

# GROWING MISTRUST – A THREAT TO DEMOCRACY IN GHANA

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

IN THE UPCOMING ELECTIONS



Growing Mistrust – A Threat to Democracy in Ghana:  
Opportunities and Challenges in the Upcoming General Elections

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Cover photo: Citizens celebrating in Accra 2008 after a peaceful presidential election. Photo: Naeema Campbell, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

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# GROWING MISTRUST – A THREAT TO DEMOCRACY IN GHANA

## OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN THE UPCOMING GENERAL ELECTIONS

In comparison with other African countries, faith in democracy is strong in Ghana. But the legal tussles that followed the last general election in 2012, and the disqualification of some candidates on trifling grounds in the lead-up to this year's presidential elections, has spurred public mistrust. This policy note issues a warning about hate speech, violent demonstrations and macho-men militias.

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The democratic transition that started in Ghana in the early 1990s has made significant progress. Compared to some of its West-African neighbours, Ghana is well ahead, having successfully conducted six elections since 1992. The two leading parties – the ruling National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the opposition New Patriotic Party (NPP) – have at different times won the elections and subsequently formed government. Arguably, a major landmark in the Ghanaian democratic experiment was the successful transfer of power from an elected government to an opposition party in 2008.

Nonetheless, Ghana has its own share of the tensions and conflicts associated with elections. For example, legal tussles over the results of the 2012 presidential elections signalled that some aspects of Ghana's electoral system are susceptible to contestation. Indeed, the nascent Ghanaian nascent democracy still exhibits certain tendencies that suggest a need for improvement.

### Pre-election anxiety

The upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections, scheduled for 7 December, will be the seventh since Ghana's transition from military rule in 1992. The president is elected in a two-round system, while

the 275 members of parliament are elected to single-member constituencies using first-past-the-post voting. Meanwhile, the country has witnessed a mixture of emotions and events especially since the Supreme Court's final ruling on the petition over the results of the 2012 presidential election.

A total of 23 persons have expressed interest in running for the presidency, including eight independent candidates. However, the Electoral Commission (EC) has disqualified 13 of them. Some of the affected candidates resorted to court actions and secured judgments against the decisions of the EC. It is likely that many other disqualified candidates will follow suit. In addition, the country has witnessed several troubling events and trends, including violent speech by candidates and their supporters, rising levels of citizen dissatisfaction and frustration, and the demonstrable predisposition of certain youth groups to resort to violence. All these developments have far-reaching consequences for the course and outcome of the December elections.

By all accounts, the elections will be keenly contested. Neither of the two main parties, NDC and NPP, has won – or by implication, has lost – three consecutive elections. Also, no sitting Ghanaian president has lost an election, and on the last occasion a candidate ran for the third time, on the ticket of one of the major parties, he won. Considering past and present trends,



# Controversies over the last elections

In the 2012 presidential elections, incumbent president John Mahama of NDC was declared winner with 50.7 per cent of the vote, just enough to avoid a run-off against his main challenger Nana Akufo-Addo of NPP. However, disputes about the election procedures left a shadow of doubt hanging over the Electoral Commission (EC).

Firstly, the leader of the newly formed National Democratic Party, Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawlings, was controversially disqualified by EC, claiming that her nomination papers had not been completed before the deadline.

Secondly, on voting day, in many polling stations across the country, there was a breakdown in the biometric voter registration machines used to prevent multiple voting and eliminate “ghost” voters, forcing voting to be extended to the following day.

Thirdly, NPP filed a petition at the Supreme Court, alleging the result was tampered with. The court’s ruling, eight months after the election, dismissed the appeal and stated that President Mahama had been validly elected. But even though the opposition accepted the verdict, the legal challenge still left a negative impact on the credibility of the EC.



A biometric voter registration machine used in the 2012 elections. Photo: Julius Mwunguzi, Commonwealth Secretariat, CC BY-SA 2.0

there are concerns in some circles that the contest between the two main political parties may not produce a clear winner in the first round of the elections. On the other hand, there is the possibility that the elections will take a surprising twist. All these trends have contributed towards heightening pre-election anxiety in Ghana.

## Disappointment in government

The outcomes of the 2012 presidential elections, including the legal battle over the results, raised the stakes for future elections in Ghana. Not unexpectedly, based on the lessons of the 2012 elections, politicians and their supporters are strategising and working with some

novel scenarios in the current electoral environment.

More than in previous elections, there are deep concerns about issues of governance, service delivery, and accountability. A majority of Ghanaians are also worried about the unimpressive performance of the national economy (inflation, rising national debt) and increasing internal insecurity. The government is not seen as having done well in the management of the economy, in spite of the country’s initiation of oil exports. It is estimated that 60 per cent of the current national debt has accrued within the last four years. In addition, the rate of unemployment is quite disturbing, and there is an unprecedented energy crisis.

Also, there is a perception of a high incidence of

corruption. The scandals surrounding governmental projects such as SADA, SUBA and GYEEDA exemplify this unwholesome trend. And the unfolding of a scandal in 2012, popularly known as Woyomegate, involving questionable money transactions to businessman Alfred Agbesi Woyome, a prominent backer of the governing NDC party, caused political turbulence all the way up to former President Atta-Mills's office.

### **Mistrust of the Electoral Commission**

EC has a mandate to conduct free and fair national elections in Ghana. According to Afrobarometer sources, trust in the EC decreased by 22 per cent between 2011/2013 and 2014-15. The NPP's petition against the EC over the results of the 2012 presidential election, in which the petitioners accused the EC of several irregularities in electoral procedures, is quite fresh in the minds of many Ghanaians.

Citizens' perception of the EC as an objective and independent body seems to be eroding fast. Its decision to disqualify presidential candidates from the December polls has not been well received by certain Ghanaians, who claim it to be unfair. Although the EC has pointed to the violation of nomination procedures and requirements, affected candidates have continued to present the EC as being selective in applying the rules. The EC's decisions have generated continuing organised reactions by disqualified candidates, their parties, patrons and sympathisers. Also, recent controversies over the right of access of political parties and their agents to signed collation sheets have made the EC even less popular.

On its readiness for the elections in terms of planning and logistics, self-assessment by the EC indicates a high level of preparedness. For example, the voters' register has been updated to include Ghanaians who have recently turned 18 or who had not registered previously. The EC has also opened the register for scrutiny by the electorate to check their voter information and report irregularities. Polling officials and EC staff have undergone a series of training courses to sufficiently equip them to conduct and supervise the elections. In demonstration of its preparedness, the EC recently announced that it was finalising the procurement of materials for the conduct of the polls. It claimed that it has secured 98 per cent of offshore items to be deployed across the country, and that some of the material has already been transported to the regions.

Notwithstanding these claims, there are mixed feelings among Ghanaians on the performance of

the country's electoral system. In October 2016, for instance, the EC was accused of breach of procedure by an independent parliamentary aspirant from Akatsi South District in South East Ghana. He claimed that the EC had illegally appointed a returning officer for the constituency without following due process. While it appears the EC is working hard to address technical issues, there are mixed reactions about its claims to be independent and transparent. Although unsubstantiated, accusations like the one above can be quite unsettling before, during and after the elections.

Injunctions and counter-injunctions by parties in dispute could disrupt the election timeline, especially if some of the decisions and actions of the EC are challenged in court. This, together with the logistical challenges, might compel the EC to consider postponing the elections.

### **Educating voters and mapping hotspots**

Several civil society groups and international development partners have become increasingly visible in the Ghanaian electoral process. Also, among stakeholders there are coordinated efforts aimed at the early identification and mitigation of risks of election-related conflict. For example, the National Peace Council Board was inaugurated with the mandate to play an interlocutory role to steer the election in the right direction. Similarly, the National Commission on Civic Education (NCCE) is carrying out awareness activities to educate the electorate on election-related issues.

This broad spectrum of stakeholders, including civil society organisations, media and development partners has helped in sensitising citizens on the need to ensure that Ghana wins by avoiding acts that will trigger violence and compromise peace. In this regard, several peace campaigns have been launched. The National Peace Council is collaborating with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and other partners to organise a peace concert in November 2016. Others are making a case for more women and people with disabilities to be granted equal political exposure.

As the December elections draw near, the last lap of campaigning has generated intense political tension across Ghana. Internal security is threatened by a number of election-related risks. Ghana Police Service has identified over 5,000 hotspots where violence is possible ahead of the elections. This assessment came as a follow-up to the EC's warning that violence was possible in nearly 30 per cent of the country's 275 constituencies. Already the police have deployed personnel to



undertake an environmental evaluation of the country and decide on appropriate steps.

The Women's Situation Room (WSR), an organisation of women trained as special election observers, have identified potential hotspots for electoral violence. The Volta Region in the South East tops the list with 14 hotspots, followed by Northern Region (13), Western Region (12) and Greater Accra (12).

### Concerns about macho men

Some parts of Ghana have witnessed clashes between the youth groups associated with the ruling party and

main opposition parties. The security services mostly intervene to prevent escalation into bloodshed. There have been other threats that were associated with the activities of politicians and their parties operating outside electoral regulations. For example, there was the declaration by the Northern regional chairman of the NPP that the party was going to deploy well-built macho men to police the ballot for the party on election day. The statement, delivered at a political rally, constituted an attempt to use unofficial armed groups by political actors/parties. The statement was generally condemned and earned the chairman an invitation



Polling station in Accra, December 2012.

Photo: Julius Mucunguzi, Commonwealth Secretariat, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

## Vigilante groups disturbing the electoral process

In the past, as well as in the run-up to this year's balloting, election campaigns in Ghana have occasionally been disrupted by so called *macho men*, vigilante groups who have taken upon them the self-appointed role of maintaining law and order at rallies and polling stations. There have been cases where these macho men have been used by politicians to create violence and

disturbance before and during elections.

More or less loosely tied to the main contesting parties, NDC and NPP, are other vigilante groups like the *Azorka Boys*, named after the Northern regional chairman of NDC, Chief Sofo Azorka, and the *Bamba Boys*,

named after Alhaji Moctar Bamba, national organiser of NPP. Although attempts have

been made from national top-level to disband and denounce affiliation with these groups, clashes between them have caused electoral tensions around the country.



from the police. With this event, there are renewed concerns and fears about having macho men around during the December elections.

The role of macho men in Ghana's electoral process is not new. In the 2012 elections, the concept of Macho Men for Peace was floated following the formation of the Macho Men for Good and Justice Association, a group of bodybuilders in the Ashanti Region supposedly committed to ensuring peace during elections. In that instance, the attempt by the group to partner with police in ensuring peaceful elections was justifiably rejected. A similarly feared group is the Azorka Boys, a political vigilante group that has been publicly condemned as having the potential to create electoral violence.

Also, there are incidents of violence associated with intra-party disputes. For example, the main opposition party, the NPP, experienced internal strife, which led to the suspension of its chairman and general secretary. This friction was exacerbated by the assassination of one of the party's regional chairmen. The intensification of intra- and interparty contestations is likely to engender threats and/or actual physical violence. Moreover, there have been incidents of tampering with and destruction of election campaign materials and the property of political parties. Both the majors, NPP and NDC, have been cited as perpetrators and victims of these incidents.

### **Hate speech and social media**

The use of hate speech by politicians and their supporters on public platforms, in print and through electronic media is on the rise. One recorded instance involved the NPP chairman for the Northern Region calling on supporters to maim any person who snatched ballot boxes during the elections. In addition, Ghana has recorded a rise in the use of social media to spread disparaging information about political opponents. Because of the difficulties of clear attribution, social media offer a platform for the dissemination of materials that can be injurious to peace. Not long ago, a student of the University of Ghana was chastised for posting disparaging election-related comments about a particular ethnic group on WhatsApp. Statements by the student subsequently went viral on social media, instigating an online storm of insults and accusations involving people defending or condemning the initial statement.

### **Key recommendations**

While it should be acknowledged that Ghana has been able to manage disputes and conflicts that have arisen before, during and after previous elections, there are compelling reasons not to gamble with the country's national security and political stability now. It is important for election observers and stakeholders in the international community to be aware of and address the following risk factors:

- Disqualification of certain presidential candidates, and the ongoing court actions and judicial decisions against the EC, have given rise to a general feeling that EC is a biased umpire that is not fair across the board in its dealings with political parties.
- Grievances carried over, and unresolved agitations from previous elections have resulted in violent conflicts involving "militant groups" supported by political parties. Furthermore, some citizens feel they have not had a fair share of the 'national cake' as a result of their not belonging to the ruling party. In some cases these malcontents have revolted and engaged in acts of violence. In certain areas, party offices and party property have been destroyed during these protests. Lack of employment opportunities, especially for the youth, leaves many of them with time on their hands to cause – or be led into – trouble.
- The use of intemperate language causes political friction and misunderstanding. On media platforms, politicians have been known to verbally abuse opponents, triggering retaliatory insults. Security experts caution that the proliferation of illicit small arms, chieftaincy disputes and the activities of terrorist groups in West Africa can easily create the opportunity for violence to thrive before, during and after the elections. The government, EC and other relevant agencies must put in place a system to check the use of hate speech and abusive communications by politicians and their supporters.
- The success of the December elections is the responsibility of all the stakeholders especially the candidates, parties, civil society groups, police and development partners. There should be regular interactions among them to enable periodic analysis of the electoral environment as well as prompt attention to matters that might have far-reaching adverse consequences for the elections.





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## About the Author



NAI POLICY NOTES is a series of short briefs on policy issues relevant to Africa today, intended for strategists, analysts and decision makers in foreign policy, aid and development. They aim to inform public debate and to generate input into the sphere of policymaking. The opinions expressed in the policy notes are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute.

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