

A stylized world map composed of a grid of dots in various shades of gray, with several dots highlighted in red. The map is centered behind the title text.

Elections and Conflict in Ghana

Country Analysis

KATHRIN MEISSNER

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- Besides an extremely close election result, the course of the elections and the acceptance of the final results proceeded relatively peacefully: such a favourable outcome is anything but a foregone conclusion in Ghana's political system. It is possible to mobilise, at the drop of a hat, supporters who are convinced that the other side has achieved its ends by illegitimate means.
- However, both main parties were aware that most Ghanaians were not willing to sacrifice the stability of their country for political ends. In addition, discussion of other African elections, such as those in Kenya, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, fostered a strong awareness of the risks involved in resorting to violence.
- Civil society actors and religious leaders were keenly aware of the potential threat of violence during the elections. Every public event or function included appeals for peaceful elections, from the trade unions, the churches and the political parties. This heightened interest in the issue – one might even call it a fixation – repeatedly reminded the parties and their followers that the majority of Ghanaians were not prepared to see the country's democratic system jeopardised by attempts to use violence to secure victory. Finally, the electoral commission made an important contribution to the peaceful course of the elections in Ghana by holding steady in the face of massive pressure exerted from various quarters.



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1. Current Situation

Despite the extremely close outcome of the 2008 Ghanaian presidential and parliamentary elections, and the considerable political tension that accompanied them, the course of the fifth general election in Ghana's Fourth Republic was largely peaceful, and the election result was accepted.

On 7 January 2009, after eight years in office, President John Agyekum Kufuor (New Patriotic Party NPP), in compliance with the Constitution, gave way to his elected successor, Professor John Evans Atta Mills (National Democratic Congress NDC).

On 7 December 2008, Ghanaians were called upon to elect a new parliament and a new president. Under Ghana's first-past-the-post electoral system, the people elect their deputies directly, by a simple majority. The president (also directly elected) needs an absolute majority to win. If no candidate emerges victorious from the first ballot, a run-off is held between the two frontrunners to determine the winner. Both the parliamentary and the presidential elections were expected to be close, with the country's two major parties, the NPP, then the ruling party, and the NDC, the largest opposition party, neck and neck.

There were therefore fears that violent unrest might break out in connection with the December 2008 elections or the official announcement of the election outcome. The first day of the elections was largely peaceful, and no major irregularities were reported. The count was likewise largely carried out in an orderly manner. A number of complaints were lodged, which were reviewed in accordance with Ghanaian electoral law, and either settled or passed on for judicial review.¹

Parties and the media are able to prepare projections of their own, since election results are first announced at the constituency level before being passed on to the central electoral commission in the capital. As a result, the two largest parties both announced that they had won. At times the situation threatened to get out of hand as NDC followers began celebrating in the streets.

However, the – relatively accurate – projections made by the media on day two indicated that neither of the candidates had won an absolute majority and there would be a run-off. The largely responsible reporting of the media and appeals issued by political observers and some politicians caused the followers of the two leading parties to reconcile themselves to the outcome before it was officially announced by the election commission on day three – Nana Akufo-Addo, the NPP candidate, had won 49.13 per cent of the vote, and was thus ahead of John Evans Atta Mills, who had received 47.92 per cent.

The Run-off Election

The run-off election for the presidency was held on 28 December 2008, amidst an extensive security operation. Election day itself was orderly and peaceful. Only in the Tain election district was the run-off election suspended on account of the security situation and problems in distributing ballots and urns; it was rescheduled for 2 January 2009. The first results from the various constituencies were available the same evening, and another round of projections got under way. In anticipation of the official result rumours abounded and accusations of fraud flew back and forth. The NDC accused the NPP of manipulating the results in the Ashanti region, its main stronghold, while the NPP accused the NDC of attacking its election observers and expelling them from election offices in the Volta region. In response to rumours that the NPP had been involved in manipulating the results after the fact, NDC supporters attempted to storm the electoral commission. NPP supporters also lost no time in marching to the electoral commission. The police were able to bring the situation under control, however.

Despite protracted consultations with representatives of the two parties, the chairman of the electoral commission was unable to announce anything more than a provisional result on the evening of 30 December, since the run-off election had been conducted in only 229 of the 230 election districts. The provisional result was that Mills (NDC), with 50.13 per cent of the vote, led Akufo-Addo, who had received 49.87 per cent. The delay caused by the suspension of the vote in Tain had a mainly psychological effect: since neither of the two rivals had been declared the loser, both were willing to accept, for the time being, the as yet purely numerical outcome. In the three days leading up to the rescheduled

1. In one election district, a court ordered a recount, as a result of which the deputy concerned was able to assume office only in April 2008. In another district, ballot boxes were stolen on election day. By mid-2009 the court had not yet reached a decision on how a new vote was to be conducted in this district.

election in Tain, discussions were intense within the NPP on whether to accept the looming defeat. The process revealed major rifts within the party. The supporters of Akufo-Addo filed a suit to prevent the final result from being announced before the ongoing investigations of irregularities had been concluded. President Kufuor and moderate forces in the NPP, however, came out in favour of accepting the election outcome as announced. In the end, the NPP withdrew its suit, accepting defeat, and on 3 January Mills (NDC), having won 50.23 per cent of the vote, was declared the winner. On 7 January, in conformity with the Constitution, Mills took over from President Kufuor.

Kufuor did not, like his predecessor John Rawlings (NPP), seek to amend the Constitution to extend his term of office. Rawlings had resigned in 2000, in the wake of which the NDC, with Mills as its presidential candidate, lost the election to the NPP. This was the first democratic change of government in Ghana's Fourth Republic, and the election of John Evans Atta Mills in the 2008 elections consolidated this achievement.

In international terms, Ghana's 2008 elections contrasted sharply with the elections that had preceded them in Kenya and Zimbabwe, marred by violence and undemocratic compromises, a development that has again underscored Ghana's reputation as a beacon of African democracy. Nevertheless, pre-election Ghana also harboured a certain conflict potential that continually threatened to erupt in the course of the election.

2. Context Analysis

2.1 Rules of the Game

2.1.1 The Democratic Nature of Ghanaian Society

Ghana's Fourth Republic was created in 1993. Democratically elected governments have alternated with military regimes through the country's recent history. In 1992, under internal and external pressure, Jerry Rawlings, who had twice seized power in military coups, initiated a democratic transformation of the military government he had headed for ten years. The new Constitution, developed by a group of experts, was adopted in a referendum, and political parties, previously banned, were (re)founded.

In 1992, the first presidential and parliamentary elections were held. Even though the opposition, accusing Rawlings of fraud in the presidential election, boycotted the parliamentary election, the present democratic system was established in the Fourth Republic.

The Ghanaian population now has a highly developed consciousness of and a certain pride in the advances in democracy it has achieved. In fact, five elections have been held in the Fourth Republic, and five times the official outcome was implemented, with new governments being duly formed, including two democratic changes of government. This would seem to indicate that the democratic system has been consolidated to such an extent that those in power no longer seek to exploit their power, by unconstitutional means, to extend their term of office beyond the two terms provided for under the Constitution with a view to remaining in power, choosing instead to bow to the will of the electorate.

By and large, the Constitution is honoured by large parts of the political class, who regard it as their paramount point of reference. The Constitution enjoys a large measure of respect and its articles are generally regarded as the foundation of the country's democratic order.

2.1.2 Election Legislation and Acceptance of Election Result

Ghana has a comprehensive set of electoral laws that meet international standards and are, in principle, accepted by all parties. Ghana's first-past-the-post electoral system, with the extensive powers it accords to the president, is perhaps best termed a »winner takes all« system. The losers are largely excluded from the political decision-making process, even when they, as the NPP did in the wake of the 2008 elections, account for a large number of Members of Parliament.

The fact that, to date, every electoral outcome has been accepted and implemented in a democratic fashion is a strong indicator of Ghana's democratic consolidation. This is not to imply, however, that the democratic process has become irreversible, or that there were not, in past elections, dynamics in play that served to diminish acceptance of the outcome. In addition, the population continues to harbour – despite a widespread commitment to democracy – a large measure of mistrust

vis-à-vis official politics. Many people are convinced that manipulation of elections, vote buying and political pressure are part and parcel of the system and that all those involved, especially the two main parties, are complicit. Up to a point, this is generally accepted – although it is difficult to say in advance at what point people will draw the line and the losers prove unwilling to put up with an outcome that may be the product of chicanery.

It does appear, however, that if the NPP had won the 2008 elections, the outcome would have been far more widespread and violent rioting. NDC followers were convinced that »their turn had finally come« and that the governing party was in a far better position to manipulate the election than the opposition. In the face of such a close outcome (after the run-off election, no more than roughly 40,000 votes separated Mills and Akufo-Addo), even »minor« cases of manipulation might have been sufficient to reverse the election result.

But at first even the NPP was reluctant to accept the final outcome. Convinced, perhaps somewhat presumptuously, that they would easily be re-elected, the result of the first round of voting came as a shock to the NPP membership. While the party leadership did manage to sooth the tempers of its followers, this did not last long. Once the run-off election had made it clear that the NPP had failed to sufficiently mobilise its base, the group around presidential candidate Akufo-Addo (NPP) filed for a court injunction on the grounds of election manipulation, the aim being to delay the official announcement of the results until the complaints lodged had been investigated.

Ultimately, the suit and the injunction were withdrawn and the NPP declared its official acceptance of the result. But the course of events shows that such a favourable outcome is anything but a foregone conclusion in Ghana's political system and that it is possible at any time to mobilise supporters convinced that the other side has achieved its ends by illegitimate means.

2.1.3 Checks and Balances

Ghana's political system is a mixture of Westminster and a presidential system, with the office of the president endowed with far-reaching powers and the executive playing a dominant role vis-à-vis the legislative. Under

the Constitution, Members of Parliament are not permitted to submit bills or amendments that have financial implications. Parliament does not even make full use of the scope it does have – for reasons of exaggerated party discipline, lack of understanding of substantive issues or because Members of Parliament of the governing party may be holding out for a government post.

By regional comparison, Ghana's judicial system is relatively well developed, although even the judiciary is not wholly free of political influence and bribery. In addition, trials and legal procedures tend to be long drawn out, and those concerned often feel that justice is not being done. In connection with the 1996 elections, one NPP parliamentary candidate mounted a legal challenge to the outcome in his election district; the court recognised his claim, even though the NPP was at that time in opposition – but the procedure took a total of four years, and the final judgment was handed down only at the end of the current Parliament.

2.1.4 Traditional Forms of Governance and Political Culture

Political contestation between Ghana's political parties is distinctly competitive, which finds expression less in efforts to tackle concrete issues than in personal attacks and accusations of political misconduct.

A large number of public service posts are reallocated in the wake of elections, usually based on what the candidate has done for the ruling party rather than any particular qualifications they might have. A sense of neglect and discrimination when a party is in opposition and the large sums that need to be mobilised to conduct an election campaign may induce the winners to embrace an entitlement mentality according to which they have a personal right to a »share of the spoils«. Moreover, the current NDC leadership is under pressure from various quarters to reward campaign donors and other supporters with ministerial or board-level posts.²

It must be said of the Mills government, however, that it took a gradual approach in replacing non-NDC support-

2. By way of illustration: as soon as Mills had assumed power, NDC supporters throughout the country set out to secure the keys to public toilets, until then in the hands of NPP supporters, with a view to enjoying the benefits of controlling access to these public »pay« facilities.

ers in official positions, not wholly caving in to political pressure to reward the »right« people and to give the others their »just deserts«. Incidents involving NDC supporters setting out to secure state property for themselves appear, in many cases, not to have been centrally sanctioned. But they do indicate the widespread belief that public goods are the spoils of the winners, not the property of the citizenry at large.

The NDC leadership is facing pressure from its own rank and file to prosecute members of the previous government for alleged misconduct. No one doubts in the least that some did fill their own pockets at public expense. The NDC hawks, led by former president Rawlings, are pushing to have what they see as the culprits brought to justice, without necessarily adhering too closely to proper legal procedure. Thus far, however, the Mills government has shown a good measure of prudence, insisting that justice be allowed to take its course. It remains to be seen how long the present government will be able to resist such pressure.

Another effect of the »winner takes all« system is that the parties declared the 2008 elections to be a »do or die affair«. For one thing, a loss for the NDC might well have consigned the party to oblivion; after all, having been denied access to state resources for eight long years, the party was close to collapse. For another, the parties had great expectations regarding prospective oil profits. On the basis of this view of electoral success as a personal key to state resources, it is easy to understand why the 2008 elections were so hotly contested.

2.2 Socioeconomic Reality

Ghana is a developing country in which resources are unequally distributed and poverty is widespread. By regional comparison, however, the country has a relatively good record. Ghana is likely to be the first Sub-Saharan African country to reach the first Millennium Development Goal, although over one-quarter of the population will continue to be affected by absolute poverty.

But cross-African comparisons are of very little interest to the Ghanaian population itself, and most people generally feel – regardless of the statistical data – that their own living standards have deteriorated. This impression is reinforced by manifest and growing economic

inequality. While a minority – by means that are not always transparent – is amassing huge wealth, the majority of people are rarely able to maintain, never mind to improve, their living standards. In this context, one of the main reasons for the defeat of the NPP government must be seen as the fact that the country's economic growth generates too few broad-based effects.

The situation is exacerbated by major regional disparities in Ghana. While good progress has been made in reducing absolute poverty nationwide, the three northern regions have experienced very little improvement, and one of them has even experienced an increase in absolute poverty. All told, most of the country's economic growth is generated in the south, while the north has tended to stagnate – a situation that is leading to a pronounced sense of injustice that reinforces regional antagonisms. In Ghana, there is also a marked urban–rural divide. The result is migration to the urban centres and to the south, and this in turn means that rural areas, and the north in general, lack the qualified people needed to boost development.

Access to and, above all, control of land constitutes a particular development problem and harbours substantial conflict potential.³ Recruited from »noble« families, the country's traditional leaders, the so-called chiefs, claim to act in the name of the community, assuming the role of the guardians of the land. In the wake of growing commercialisation, many of them have become businesspeople, and instead of being collectivised, the proceeds from land sales have tended to be privatised. The consequence is that the institution of chief has not only become extremely lucrative, but it at the same time serves to cut off the access of poorer population groups to valuable land. In many cases – for example, when the successor to a chief must be chosen – this in turn may give rise to covetousness and escalating conflicts over land that often take a bloody course.

In recent years these so-called chieftaincy conflicts have been increasingly politicised. As a rule, the rival groups identify with one of the two main political parties, one reason being that the latter are increasingly seeking to gain influence at the local level. These chieftaincy conflicts, originally local in nature, are becoming part and

3. Women in any case face severe disadvantages stemming from the country's discriminatory customary and family law.

parcel of party-related squabbling even beyond the boundaries of conflict regions, a development that has given these conflicts a national dimension.

(Male) youths are one of the country's largest disadvantaged groups.⁴ Many of them, qualified or not, have no job prospects. Their lack of options for participating in formal political, economic and social decision-making tends to increase their willingness to use illegal means to gain entry to the political process.

However, it would be a serious mistake to underestimate the country's electorate – regardless of educational levels or actual access to information. A comprehensive study of the behaviour of Ghana's electorate published in 2008⁵ shows clearly that Ghanaian voters decide how to vote on the basis of clear-cut criteria. Their decision is not influenced in any crucial ways by the money they may be given by one or more candidates as an election approaches. Still, many voters describe the practice of taking money offered to influence their voting behaviour as a right, some sort of compensation from politicians who otherwise »live the good life« in the capital, Accra.

2.3 Main Actors and their Interests

2.3.1 Political Parties

Ghana's party landscape is dominated by the NDC on one side and the NPP on the other. Both parties emphasise their programmatic orientation: the NPP terms itself liberal, while the NDC sees itself as social democratic. In the course of an election campaign that was only marginally issue-centred, however, the two parties made little effort to clearly explain what they stood for and what they intended to do. Both parties are in need of an intensive internal debate to define their programmatic and ideological stances.

Ghana's smaller parties are utterly marginal: in a 230-seat parliament they account for no more than three Members of Parliament. Potentially, the Convention People's Party (CPP), a socialist party founded by Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of independent Ghana,

could play a larger role in the country's politics, since many citizens of Ghana continue to identify with Nkrumah's ideas. However, internal conflicts have prevented the party from establishing itself as the country's third force based on a convincing programme and array of candidates.

Under the Ghanaian law on political parties, the latter need to be organised nationally, and thus to have offices in all constituencies. The aim of this provision is to prevent the emergence of regionally or ethnically based parties. Although some of the country's smaller, more insignificant parties fail to meet these criteria completely, Ghana's party landscape is by and large nationally oriented.

The main objective of political parties in Ghana is to work to gain individual and collective power. While the parties' contribution to the shaping of national public opinion remains limited, they have continuously expanded their role as »pure election campaign machines«. The more the parties have been forced to rely on a network of supporters to gain power, the louder the calls for intraparty democratic procedures have become. In the 2008 election campaign, for instance, the NPP fell victim to its own strategy of presenting the NDC as an autocratically led campaign machine designed for and by individual personalities. The NPP saw itself forced to hold party primaries to prove that it was serious about translating democratic values into political practice.

Party primaries turned out to be a major problem for the NPP: in some cases, even experienced Members of Parliament, key figures in the party, failed to win. Several businesspeople spent large amounts of money running in the primaries for parliamentary candidates, clearly expecting significant returns on their investment if they won. These conflicts within the NPP, in part played out in public, damaged the party in the period leading up to the elections.

Isolated violent encounters between followers of both parties occur occasionally between elections. Naturally, in the run-up of elections the potential for violence on both sides increased. Before the run off election in particular, the mood grew dangerously ugly, even explosive. However, both the NDC and the NPP were aware that most Ghanaians reject the use of violence to achieve political ends. In addition, discussion of other African elections, such as those in Kenya, Nigeria and Zimbabwe, fostered a strong awareness of the risks involved

4. In 2006, the youth ministry indicated that youths – defined as people between 15 and 35 years of age – account for 26 per cent of the population.

5. Lindberg und Morrison (2008).

in resorting to violence. Ultimately, it was the defeated candidate's call to accept the election result that calmed the situation.

In the absence of state funding for political parties, election campaigns in Ghana are financed by individuals. Ignoring central party coffers, private donors tend to »contribute« to individuals, from whom they expect favours if the election is won. This is one important reason why the elected party leadership, often itself dependent on external donors, has little influence over how election campaigns are conducted. This serves not only to undercut internal party democracy, but also corrupt the political system as a whole: even before they assume power, the parties are beholden to forces other than the people who actually voted for them.

This highly money-driven style of politics also makes it difficult for women to participate in politics since, besides the strong gender discrimination, they generally lack the financial resources available to men. Indeed, in the 2008 election only 20 women were elected to the 230-seat parliament, five fewer than in 2004. In addition, women in politics face massive hostility, as well as prejudice and sexist attacks. Few women are willing under these circumstances to participate actively in politics, even if they have the desire to do so.

2.3.2 Social, Religious and Ethnic Groupings and the Security Forces

The tense situation during the election campaign, the expectation of a close outcome and, not least, the events surrounding the elections in Kenya inculcated a keen awareness of the potential threat among civil society actors and religious leaders and even, to some extent, in the political parties. They responded with measures designed to promote peace, including dialogue forums, peace marches and calls for non-violence. Every public event or function included appeals for peaceful elections, from the trade unions, the churches and the parties. This heightened interest in the issue – one might even call it a fixation – reminded the parties and their followers time and again that the majority of Ghanaians were not prepared to see the country's democratic system jeopardised by attempts to use violence to secure victory.

Since religion plays an important role in Ghana, both major parties were at pains to woo religious leaders. However, the fact that religion – in contrast to ethnicity – was hardly used as a divisive issue in the election campaign is due in large measure to the efforts of associations such as the Ghana Conference of Religions for Peace (GCRP), which brings together all of the country's major religions.

All the same, segments of the established churches, with quite substantial memberships, have long found it difficult to adopt a wholly neutral approach. Under the Rawlings military government, and even during the first NDC government, the churches played a critical and important role in society, coming out, alongside other groupings, in favour of more freedoms in society and openly opposing the NDC. However, when the NPP assumed power in 2001, the churches seemed to have had trouble maintaining their independence. They were, for instance, very reluctant to criticise the NPP. Thus, during the 2008 elections, only at the very last moment were the churches prepared to issue calls to accept the election result – whether it was with a view to keeping the peace or in order not to annoy the probable new rulers. Party membership in Ghana is often described as closely bound up with ethnicity. The NPP is often perceived as the party of the Akan ethnic group, with the Ashanti, a subgroup of the Akan, clearly dominant in influential positions. The NPP's stronghold is the Ashanti region, the country's most populous area. On the other hand, the NDC, with its strongholds in the Volta region and in the north, is often seen as the party of the Ewe. But even if certain ethnic groups tend to be strongly represented in one party or the other, the parties are not closed to people from other ethnic groups.⁶ If we compare the 2004 and 2008 election results by region, we find that the NDC was able to make inroads nationwide, and not only in its own strongholds. While in the 2004 presidential elections it won a majority in only four of the country's ten regions, in 2008 it won a majority of the votes cast in a total of eight regions.

However, both parties tried to score points in their traditional regional strongholds by playing the ethnic card. The NDC side claimed that the incumbent government had marginalised and neglected certain population groups on

6. To cite one example, President Mills belongs to the Fante, along with the Ashanti, another subgroup of the Akan, even though the NDC is regarded as the party of the Ewe.

the basis of their ethnicity, while the Ashanti had enjoyed financial privileges. For its part, the NPP sought to stir up ethnic resentments by pointing to the Rawlings years. Both sides in this way sought to play off one population group against another, and this led to violent confrontations between youths who needed little encouragement.

As far as the influence of chiefs on the electoral process is concerned, it must first be noted that they do not constitute a homogeneous group. While some chiefs strictly adhered to the constitutional provision excluding them from active engagement in party politics, others, including the president of the House of Chiefs, had no qualms at all about issuing election recommendations. In communities in which chiefs openly supported one party or the other, there were knee-jerk reactions by the other side. At the same time, however, prior to the announcement of the result of the run-off election, numerous public personalities called for moderation, pleading publicly for acceptance of the outcome, regardless of their own sympathies.

By and large, the security forces did their job effectively, generally remaining neutral. Neutrality is of course relative in a system in which individual police officers are tightly integrated in relations of patronage and police corruption is part of everyday life. But the crucial factor is that, as a group, neither the police nor other security forces, acting on orders from the centre, were seen to be acting unambiguously in the interest of one or the other party. While they proved unable to cope with some situations, there were established mechanisms in place to mount interventions in the case of unforeseen events. Although the National Elections Security Task Force (NESTF) – which is made up of various official security forces, the official election commission, one department of the information ministry and the Regional Coordinating Councils – was first deployed only in October, it proved very effective: information flowed rapidly and a joint approach was taken. The military was used only to transport election materials and to secure districts beset by local conflicts unrelated to the elections, in this way enabling willing voters to cast their ballots.

2.3.3 The Electoral Commission

The permanent electoral commission and, in particular, Dr Afari-Gyan, its chairman, are well respected by both the general public and the political parties. Although

commission members are nominated by the president, they can only be removed by the courts. Regular members must step down when they reach the age of 60, while deputy chairs remain in office until 65 and the chair retires at 70. This mixed age structure means that, at any one time, the current commissioners were appointed by different presidents.

The electoral commission has a reputation for independence. Nonetheless, the parties sought to delegitimise the commission in the run-up to the elections, the idea being to »have something on the commission« in the event of electoral defeat. In 2008, there were in fact several slip-ups that permitted the parties to impugn the commission's professionalism. To cite one example, it became necessary to postpone the registration of new voters from January to August 2008 when new equipment needed for the purpose was not delivered on time. The registration process was chaotic: in some areas the five days allotted were not sufficient to register voters, who had to queue for hours, and there were not enough registration forms.

In addition, after registration the electoral rolls were found to contain roughly one million more names than they should have, based on statistical criteria. One reason for this was that too little information was made available on how to register, and some people who were already registered but had lost their polling cards were registered again. These people now appeared in duplicate in the electoral roll, as did persons who had moved to a new place of residence. Another reason was deliberate attempts at manipulation, with minors, citizens of neighbouring countries and registered party supporters being bussed to registration centres to be registered illegally. The electoral commission was unable to verify eligibility to vote on the spot, because Ghana has no national identification system.

Despite these shortcomings in the run-up to the elections, the electoral commission did its best to clean up the electoral rolls. More effective, however, was the public attention which had arisen in connection with the chaotic registration process earlier that year. The public was called upon to keep an eye out for unknown persons or minors lining up to vote. It is likely that the public discussion of this problem deterred a good number of illegally registered persons from voting.

The chairman of the electoral commission, furthermore, made it perfectly clear that the responsibility for deliberate double registrations and registration of minors and foreigners lay not with the commission but with those who had initiated the practice, in other words, the political parties.

The relative orderliness which characterised each day of the elections was confirmed by the numerous election observers present in Ghana. While individual election agents were accused of partisan behaviour – subsequently borne out in some cases – such accusations must be viewed against the background of the large number of new election agents recruited for the 2008 elections.

Dr Afari-Gyan, chairman of the commission, was instrumental in preventing the extremely tense situation from escalating while the votes were being counted and before the official result was announced. For one thing, he exercised considerable prudence in keeping the parties informed of events as they unfolded; he also met with the NDC and NPP leaderships before the final result was known with a view to dealing with possible accusations and setting the stage for a direct and violence-free encounter between the two parties behind closed doors. This served to obtain the active involvement of the parties as the process unfolded. Finally, Dr Afari-Gyan made an important contribution to the peaceful course of the elections in Ghana by holding steady in the face of massive pressure exerted from various quarters.

2.3.4 The Role of the Media

During the election campaign, the state-run media did its best to present fair and balanced coverage. But the NPP, the incumbent party, had a stronger media presence because it had the resources to purchase advertising and airtime. Furthermore, its broadcasts were not always labelled as campaign advertising; indeed, some presentations were broadcast in the form of documentaries on the NPP's presidential candidate or on the government's achievements. The opposition parties were highly critical of this state of affairs.

A large segment of the private media typically engages in highly partisan reporting. However, the fact that the media's basic orientation is widely known limits their

potential to manipulate public opinion. Widely heard private radio stations that otherwise take a neutral position on political matters sought to maintain that stance during the election campaign and the electoral process itself. They played an important role in rendering the electoral process as transparent as possible throughout the country. JOY FM, probably the country's most popular radio station, had over 500 correspondents stationed throughout the country; on election day they reported the emerging results as they were announced from polling station to polling station, passing the information on live to headquarters, where the results were tallied and interim results were made available at a very early stage.⁷

The two main parties sought to harness the media for their own purposes. After the first round of the election, for instance, they held their press conferences at the international press centre, where the official results are announced by the electoral commission, and where a large number of journalists were always present. The NDC started out by announcing that the projections clearly confirmed the victory of the NDC candidate. Soon afterwards, an NPP delegation announced the same thing, only this time for themselves. In order to prevent things getting out of hand, the organisers banned any further party press conferences at the venue.

With party followers already resigned by media projections to the inevitability of a run-off, the electoral commission's official announcement of the results was seen as no more than a formality.

The media, generally speaking, continued to act responsibly during the run-off election, particularly on 30 December, the second day after the run-off, when the outcome was still unknown and tensions were rising. However, two radio stations with close party affiliations, one to the NDC, the other to the NPP, were instrumen-

7. The potential of mobile phones was also skillfully harnessed. In this way it soon became clear that the outcome would be very close. Callers were able to report where they had experienced difficulties or problems. These reports were, however, verified on the spot by the station's correspondents, and unconfirmed reports were cited as such.

tal in attempts to ratchet up the tension.⁸ They spread accusations that attacks had occurred, mainly in the strongholds of the other party, and that supporters of the favoured party had been driven out of election offices. These reports had not been verified. These stations also used leading personalities from their favoured party to call on their followers not to cede victory to the other side and to defend themselves should they be attacked. One effect of reports of this kind was that followers of the two parties, some of them armed with machetes, went so far as to march on the electoral commission. The police, using de-escalation measures, succeeded in holding back party supporters, ultimately persuading them to retreat.

2.4 External Influences

Developments in the region did have a direct influence on the atmosphere in which the elections were held. As already mentioned, the events of the elections in Kenya and Nigeria were subjected to keen scrutiny. There was

interest not only in the region – for example, on the part of the ECOWAS Commission, which dispatched a 200-member election observation mission – in ensuring that the region’s positive example would continue to be regarded as a model; there was also international interest in ensuring that »donor darling« Ghana would continue to be able to serve as a positive example for Africa’s democratic development. Observer missions were sent to Ghana, for example, by the EU, the Carter Center and the Commonwealth Secretariat.

However, the positive course that the elections ultimately took, and the peaceful change of government they brought about, are in the end a purely Ghanaian success. By the same token, the problems that emerged in the electoral process are Ghanaian problems which the country urgently needs to address.

8. The station aligned with the NDC had already broadcast inflammatory reports during the election campaign, seeking to mobilise and even incite NDC supporters. However, reporting of this kind received particular attention only as the run-off election approached. The station close to the NPP indicated its intention to heat up the atmosphere in response to the reporting of the NDC station. It is important to understand, however, that there were strong fears within the NDC that the NPP was intent on misusing its power. Unlike the 2000 elections, when the NPP was the opposition party, in 2008 the misgivings and accusations voiced by the NDC met with far less attention from the media and civil society, which the NDC tends to mistrust. The NDC station thus perceived itself as the only voice seeking to expose the attempts of the NPP to use manipulation to pocket the election.



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About the author

Kathrin Meissner has been the director of the FES office in Accra, Ghana from 2007 to 2009.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Department for Global Policy and Development
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Responsible:
Marius Müller-Hennig | Global Peace and Security Policy

Tel.: ++49-30-269-35-7476 | Fax: ++49-30-269-35-9246
<http://www.fes.de/GPol/en>

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Sandra.Richter@fes.de

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