

Briefings

Reflections on Ghana's Recent Elections

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Ghana's last elections represented a crucial aspect of the transition to multi-party democracy that began with a 'founding' election in 1992 and ushered in the country's Fourth Republic. A second 'confirming' election in 1996 continued that process, and the third, held on 7 December 2000 with a runoff on 28 December 2000, signalled Ghana's commitment to constitutional democracy.

The elections were significant for a number of reasons. They marked the first time in the 43-year history of Ghana that there had been a successful alternation of power and provided a boost for Africa's 'third wave' of democratisation. They also represented the beginning of the post-Rawlings era in Ghanaian politics. After 19 years in power, half of it as a military dictator, Flt. Lt. Jerry John Rawlings (Rtd.) was ineligible for a third term under the Constitution. But the elections were as much a verdict on his performance and popularity as they were a vote on his hand-picked successor and vice president, John E. Atta Mills.

Seven parties contested the elections with the ruling National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the opposition New Patriotic Party (NPP) the leading contenders. In all, more than 6 million Ghanaians out of a population of 18.4 million (60% of the voters on the overbloated register) voted on polling day. It proved the most competitive elections ever held in the post-independence period, and one in which

Rawlings, the non-candidate, campaigned tirelessly for and overshadowed Mills, a former law professor and his party's presidential candidate.

The outcome has been described as historic. John Agyekum Kufour secured the most votes of all the candidates, but failed to win the 50% plus one vote required to have been declared an outright winner in the first round. Three weeks after the first ballot and this time with the support of the rest of the five other parties who had together accounted for some 7% of the votes, Kufour beat Mills by polling 57% of the total valid votes cast.

The traditional strongholds for the NDC and the NPP – the Volta Region and the Ashanti Region, respectively – provided the bulk of support for the main presidential rivals, Kufuor and Mills, in both elections. In the first round, Mill's won 505,614 votes in the Volta Region, roughly 86% of the vote in the multiparty presidential election, increasing it slightly on December 28, during the runoffs to 589,719 votes (88.47%) to Kufuor's 76,839 (11.53%).

Compared with past elections when Rawlings, a native of the Volta Region, was the NDC's presidential candidate, support for Mills in the Volta Region was relatively lower. Nearly 150,000 less voters in the NDC stronghold cast ballots for Mills in the first round than supported President Rawlings in his 1996 re-election bid. Mills' showing nationwide was comparatively poorer than Rawlings. On December 7, Mills polled only 2,895,575 valid votes nationally, whereas Rawlings in 1996 tallied 4,099,760 valid votes, a difference of 1.2 million votes.

As expected, Kufuor generated most of his support in his home region, the Ashanti Region. In the first round, Kufuor received 950,602 valid votes from the Ashanti Region alone, which was over 30% of the 3,131,739 total votes cast for him nationally. In the second round he beat Mills by 768,509 votes in Ashanti, the NPP's traditional base, tallying over 1 million votes in the country's most populous region. In particular, Kufuor scored big in Bantama constituency, dubbed 'Florida' by its constituents and derided by critics as the NPP's vote rigging capital. Kufuor clobbered Mills in Bantama constituency by nearly 89,000 votes in the presidential runoff election, winning 90.4% to 9.59%. On 7 December, Kufuor had demonstrated the NPP's strength in Bantama, defeating the other six contestants by an equally impressive score.

While the pattern of voting in Ashanti and Volta region indicated that the country continues to be polarised along ethnic and regional lines, it is worth noting that regions such as the Central Region, appeared to have resisted ethnic voting. Even though it was Mills' home region he failed to carry the Central Region.

Election 2000 bequeathed to Ghana a new government whose antecedents are liberal democratic with an orientation towards free-market policies, and a more balanced parliament. The third legislature is composed of 100 representatives of the New Patriotic Party, 92 representatives of the National Democratic Congress, 3 members from the People's National Convention (PNC), and 1 member from the Convention People's Party (CPP). The remaining 4 seats are being held by independent candidates. This contrasts with the 1992 parliament which had no real opposition members because opposition parties had boycotted the parliamentary elections after claiming the elections were rigged, and the 1996

parliament which was dominated by the ruling NDC government by 136 seats to 64.

Disappointingly, despite high expectations and efforts by gender activists to get more women elected into Parliament, only 17 women were elected in the parliamentary elections of December 7, representing a reduction from the 19 women elected in the 1996, though marginally better than the 16 who made it into the 1993 Parliament. The number reached 18 following the victory in by-elections of the widow of a candidate in the Asutifi South Constituency who had died before election day. Nine of the 18 women who currently serve in Parliament represent the ruling NPP and the other 9, the opposition NDC. Four of the 18 are serving their third term, seven are in their second term and seven are making their debut in the nation's legislature.

Domestic and international observers pronounced the outcome of the elections generally 'free, fair, and transparent', but the contest for the highest office of the land and for the 200 parliamentary seats on offer were by no means flawless. The electoral process itself was undoubtedly a marked improvement over the 1996 elections, and far better than the controversial 1992 presidential contests and parliamentary elections. But some serious lapses and developments in the pre-election period nearly marred the process. The fact that elections were pulled off with considerable success in Ghana attests perhaps to the maturation of the citizenry, civil society, political parties, the media and more importantly, constitutionality.

One of the first hurdles the Electoral Commission had to confront was controversy over the voter's register that threatened to spark violence among supporters of the NDC and the NPP. The EC commis-

sioner, Dr. Kwadwo Afari-Gyan, publicly admitted that based on recently released population census figures the register was substantially bloated by some 1.5 million potential voters. This was not the first election in Ghana's Fourth Republic where charges of bloating in the register had been levelled against the EC. In 1992 political analysts judged that the playing field was skewed in favour of Rawlings and his party because of a hastily compiled and bloated voters' register, an electoral commission appointed by the former military leader that was largely perceived as beholden to him, and an electoral process open to manipulation. By 1996, however, efforts were made to level out the electoral playing field. An Inter-Party Advisory Committee (IPAC) with representatives from all contesting political parties was formed and with financial support from the international donor community, the EC started to cleanse the registration process by embarking on a pilot photo identification card exercise and a new compilation of the voters register.

In 2000, the EC sought, together with other anti-rigging proposals, to extend the use of photo ID cards to cover the entire nation and to disallow the use of thumbprint cards that had been used as proof of voter identification in most areas of the country during the two previous elections. But the ruling NDC party was opposed to a total ban on thumb print cards, arguing that the EC had been unable to issue all potential voters with ID cards and was in danger of disenfranchising thousands of rural dwellers who were their strongest supporters. The opposition parties countered that the reason the NDC was opposed to photo IDs was because it planned to rig by having non-Ghanaians from neighbouring African countries impersonate names on the register and that without photo identification it would be difficult to thwart their efforts. The Supreme Court decided, in a unanimous decision, against the EC and allowed for both photo and thumbprint

identification. In retrospect this was a non-issue as electoral information suggests very few voters voted with thumbprint cards, an indication also that perhaps the EC had after all reached practically all potential voters with photo IDs.

Persistent fear of vote rigging and lack of confidence in the balloting process led to calls by some political parties for the adoption of a system of limited voting hours. Dubbed erroneously as the 'OAU method' the system requires voters to first assemble to check on their names in the voter register, wait around until a specified time and then line up to vote. No one arriving after voting had commenced at the specified time would be eligible to vote. This scheme was used in the 1998/99 elections in Nigeria and was thought to have helped prevent double or multiple voting. However, this proved infeasible as changing voting time would have required changes in Ghana's electoral laws and coming late as the proposal did, it was impossible to effect the needed legal changes.

Even the mundane matter of setting a date for the elections proved contentious. The original December 8 date was apparently based on the EC's misinterpretation of the 1992 Constitution that elections should be held at least '30 days' before Parliament stands dissolved and 'not later than one month' before the president's tenure of office ends. On technical grounds ruling party officials challenged the constitutional basis of this date, and were supported by interests that pointed out that the EC's original date fell on a Friday in the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Some ruling party elements also canvassed for a change in the date on the basis of bizarre numerological and superstitious calculations that saw the date as advantageous to a NPP/Kufour victory (the date coincided with Kufour's birthday). Matters were not helped when those who wanted to retain the date were branded as intolerant religious bigots. The EC executed a volt face and eventu-

ally changed the date to December 7. Although the opposition accused the EC of pandering to the ruling government, the new date was accepted.

Perhaps more alarming in the last few weeks leading up to the elections was the escalation in the activities of the security forces. Over two consecutive weeks the Ghana armed forces conducted military exercises in the capital to 'test their combat readiness' in case of external attack. At the same time four different attacks on the media fed existing paranoia that the status quo was bent on intimidating their detractors and hanging on to power. In the first incident, a journalist with a private newspaper was arrested on the orders of the Deputy Minister for Defence after the reporter had telephoned the Minister to verify a story alleging he had pulled a gun on a security guard at a filling station. The second involved a private radio station in the Brong Ahafo Region which was cordoned off by the military after it had been ordered to shut down by the Regional Security Council for allegedly airing inciting statements by the NPP parliamentary candidate, raising questions about a military occupation of a private radio station. The third questionable act by security agencies against the media occurred when a regular panellist on GTV, the state-owned television station, was arrested, detained and interrogated by the Bureau of National Investigations (BNI) for comments he made on a breakfast show considered 'insulting' to President Rawlings. And the final incident, also involving the BNI, was the arrest of the publisher of a leading private newspaper for publishing information that allegedly came from stolen diskettes containing confidential material on the NDC campaign.

These incidents raised critical issues of civil rights, media freedom and undermined efforts by the military to improve relations with a civilian population that has for a long time viewed their links

with the ruling government with suspicion. Civilian anxieties about a peaceful transition were also heightened when all but one of six opposition political parties signed a statement accusing Rawlings of threatening the peace and stability of the nation. The parties alleged that the outgoing President was deliberately sowing fear in the electorate through his public utterances, particularly regarding suggestions he made to the military that Ghana would be de-stabilised if power went to the opposition.

In general, fears that there would be wide-spread electoral violence failed to materialise although there were scattered incidents of violence, especially during the run-offs elections. A particularly serious incident occurred in Bawku Central in the Upper East region on 7 December, election day, which led to the death of more than 50 people and injuries to many more.

The campaign itself was largely vibrant and vigorous with low and high moments, well-attended rallies and a blitz of sophisticated advertising that aimed at engaging voters on the issues. A first was chalked when a presidential debate, involving six of the seven presidential candidates, was organised. Citing various reasons including a heavy work schedule, and foreign interference, the NDC candidate boycotted the event. The presidential debate was co-sponsored by the Freedom Forum, an American-based international foundation for press freedom and free speech, the Ghana Journalists Association and the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC), which broadcast the over-subscribed event live. The debate, also beamed by CNN and South African Broadcasting Corporation into millions of homes across the globe, forced the candidates to simultaneously define the issues before a critical voting public. Dominating discussions were economic issues such as the escalating price and decreasing supply of fuel, the \$500 million budget deficit, the declining value

of the monetary unit, affordable education and health care and employment opportunities.

Throughout the election period and especially during actual voting day the media underscored its role as integral to democracy. The state-owned media, accustomed to pandering to ruling party interests, made strenuous efforts to ensure fair and objective coverage of all political parties and their candidates. The GBC published an elaborate set of guidelines agreed to by the political parties and allotted equal media access to all presidential candidates. Each party was given five minutes of free air-time on state television and a total of 15 minutes each morning on two nation-wide radio stations. The state-owned *Daily Graphic* published, for the first time, its guidelines for equal and objective reportage. Most of the private radio stations also provided equal time for party candidates to debate issues or to speak to the electorate and to a limited extent, so did some private newspapers.

Perhaps the media's most shining moments came during polling days when radio stations helped to alert EC officials on electoral problems at polling stations and informed the general public on acts of intimidation particularly in rural areas. The efforts of journalists in providing continuing election results were also seen as largely helpful in keeping the public abreast of polling results and in thwarting alleged efforts at altering results in the more remote polling stations and constituencies.

Media efforts were augmented by the initiatives of election observers formed by civil society organisations. The largest observer group, the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers, comprised over 20 prominent civic bodies such as the Ghana National Union of Teachers, National Union of Ghana Students, Nurses and Midwives Association, Civil Servants Association, the Ghana Bar Association, Ghana Legal Literacy Resources Founda-

tion and the Trade Unions Congress. About 6,000 observers were drawn from these organisations in addition to an additional 5,000 deployed by the Forum of Religious Bodies to monitor the integrity of the polls.

Prospects After the Ballot Box

The outcome of the 2000 elections in Ghana brought renewed optimism that there could be a change in the nation's body politic, as well as an awareness on the part of ordinary citizens that they could make a difference through 'thumbpower' (voting is done by thumb printing against the desired candidate). The promise of change was central to the electioneering process and was captured by the campaign slogans of the two dominant parties. The ruling NDC promised continuity in change, the opposition NPP promised positive change. It is early days yet to pronounce on whether the NPP government has brought about any positive transformations in the lives of Ghanaians, even though the government did receive rave reviews from media and political pundits after its 100 days in office.

Generally, the government appears to have started on the right foot by being open to the media. It has established a media liaison ministry and unlike the past government its officials have generally made themselves available to the media (appearing frequently on radio programs to respond to questions from journalists and the general public).

The new administration has also made an important symbolic shift by resisting turning national events into party rallies and minimising usage of party colours at such state events as the opening of the 3rd Parliament of the 4th Republic, the swearing in of President Kufour and his Vice-President, and the Independence Day's celebration. Beyond symbols of national unity the Kufour administration has also made greater effort at inclusiveness by

appointing a few of its ministers and key government functionaries from opposing political camps, including the presidential candidate of one of the minor parties, the United Ghana Movement, who now serves as the country's energy advisor.

It has also promised to improve the low numbers of women representatives by appointing more women to cabinet than its predecessors. It is not clear whether this expectation may be met. So far only five of 37 persons nominated to become ministers are women. However, the NPP government has overtly signalled they intend to be gender sensitive by setting up a Ministry of Women's Affairs headed by a cabinet level minister to advise government on matters relating to women.

The new government faces enormous challenges. Economically, the new administration must tackle a deteriorating economy, a depreciating currency, low commodity prices on traditional exports such as cocoa and gold, and an out-of-control external and domestic debt estimated at about \$3500 per capita in a country whose GDP per capita is about \$400. Amidst criticism the Government opted to join the Heavily Indebted Poorer Countries Initiative (HIPC). Joining this World Bank/IMF program, which aims to wipe out roughly half of the debt of eligible countries to the developed world, angered many Ghanaians who felt there should have been a public debate if the country was to be officially declared poor and indebted, a label many find deeply offensive.

Having opted for debt relief the government must now prove it is more accountable than its predecessor by controlling corruption in a country where most public officials earn less than a living wage, where resource hungry ruling party and government appointees are faced with serious temptations of self-dealing and other moral hazards, and where pursuing ex-leaders suspected to have

looted national assets is perceived as 'witch-hunting.'

The new administration is also presented with the challenge of national reconciliation and of healing the many social and political divisions left behind by the regimes of JJ Rawlings, as well as the deep social tensions that revealed themselves in an intensely competitive multi-party election. Since very little was done during the eight years of the Rawlings-NDC administration to readdress past human rights abuses and a politically divided nation, pressure for retribution against perpetrators of past human rights violations remains strong. There is neither a consensus on whether to grant clemency to perceived wrongdoers nor a framework for redressing past wrongs and compensating victims, although the government has announced a national reconciliation committee to address the issue.

There are genuine fears over whether the NPP government can avoid provoking uncontrollable or difficult to control constitutional and political crises, for instance over the transition clauses of the 1992 Constitution, and the possibility that JJ Rawlings might return to power through fair or foul means. His party has already threatened to file a lawsuit seeking interpretation over the term limits, arguing that the two-term bar means two consecutive terms rather than a total bar from contesting the presidency.

Finally, before the next elections in 2004 the government has the formidable task of curtailing the negative tendencies and attendant depredations of Ghanaian political culture such as playing the ethnic card, the proclivity towards one-party state and political patronage as well as low political tolerance. Together with the EC, the Kufour administration must also address the serious structural problems regarding not only an undermined voter's register, but the malapportionment

of parliamentary seats. The EC has stated that demarcation of constituencies is 'the root cause of the problem, ' as malpractice begins 'with the demarcation of electoral areas. ' Indeed, a close inspection of Ghana's 200 parliamentary seats, apportioned before the 1992 elections, reveals that some parliamentarians are representing upwards of nine times as many people as other MPs. Figures released by the EC during the elections show some constituencies have less than 14,000 registered voters, whereas others have more than 100,000. With the 2000 census now in place, the EC is constitutionally mandated to redraw the boundaries of parliamentary seats to make sure they are more equally balanced.

In a continent marred by civil wars and political turmoil, Ghana is considered an oasis of peace and stability. The country's successful alternation of power has raised hopes that it will become an example of Thabo Mbeki's African renaissance. But the challenge remains for the new government to work diligently to consolidate the country's impressive democratic achievements and overcome entrenched weaknesses inherent in a political culture that until recently was more illiberal than liberal.

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GNA, 'Allegations of Fraud in Volta Region are False,' *Daily Graphic*, 2 February, 2000, p. 11.

Egyptian Electoral Politics: News Rules, Old Game

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Introduction

Elections have been seen as markers for promoting the possibility of consensus politics. The practice of electoral politics might be perceived as the 'art of inviting the political system to negotiate, bargain, compromise and moderate its otherwise polar stances'. This has led some studies of Egyptian politics to conclude that 'elections have been a mechanism that characterised the building of consensus in the 1980s in Egypt' (El-Mekkawy, 1999). Alternatively, however, the low voter turnout makes elections seem an invalid analytical tool since only mass participation in politics is the major guarantee for safeguarding democracy. Using elections to assess the extent of political liberalisation in Egypt might thus be rather premature as this is a country where voter turnout is extremely low: 10% in urban areas and 50% in the countryside.

This article argues that the 2000 Egyptian elections have been an occasion for negotiations, compromise and moderation of ideological stands over the rules of the political game. This was demonstrated most by a strong representation and success for an Islamic trend. To have the Muslim Brotherhood, an outlawed group unrecognised by the government, enter elections and win seventeen seats, meant that the Islamists had given up radical or extreme positions and decided to play by the rules of the game as set by the Government of Egypt (GoE). The GoE has also responded to the pressures exercised over it to offer guarantees of a fair process thus making compromises on its long-held stand vis-à-vis political liberalisation.