lack of competitiveness? There's standard explanation, which is one that I sort of tried to fight against in the, look, is that well, this is an expression of ethnic voting. So in Africa and ethnic groups are spatially segregated for different institutional, historical reasons. But I argue that it there, there's more to it than that. And the important thing is to realize that in these types of electoral systems, where a lot of the competition is about winning territory rather than individual voters, where it's about mobilizing regional cleavages, it is absolutely essential to have electoral campaigns that are able to create those linkages between political parties and those regional cleavages. So basically, electoral campaigns become a contest over space, and when we have that sort of environment, election violence can be an extremely useful tool because electoral violence can be used to regulate the access to space. So I know that that's a little bit aggregated and and a little bit abstract, but I want to give you a couple of examples. So imagine for instance that you have a particular constituency that is held very firmly by one political party. So in this area, most people belong to this political party, it's assumed that this political party will be the one that mobilize this particular area. The only way that you could potentially break that narrative about this party sort of owning this space, of course, is if you can actively campaign there. But election violence can be used to prevent that sort of campaigning. So that's actually what we've seen in in many of the examples that I use in the book in Africa that is often referred to as no go zones. So this idea that there are certain areas that belong to a political party and the very even existence of another party in that area is seen as some sort of some sort of violation and it's it's a big problem because that basically means that we have what I would refer to as subnational authoritarianism and election violence can really be used to to create those sort of systems. But it can also be used in other ways, so this is also what we've seen, particularly from government parties, is that election violence can be used as a way to forge an entry into these places where the party might not be very strong and reassert our national control over opposition enclaves. So the argument that I'm making in the book is that we should think about this election violence as special, as special, a territorial tool, rather than a tool that is directed towards individual voters.

And just to be clear, the first type of electoral violence where it's being used to essentially scare potential opponents out of the area that can be used either by basically incumbent or opposition parties?

Absolutely. So it is often assumed that because a lot of the literature has shown that opposition areas have high levels of violence before elections. That is often seen as as proofs that there is targeted incumbent aggressions against these opposition areas, and I'm I'm not contending that, but actually what I did find in my research was that actually a lot of this violence is also perpetrated by the opposition against the incumbent party as it's trying to campaign in those areas. So you have often very sort of cycles of election violence and increasing levels of election violence in those opposition areas because they become contests between the local opposition party that has pretty strong repressive capacity within their own strong notes and an incumbent party that has the nationalized capacity for violence to perpetrate it in these opposition areas.

And actually I think that one of the things I want to highlight right is that is you're providing us with two insights that are really important. One is this delinking of ethnic homogeneity or ethnicity and localism, right. So you make a very clear argument and I think a very compelling one that as you said, you can have competition for control over space or over territory and that it's not simply the same thing as just simply saying well, because this is an ethnic group and there's relatively large areas that are ethnically homogeneous that we just expect this, right. So I think that's a really important, important distinction. And it nicely fits with some of the evidence that GLD has collected in the past, which actually shows a lot more heterogeneity in areas where we tend to think of them as being Tyler to Booker like we think of them as being homogeneous, but they're actually not in terms of actual populations living there. So I really appreciated that distinction, and I think it's, it's an important one to to keep in mind. And then. This other one, which was about, not all electoral violence, is perpetrated by incumbents, right. And I think that's another turn away from what might be people's knee jerk reactions or expectations in the absence of the kind of clear evidence that you provide so. Just think it's worth highlighting those two points. You're essentially showing us a dynamic of electoral violence that comes from the the parties, strategies and you, you very clearly say, OK, this is strategic, who can perpetrate this and then want to talk a little bit about, you know, if this violence doesn't necessarily come from incumbents. But who does it come from in terms of the actual perpetration of it?

Yeah, if you would allow me. Ellen, I I just want to talk a little bit about this concept of strategic because I think the concept is sometimes misunderstood. So yes, I am making the argument to say that election violence is usually strategic. So what does that mean? So that doesn't necessarily mean that every instance of election violence is planned by a centrally placed political actor and carried out exactly how in the way that this actor wants. So I I like to use the example of January 6th as I think a very clear example of how I think about strategic violence. Was January 6th strategic well and what would we need to show in order to say that it was strategic? Would it mean that Donald Trump personally told these people to trespass into the capital? Or was it enough the fact that he actually just sent the signals that? Not only was this acceptable, but encouraged right by using rhetoric that had the potential to mobilize people in a violent way. And that's often what happens in these elections as well. So from a legal point of view, it's very hard to say that this particular politician strategically planned this, this, this Act act of violence. But they send signals, they mobilize, they equip party activists or cadres so that they can actually perpetrate this violence. That's what I mean with strategic. So who are the people who are perpetrating the violence? Well, in both of the cases. This the typical perpetrator will be a young, unemployed or underemployed man who will be loosely affiliated with the political party in Zambia. They're often referred to as cadres. They go by by other terms in in Malawi, but these are not necessarily party members. These are people that are paid by people in the political party to provide that sort of repressive capacity for the violence, so that is what we see in, in, in most of these cases, there's a very interesting story to tell about the the culture of chapters in Zambia, which is longer story that we can come back to if you want to. But really shows how, how, how violence has become increasingly entrenched in the Zambian example. In Malawi, it's a little bit less organised and a little bit less wide spread. So that's the first sort of category of perpetrators. The other one is the state itself and this is particularly true in the Zambian case where the government and the PF had a pretty strong grip of the police and used the police in in a very targeted way in order to repress opposition. So we saw at several instances how particularly violence was targeted towards opposition party campaigns. And it seems to have been used particularly in in spaces where the opposition was not supposed to campaign. The most famous example was the shooting of a party activist in Lusaka during the 2016 election.

Actually, I do want to hear a little bit more about what you see as the distinction between Malawi and Zambia. So you've just made the case here and and you talked a little bit about in the book about how in some ways these are quite similar cases, right. But in other times you draw out distinctions between the two. So can you give us a sense of how we might compare them and maybe how they fit into the broader set of African cases?

Yeah. First of all, I should say that when people hear that I study election violence in Malawi and Zambia, they get a little bit surprised because none of these cases have been particularly highlighted in the election violence literature, and that is actually one of the reasons I wanted to study these cases from that perspective because we know quite a lot about cases like Nigeria and Kenya, these are cases where we have very high level high scale violence, but we know much less about other African demographics. Sees where the violence might be more low scale, but one interesting thing when you look at both of these cases, you can see that very few people die during elections. But if you look at data, like for instance, the data provided by the Afro barometer, you can see that a lot of people who participate in these elections are very afraid of violence when they exercise their democratic rights. So in Zambia, for instance, about 40% of the population say that they are very afraid of violence during elections and more than 60% say that they feel some level of fear during elections. So clearly it's an important factor. So there are similarities between the two cases, but there are also differences. So in terms of similarities, the most important similarity is that they have very similar structures of political mobilization. So both of these cases are examples of what I refer to as geographically polarized electoral systems, very competitive at the national level, and not particularly competitive at the local level. So in both of these cases, you see this mobilization of area rather than individuals, regionalism is a very important political cleavage. In both these cases, I argue that in both these cases this is possibly more important than ethnicity itself, so they have a lot of similarities in how we can think about what would be the structure of violence, what would be the incentives for violence. However, they vary in terms of the capacity for violence, particularly from the incumbent party. So the two elections that I compare in the book are the 2016 Zambian election and the 2014 Malawian election. So Malawi was a very special case because in 2014, the President was Joyce Banda, she had never been personally elected to the office. She became the president because her predecessor died in office just a couple of years before the action. She didn't have a strong party, she had created a new party just a couple of years earlier. And the way that she sent it to the Presidency meant that she did not have the normal advantages of incumbency that we are used to in the African examples. She was also very constrained by donors and a number of other constrains. So this meant that she didn't have much of that sort of central coercive capacity or the PP. Her party did not have the sort of central course capacity that many African incumbent regimes have. That is a big difference with PF. So PF had a much stronger position in power. They had much more control over the military, the police. So this means that they were able to to perpetrate violence strategically, not only from a local perspective but also nationally. So we see much more of that sort of nationally orchestrated violence in the Zambian case than in Malawi. Instead in Malawi, we see truly sort of local patterns of election violence, where whatever party is the strong party locally tends to be the one that perpetrates a lot of the violence. So those are quite different dynamic.

So I want to add a third case into the mix and get your get your reflection on it right, which is of course the case of the US because as I was reading I kept having the picture of kind of the red States and the blue States in my mind. And even things that we think of as being the purple states, if you really zoom in on them are often blue state capitals or larger cities surrounded by red more rural areas. So depending on what level you're looking, you could say, OK, well, we also have a degree of non-competitive areas or localities within a competitive system. So tell me if I'm off base, tell me, how I should think about the lessons of your book with regards to for example the US?

I really like that question. So I want to be clear and say that I want to make a couple of contributions in this book. One is about election violence, but one is also more broadly about electoral mobilization. The US is different than these African cases in, in some respects. One is that arguably functional cleavages tend to be a little bit stronger. Things like social class and other things seem to be a little bit stronger in the American case than maybe in the two African cases that I study here. But I definitely think that this idea of thinking about space as an important factor in political mobilization is quite important also for the American case. So I've often been thinking about that when we have elections in America. So one thing that struck me as a European in America, is that Americans love to manifest their political association. They don't vote, but they love to put the yard sign out in their in their garden to show what party they support. So it's an interesting thing when you drive around, especially suburbs and rural areas in America during elections, you can really see how the political affiliations shift spatially over space, because you can look at these, right. Since I live in East Lansing, which is a college town, and I live just next to campus, basically where you can refer to as a professor's ghetto, so everyone around where I live is a professor, so you can, you can imagine the sort of political leanings that people have here during the last elections. Basically every single house had their Biden Harris sign out, there was one house that had a Trump sign, but they they had problems with vandalism of that sign actually. So I was thinking quite a lot during that election, what is the purpose of these signs? So clearly it's not about telling us that there is a guy called Joe Biden running for president. We all know that the signs don't contain any information about what this Joe Biden wants to do. It just says Joe Biden, Biden, Harris, right. I think that those yard signs are there to convey a sense of identity and a sense of local identity and giving the sense that people like us, people who live here, we vote for this person. And that is the interesting thing with the sociology of voting, right? I mean it's it's a lot about the identities that you have and I don't have a yard sign actually in my yard. It's not part of my culture. But after a while I almost felt that maybe we need to put one out, otherwise they will think we're Trump supporters. So that's really what it does. And I think, you know, this is why space is so important. At some point we create a sense of what is the party that is representing people like me. And if we think about elections as particularly a contest between different regional interests, the question is what party is it that really represents this region? In Africa, most parties are not very old, they're not very established, they don't have very strong connection to, you know, grassroots. So mobilization has to happen on an election to election basis. And this is where these campaigns become really important and parties they really have to show that we are the party that people like you should be voting for. And that's why this, this existence in space, the the ability to control space becomes so incredibly important. And of course, the important difference between the US and many African countries as well is that much more of the inflammation, much more of the communication is local rather than not. So that's an also an important distinction between the two.

It's interesting when you talk about the, the Trump supporter who had to take their side down because they kept getting vandalized, you could almost see that as a manifestation of the first type of electoral violence, right? I mean, we're not necessarily sort of clear that it's party cadres who are taking it down or violating it, right. But it is a notion of this doesn't belong and therefore you can't have the sign.

Yeah, totally. Totally. I mean the the distinction is not, yeah, absolutely, it's a very mild form, but it's it's adjacent, yeah. And you know, interestingly, this is how a lot of election violence has actually actually escalates in the in, in the countries that I study. So particularly in Malawi, there's this, there is this tradition of setting out party flags. So if you come into a village during an election time in in Malawi, the parties will put out their flags and that's a very physical manifestation of territoriality, showing that we are able to control this area, we're able to put out the flags, but we're also able to defend the flags here, and a lot of the violent episodes that I I saw in in these cases was basically fights over these flags, who could put the flags out? Uh, the other parties trying to to to, uh, to take them down and then you know, uh, violence erupted as as as a consequence of that.

So what does this mean? If I was working for an organization, I want to sort of promote elections and free and fair elections, what would be the lessons that I should take from from your book and your work into the more practitioner or policy world?

So I think that there are a few things that I would like to highlight. One of them is that we need to take low scale violence seriously. So something that I've unfortunately encountered in some of my interactions with people in the policy space, and I can understand why, is that they tend to think about cases like Malawi and Zambia, that election violence is not really a problem. There are not many people who die, and especially some of these people have also worked in places where violence has been much more high scale. But then again, if we think about election violence not as a form of conflict, but it's a form of electoral manipulate, nation and more than 50% of the population say that they're afraid of violence during elections, and we know that that affects electoral participation. We need to take it seriously and I want to go a step further, it's not only a question about the fact that a lot of people feel this fear, but there are also certain categories of people that feel this fear to a higher extent than others. So we know, for instance, that women are more fearful of violence during elections than men. And there is a lot of literature about the often gendered expressions of election violence. So shouldn't you think that it's a big problem if women don't feel like they can actually exercise their democratic rights due to violence, however, low scale? So I think we need to to to take this low scale violence much more seriously and not think of it as a marginal phenomenon because people don't die during elections. The other thing is that we need to think about local solutions to election islands. There are some good examples, I tried to highlight the multi-party liaison committees in Malawi, which I think was a pretty useful exercise in trying to bring local actors together to talk about remedies to violence, try to deescalate violence as it happens, and then a third thing that I really want to highlight as well, is that the research that I do here could not have been carried out without the support of domestic election observers, both as academics and in a lot of the development community, I don't think we give them enough credit for for the work that they do. They are a welcome knowledge and there is so much knowledge that we can collect from working with domestic election observers. But we of of course have to provide the resources to do

so. And we need to put in place the right kind of structures so that we can actually really collect reliable data that is comparable across space, because one thing that I learned in the process is that if you actually work with the election observers and try to collect the data systematically, or space, a completely different picture emerges on the problems of election violence than if you would read newspapers, for instance. Newspapers are not a reliable source if we try to to to create a good diagnosis of the problems of violence, the geographic concentration of violence, there are all kinds of ISIS. So yeah, the takeaways is take these the low scale violence, seriously, work with election observers, and try to find local solutions to escalation of violence.

Fantastic. This is, like I said, it's both a a really insightful book, but it's also been a really, really useful and and insightful discussion. And congratulations.

No Ellen it was really my pleasure. Thank you so much for having me.

Thank you.

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