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Ghana's elections expose cracks in its democratic success story

The country is often considered a 'beacon of democracy' in West Africa. But the latest elections have tarnished that image

Some underlying electoral inconsistencies, the increasing polarisation of its electorate and the partisanship of key institutions in West Africa's so-called 'beacon of democracy' couldn't go unnoticed. Ghana's presidential and parliamentary elections on 7 December have shown that the quality of democracy goes beyond just an orderly organised voting process. The opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) has publicly announced its refusal to accept the results of the election on the basis of alleged electoral fraud. It plans to fully audit the results and possibly file a lawsuit against the outcome of the election.

But first things first. The candidates John Dramani Mahama from the social democratic NDC and incumbent president Nana Akufo-Addo from the centre-right New Patriotic Party (NPP) aren't strangers to each other. It was Mahama who in 2012 had an edge over Akufo-Addo and became president for a four-year term. In 2016 Akufo-Addo campaigned again and defeated the NDC and Mahama.

Ghana's 'Fourth Republic', a term used to describe the post-military rule democratic system since 1992, is known to function as a political pendulum where power is changing hands every 8 years: 1992-2000 NDC, 2000-2008 NPP, 2008-2016 NDC. This continuity of change is an essential element for the legitimacy of the Ghanaian democracy. According to Ghana's Electoral Commission (EC), President Akufo-Addo received more than 51 per cent of votes whereas contender Mahama has received more than 47 per cent.

Pre-election opinion polls showed that Akufo-Addo was quite popular amongst young Ghanaians and was considered more competent in fighting corruption whereas most social media polls conducted by several media houses in Ghana put Mahama ahead of Akufo-Addo as the potential winner of the 2020 election.

A new development in Ghana's democracy

What's interesting however is that the NPP has lost many parliamentary seats to the NDC and Akufo-Addo does no longer have a clear majority in Ghana's parliament. This is due to the fact that some of the electorate applied a so-called 'skirt and blouse' voting pattern in which the first vote is allotted to the presidential candidate of one party and the second vote to the parliamentary candidate of the other party. The comparatively strong result for parliamentary candidates of the NDC can be interpreted as people's dissatisfaction with the reality on the local level – joblessness, corruption, lack of basic infrastructure, etc. It is a message to the NPP that their manifesto promises have neither materialised nor trickled down to the local level. The demand for a political alternative – focusing on inclusive development, accountability and transparency – is growing.

Ghana is a multi-party democracy. A total of 27 parties and nine presidential candidates participated in this year's election. Yet, the share of votes that the two biggest parties NPP and NDC received was more than 98 per cent. The support bases for NDC and NPP are relatively equal in size – this seemed to work as a stabiliser for the balance of power in Ghana. Yet in times of uncertainty, this can also lay the ground for conflicts.

The NDC won in 9 regions out of the 16 regions in Ghana – among others the Greater Accra region, the political, economic and administrative centre of the country. Members of both parties were present at every voting booth to check each other's actions. This vigilance, apart from the activities by international election observers from the EU and the Ghanaian Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO), has ensured some level of due diligence in the voting and the subsequent ballots counting process. Nonetheless, there is increasing evidence of problems with collation and 'padding of figures' in favour of the NPP.

Challenges to Ghanaian democracy

NDC has criticised the incumbent NPP government for misusing its power on numerous occasions. It has attributed unmatched levels of corruption to president Akufo-Addo and the people from his extended family who have been brought into high positions or offered profitable government contracts. The Special Prosecutor Martin Amidu, who was appointed to investigate and prosecute corruption-related cases involving politicians and politically exposed persons, resigned from office just a

couple of days before the election – signalling the NPP government's lack of commitment to the fight against corruption.

NDC has also pointed to the constant weakening and undermining of state institutions by the NPP government and Akufo-Addo. A prominent example is President Akufo-Addo's sacking of the chairperson of the EC Charlotte Osei and the appointment of alleged NPP sympathiser Jean Mensa in 2018.

Despite all these problems, both candidates have campaigned extensively all over Ghana and have urged people relentlessly to make full use of their democratic right to vote.

The EC enjoys a crucial constitutional role and is in charge of all public elections. It has made a significant effort to compile a new voter's register for the 2020 elections. According to the NDC however the new voter's register is not only redundant, as a properly arranged register already existed, it is above all else disadvantaging NDC voters. This may be borne out of the claim by NPP Majority Leader in Parliament that after the creation of the new register it would be difficult for the NDC to win any election in Ghana. These elections have shown that a politically biased EC was not able to deliver a credible election outcome that is accepted by all parties.

In just four years, Akufo-Addo has appointed eleven out of the current 17 justices of Ghana's Supreme Court, which has resulted in an 'imbalance# in the highest judicial body of the country. Critics emphasise that judicial decisions are increasingly taken in favour of NPP interests.

Despite all these problems, both candidates have campaigned extensively all over Ghana and have urged people relentlessly to make full use of their democratic right to vote. This has led to a historically high turnout rate of almost 80 per cent of all registered voters. The atmosphere between the two big parties and their 'flagbearers', a term used for party leaders contesting elections in Ghana, Mahama and Akufo-Addo was rather heated than hostile.

A window of opportunity for NDC

From the early days of the campaign, both NDC and NPP have emphasised the need to ensure a peaceful and fair election. The government has deployed more than 60,000 police and military personnel to safeguard the voting process on the ground. Some commentators criticised this decision for being particularly intimidating

against potential NDC voters. In the end, the Election Day was overshadowed by more than 60 violent incidents and five deaths – it is difficult to say that it has been a peaceful process.

Numerous TV and radio channels, newspapers and internet publishers have covered the election and campaigns of both candidates. The liveliness of Ghanaian media is considered one of the core elements for the stability of the country's democracy. However, there are some indications that a majority of media houses are controlled, or, rather influenced by people around Akufo-Addo. This has resulted in a comparatively larger media coverage for the incumbent president during the election campaign.

Ghana's election demonstrates that there are some fissures in its democratic success story. In order to prevent these fissures from becoming even bigger, independent institutions that can withstand the clear political divide need to be revitalised. For the NDC, this election signifies a window of opportunity to distinguish itself through the quality of its parliamentary work and an alternative political agenda which focuses on real inclusive development beyond catchy phrases. It should lead by example and establish a large societal coalition of watchdogs of democracy. Ghanaians are rightfully proud of their democracy – it will require joint efforts to bring it back on track.



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