

Briefing Paper

Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-GHANA)

Volume 8 Number 4

January 2008

Ghana's Fourth Republic: Championing the African Democratic Renaissance?

by

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■ Introduction

Freedom, prosperity, and unity were the main goals of Ghanaian independence. Unfortunately, much of Ghana's 50-year experience with nationhood was dominated by false starts as well as twists and turns. The lofty dreams turned largely nightmarish in much of the first 30 years of Ghanaian life as an independent nation. The "Black Star" of Africa became a poster child of failing African state, cursed with incompetent, corrupt and repressive governments presiding over political instability, stagnant economy, broken down infrastructure and decaying society.

However, in recent years Ghana appears to have returned to her earlier promise. The 50th anniversary of Ghana's independence has been taking place against a highly auspicious background. The country has generally stayed the course with economic and political reform since the 1980s. Significantly, it has been politically stable for nearly 15 years, and sustained positive, though still modest, economic growth (currently in 6 percent per annum range) and achieved significant poverty reduction).

The lecture seeks to put these achievements in the perspective of the Ghanaian and Africa's historical quest for renewal in the 21st century. It reviews Ghana's experience in the 4th Republic (i.e., since 1992), highlighting strides in democracy-building, and analyzes the extent to which it portends hope for sub-Saharan Africa.

■ From "freedom" to repression and stagnation

Ghana's decolonization process and eventual independence on March 6, 1957 aroused heady excitement among Ghanaians, people of African descent, and indeed, many others

across the world. Nkrumah's exhortation to his countrymen - "Seek ye first the political kingdom, and all things shall be added unto thee" - resonated deeply with the peoples of the colony then called the Gold Coast. The people of the so-called "model colony" and their numerous sympathizers around the world harbored high expectations for freedom, prosperity and national unity.

■ The turn towards authoritarianism

However, these high hopes for democracy, prosperity and unity at independence were not sustained. Early political and economic progress in Ghana in the late 1950s and early 1960s under Dr Kwame Nkrumah and the Convention People's Party (CPP) proved short-lived. The country was experiencing severe difficulties both on the economic and political fronts when key elements from the military and police overthrew the Nkrumah-CPP administration on February 24, 1966.

On the economic front, growing shortage of foreign exchange, mismanagement and corruption had frustrated Ghana's dreams of socialist industrialization. A severe balance of payment problem, inflation as well as consumer goods and job scarcity had begun to emerge.

On the political front, Ghanaian politics had begun to turn authoritarian. Ghana jettisoned the Westminster-democracy type of government inherited from colonial Britain in favor of dictatorial government - which featured wide constitutional authority for the government/president to detain persons without trial, gave the president the power to nullify court decisions and sack judges. Within a few years of nationhood, Ghana had officially become a one-party state, with life tenure conferred on the president.

A succession of post-Nkrumah/ CPP military and short-lived civilian governments from 1966-1992 held sway in Ghanaian politics. They were the National Liberation Council (NLC) from 1966-69; the Dr Kofi Busia-Progress Party (1969-72); the National Redemption Council (NRC), later reconstituted as Supreme Military Council (SMC) I from 1972-1978; the Supreme Military Council II from 1978 to 1979; the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) between June and September 1979; Dr Hilla Limann-People's National Party (PNP), 1979-81 and; the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) from 1981-1993. But they largely proved unable to return Ghana to the path of economic prosperity and political stability or even national unity.

Indeed, by the late 1970s and early 1980s Ghana had become a veritable symbol of the "failing" and/or collapsing African state, improvident government and decaying society. Its economy was stagnant, the fiscal situation could be best described as bankrupt; it faced acute shortage of foreign exchange, broken down public infrastructure, roads were in acute state of disrepair, shops literally empty of essential consumer items and spare parts, trained manpower was in an accelerated flight out of the country, especially in the crucial areas of education and health, and politics was characterized by bloody coups, counter-coups and attempted coups, violent reprisals as well as repression.

■ Reviving the Ghanaian dream

Ghana's economic turnaround began in the mid 1980s, when the country (under the radical populist Flight Lt. Jerry Rawlings and the quasi-military PNDC) initiated neo-liberal economic reforms. While the reforms achieved significant success (especially in terms of macro-economic improvement and infrastructural rehabilitation), they were largely unpopular and provoked considerable disaffection between the Rawlings government and many of its radical populist supporters.

Moreover, the reforms were undertaken under a fairly severe brand of authoritarian rule (political opponents and dissidents detained without trial or jailed by kangaroo courts, chased into exile or worse still extra-legally killed). The Ghanaian political climate had become extremely chilly and a "culture of silence" said to be prevailing.

Against this background of modest economic recovery combined with deep authoritarian rule, Ghana joined other African countries in liberalizing its politics in the early 90s and embarked on a formal democratic transition in 1991 and 1992. The transition included the formulation of a liberal democratic constitution in 1992 - the 1992 Constitution. This was followed by multi-party elections and return to constitutional rule with an

elected administration. Ghana was thus, reborn as a 4th Republic under the 1992 Constitution on January 7, 1993 (which provided for President and Parliament elected through universal adult suffrage and a full bill of rights. It also imposed checks and balances and placed limits on executive powers, and established an independent judiciary, independent ombudsman/human rights/anti-corruption and electoral commissions).

The early 1990s democratic transition began the process of bringing Ghana back on track to the fulfillment of her long-deferred national independence dream of *political freedom and economic prosperity in a united country*. It also began a process of aligning Ghanaian politics with the process of economic rationalization and pro-market reforms earlier initiated under the quasi-military Flt. Lt Jerry John Rawlings-led PNDC dictatorship.

■ Democratic progress in the 4th Republic

To be sure, Ghana's early 1990s transition to democratic rule had been highly flawed. In fact, it was denigrated as "transition without change" for a number of reasons, including the fact that some provisions of the 1992 Constitution appeared to have been tailored to enable the departing military ruler to retain some of the autocratic powers it wielded under military rule; "permanent transitional" provisions had been inserted in the 1992 Constitution giving blanket immunity to Flt Lt Rawlings and his AFRC and PNDC governments; the same Chairman Rawlings of the erstwhile quasi-military PNDC had become the elected president of Ghana, with many of the ministers from his previous government retained as ministers in the new Rawlings-led National Democratic Congress (NDC) administration. Worse still, the boycott of the transition parliamentary elections by the main opposition parties (in protest against perceived rigging of the presidential elections) created two major problems: the first Parliament of the 4th Republic became a de-facto one-party legislature (with 198 of the 200 seats in the legislature controlled by the ruling party and parties formally aligned with it, leaving only 2 independents); and the new Parliament whose Speaker was ex-Deputy Chairman of the erstwhile PNDC appeared to behave largely as a rubber-stamp Parliament.

Nonetheless, the return to democratic and multi-party rule in January 1993 paved the way for significant democratic developments. Notably, it opened the way for substantial and improvements in the enjoyment of basic human rights (jails became free of illegally detained Ghanaians, opposition parties operated more freely, and civil society became more active). Media censorship was substantially relaxed and the

airwaves largely liberalized (though criminal libel laws continued to be enthusiastically enforced in the meantime). In addition, significant reforms were made in election administration (resulting in the introduction of transparent ballot boxes, independent election observers, party agent, and presence at polling stations).

Not surprisingly, improvements in the political climate since the early 1990s and the above mentioned reforms in the electoral process helped to make the second transition election in December 1996 relatively more competitive. Thus, while the Rawlings-NDC group secured victory in the 1996 presidential and parliamentary elections, the opposition New Patriotic Party (NPP) performed creditably in presidential elections and secured a respectable presence in Parliament (67 out of 200 seats).

Further democratic progress in Ghana brought Ghana to its third transition multi party election in December 2000. In a historic development, the opposition New Patriotic Party (NPP) and its presidential candidate, John Agyekum Kufuor, won the tightly contested 2000 polls. The NPP secured 102 of the 200 parliamentary seats, and its candidate won 57 percent of the popular vote in the second round presidential elections. This paved the way for inauguration of new government on January 7, 2001 and the beginning of a post-Rawlings phase in Ghanaian politics under the administration of J. A. Kufuor and the NPP.

The peaceful hand over of power from the Rawlings-NDC government to the Kufuor-NPP on January 7 2001 was truly a landmark event in Ghana's search for democratic development. It was the first time an elected president was handing over to another elected president; and the first time an elected president was handing over power to an elected president who belonged to another party. It confirmed the efficacy of the electoral system, viability of multi party competition, and resilience of the 1992 constitution, especially presidential term limits, and the institutions established under the same constitution.

But that very positive also did bring the country to a new and uncertain political juncture. Among other things, it brought up a number of crucial challenges for which there were no precedents, notably, how to deal with ex-President and his entourage (who had controlled politics in Ghana for nearly 20 years) as well as his positive and negative legacy. It raised delicate issues such as an appropriate settlement for the former president and other ex-leaders (some of whom had military antecedents and had strong links in the security sector); appropriate sunset arrangements for holdover appointees from the Rawlings administration; demobilization/disarmament of

armed supporters of the former regime; and professionalization and democratization of the military and security agencies.

■ Ghana since 2001

To the credit of the Kufuor-NPP administration and, no doubt, with the cooperation of the main opposition NDC, Ghana has continued to deepen its democratic governance structures and processes. The trend towards credible elections has continued. Ghana's 4th transition elections in December 2004 were peaceful and generally clean. The country is heading for its 5th regularly scheduled polls in December 2008 and they are expected to be generally peaceful, clean and credible.

There has been substantial expansion in the enjoyment of civil liberties and media freedoms (especially following the repeal of criminal libel law in 2001). Ghana now has over 100 independent FM radio stations and about 4 TV stations plus satellite TV (from near state monopoly over broadcast media by 1995). In addition, the state has lifted its control over the public broadcast media.

There have been substantial improvements in the quality of governance in Ghana, especially in terms of transparency in governmental affairs, voice and accountability. The president and/or his ministers have become more open to the media, civil society and the public at large. Moreover, civil-military relations in Ghana have been substantially democratized. The 64th Infantry battalion (that was based at the Castle and appeared to have been run under President Rawlings's personal command) has been integrated into the regular military and no more functions as a parallel army. The military budget has been brought under parliamentary scrutiny. The Ombudsman and other official human rights bodies as well as media and civil society bodies are able to monitor the military and security sector.

Furthermore, the Kufuor-NPP government has managed the economy prudently, leading to the achievement of macro-economic stability (inflation has been brought down from over 20 percent a few years ago to nearly 10 percent in 2007, the value of the local currency has held steady for 7 years) and there has been a steady rise in annual growth rates (reaching a historic high of 6.2 percent in 2006).

Ghana has also made impressive gains in poverty reduction (reducing poverty levels from nearly 40 percent in 1998/99 to below 30 percent by 2007 and well on target to reach UN Millennium Development Goal). It has also taken impressive strides in human resource development (introducing a National Health Insurance Scheme, a capitation

grant for students in basic schools, a pilot school feeding program, youth employment program – NYEP etc.), and made substantial investments in infrastructural development (major road construction, a new dam and hydro-electricity project commissioned at Bui in the Northern Region etc.)

The nation has continued to be politically and socially stable under the Kufuor-NPP government (notwithstanding the Dagbon regicide and other recurrent communal conflicts). Moreover, the sense of national unity has grown, as was evident in the national euphoria over Ghana's 2006 World Cup exploits and the 50th anniversary celebrations earlier this year. Indeed, the Kufuor-NPP administration achieved partial but significant success in promoting national unity by establishing in 2002 a South African-style truth commission known as the National Reconciliation Commission (NRC). The Commission reviewed legally cognizable abuse of individuals by the state and by officials purporting to act in the name of the state and made recommendations for partial psychic and/or material compensation.

These achievements are confirmed in the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)-African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) report on Ghana, recent World Bank Institute (Kauffman Index) reports, and the maiden Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance 2007 (on which Ghana is placed 8th on a list of 48 countries).

Ghana's impressive achievements in building the foundations for democratic governance have also generated international confidence in the country's economic development prospects. In recent years, Ghana has attracted substantial debt relief under the Highly Indebted Poor Country (HIPC) Initiative. It has been awarded an amount of \$547million under the US Millennium Challenge Account (MCA). Awarded on the basis of assessments as to whether government was ruling justly, investing in people, and keeping markets reasonably open, the MCA grant paves the way for Ghana's further poverty reduction through agro-industrial growth. An even more impressive vote of confidence can be found in the success of Ghana in raising a \$750million sovereign bond on the international market. (Indeed, Ghana's bond floatation was about five times over-subscribed.) Ghana's current economic buoyancy has been given an additional boost by the discovery of oil in commercial quantities on the Western coast of the country.

■ **Putting Ghana's democratic achievements in a national and continental perspective**

Admittedly, Ghana is still confronted with formidable challenges and deficits it must overcome before it begins to fully realize

her dreams of freedom, prosperity, and national unity. Ghana's per capita income (under \$600) and economic growth rates remain far short of Ghana's aspiration to become a middle income country, a la the "Asian Tigers." Life expectancy is low at about 57 years; literacy rates are low at 5.3 percent of the population; poverty levels remain unacceptably high (with 28.5 percent of the population living in poverty and 18 percent in extreme poverty by 2006); health standards are low (infant mortality rates stand at 64 per 1000 births, malaria remains endemic and guinea worm, buruli ulcer and other horrible but preventable tropical diseases prevail).

Moreover, there are huge gaps in income between the few affluent rich and the poor, the northern and southern, rural and urban parts of the country; ethnic tensions (especially between Asante and Ewe) and political polarization (notably between the ruling NPP and main opposition NDC) persist; the country continues to be faced with internal security challenges, highlighted in the violent communal conflict in Dagbon in 2002 that claimed the life of the second most prominent monarch; the rule of law is weak (highlighted in the occasional incident of mob lynching), and access to justice is poor, especially for the ordinary citizen.

Furthermore, public administration is extremely weak, evidenced by poor delivery of key public services such as water; poor sanitation and environmental degradation; official corruption and political patronage remains largely entrenched (see Ghana's Transparency International Corruption Perception Index from 1999-2007); the political culture remains largely intolerant; and the interests of religious, social, migrants and other minorities are often assaulted.

But compared to where Ghana was in its first 35 years of nationhood, especially the late 1970s and much of the 1980s, and by regional and sub-regional comparisons, Ghana is doing well today under the 15-year Fourth Republic. The country is enjoying a prolonged honeymoon of democratic development as well as economic growth and poverty reduction. Moreover, the nation has remained fairly united (notwithstanding persistent ethnic tensions and communal conflicts).

■ **The lessons Ghana offers to Africa**

Ghana's present situation therefore offers several positive lessons for African democratization and nation building in the new century. Firstly, for over 30 years, conventional wisdom held that the project of post-colonial nation-building in Africa would require what President Nkrumah described as "measures of totalitarian kind."

Multi-party democracy was deemed particularly unsuitable for Africa on several grounds: that it would aggravate ethnic cleavages and tensions, foster social and political divisions, provoke social and political instability, and impede the development of national unity.

Armed with this intellectual justification and readily abetted by Cold War supporters from the West and the East blocs, autocratic governance and personal rule became the political system of choice for most political African leaders in the first 30 years of independence. Ghana, which had led Black Africa in achieving national independence and had inspired the independence movements in other African nations, had also led the way in initiating autocratic rule in sub-Saharan Africa.

While the country was not a leader in the African democratic transitions of the early 1990s (Ghana's democratic transition followed those in Benin, Zambia and elsewhere) and its transition had been seriously flawed, the country has made steady progress with her democratic development in her 4th Republic and emerged at the present time as a leader of the African democratic renaissance.

Ghana's relative democratic success also affirms the importance of the value political moderation and incrementalism in democracy and nation building in Africa. It should be noted that the main opposition parties had been bitterly disappointed with the 1992 transition elections and their supporters had bayed for blood. Fortunately, the opposition parties and their leaders opted to behave responsibly and reasonably in the face of an election they deemed openly rigged and ensuing flawed transition. Instead of resorting to some kind of a bush war as was to happen elsewhere in African nations such as the Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone etc, they opted to engage in acts of peaceful civil disobedience such as boycotting the parliamentary elections, and went on to document their electoral grievances in a book titled *The Stolen Verdict*.

The constructive and conciliatory attitude of the Rawlings-NDC government must also be noted. It began to respect the provisions of the 1992 Constitution and the restrictions it imposed, albeit in the most minimalist manner possible. Most importantly, it conceded opposition and international donor pressure to reform the electoral process and level the electoral playing field, notwithstanding the risks entailed, notably the likelihood that the opposition would be the main beneficiary of such reforms. Above all, it was supreme act of statesmanship on the part of President Rawlings and his NDC colleagues in resisting the temptation to tamper with

the two-term limit the 1992 Constitution imposes on presidential tenure—despite genuine fears of revenge against Rawlings/PNDC/NDC in the post-Rawlings/NDC/PNDC era. It was also a major credit to the NDC's candidate, Professor John Atta Mills, that he conceded defeat. These actions were extremely crucial in saving Ghana's democratic transition from the canker of one-party dominance, perpetual incumbency and other developments that have stalled transitions in Togo, Uganda, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, and Ivory Coast etc.

Similarly, like South Africa, and unlike Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso and elsewhere on the continent, Ghana has managed to use her South African truth commission type National Reconciliation Commission public hearings and processes to bring at least partial relief and some closure to victims of past human rights abuses and other state-induced wrongs without provoking backlash from alleged perpetrators.

Ghana today presents a best practice model in Africa and elsewhere of peaceful and transparent multi-party presidential and parliamentary elections whose outcomes are credible. Thus, unlike many other Black African countries, there is reasonable certainty that Ghana's 5th multi-party elections in December 2008 would be peaceful, transparent and credible. Ghana, indeed, is also one of the few African democracies that have gone through a peaceful transfer of power from one elected president to another.

Most importantly, democratic governance is gaining institutional roots in Ghana. The institutions of democratic governance, notably the Electoral Commission, Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ), the Media Commission, the Judiciary, and arguably Parliament have steadily grown in independence and effectiveness. CHRAJ, for instance, has investigated government ministers and other top level functionaries, including the President, and imposed sanctions on them; the Media Commission asserted its independence with respect to the appointment of heads of the state-owned media etc.

A highly vibrant independent print and electronic media as well as active and engaged civil society have emerged and began to aggressively demand accountability and responsiveness from public officials and agencies. Thus Ghana has moved from a "culture of silence" to a culture of public disputation and active civic engagement.

Significantly, Ghana's impressive democratic progress has been accompanied by sustained economic stability and growth, reflected in a historic 6 percent annual growth rate in 2006, as well as poverty reduction (the percentage of the population living in poverty in 2006 is about half what prevailed in the early nineties, and set to go down even further).

In addition, Ghana is enjoying its longest episode of political stability. Through 4 generally peaceful and clean multi-party elections and heading for the fifth in 2008, the 4th Republic endures. This in turn has made it possible for the country to enjoy an unprecedented degree of continuity in policies and infrastructure development.

Indeed, Ghana appears to have returned to its earlier promise of leadership in Africa in positive terms, especially in terms of democratic governance. While Ghana was not among the initiators of the NEPAD/APRM, it has played a pioneering role in its elaboration and implementation. It was among the first to voluntarily accede to the APRM. It organized the most objective and credible peer review process which allowed an independent presidential council and independent think tanks to lead the technical process of assessing the country's social and economic progress and identifying outstanding deficits. Here too, Ghana is championing the idea and the practice of allowing citizens the freedom to review the performance of their government and governance institutions in between elections.

Ghana has also been championing democratic governance excellence at the regional and sub-regional levels. Experts from Ghana's election body and independent think tanks have been active in providing electoral assistance in Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Liberia and elsewhere on the continent. At the African Union, Ghana has been among the few African nations willing to criticize President Mugabe of Zimbabwe and President al Bechir of Sudan.

■ Conclusions

Developments in Ghana under the 4th Republic helped confirm that not all of Black Africa is a 'basket case'; and Black African nations need not confine themselves to the 'basket case' category of nations.

Above all, Ghana's experience in the last 15 years confirm that autocratic rule is not necessarily African; and that democratic governance can work in Africa.

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The Paper was presented at the Miami University, Oxford, Ohio on November 7, 2007. The views expressed in this publication are entirely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Board of Governors, officers, staff, or sponsors of the Center.

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ISSN: 0855-4005

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