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## GHANA'S ELECTIONS

### Regional implications and lessons from electoral peace structures and processes

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In a politically tumultuous 2016 worldwide, Ghana stands out as the country that successfully managed to conduct presidential and parliamentary elections and peacefully emerge from a tense and complicated electoral campaign. After the elections in Uganda, Gambia and Gabon, to name a few of the African elections gone awry, the elections in Ghana became even more relevant for democratic beliefs in the continent. The locus of praise and, most importantly, of lessons to be drawn from Ghana's elections should not solely lie in the outcome – the lack of turmoil during and after the elections – but in the process – how turmoil was avoided. This country, touted as a beacon for democracy, is usually considered to be the example to follow. In this scenario, the continuous celebration of peaceful, transparent and successful democratic elections and peaceful transfers of power are particularly relevant for Africa and the international community. Despite multiple – and valid – concerns

this year, the voting unfolded in an almost uneventful manner, and despite the delay of the Electoral Commission in publishing the election's results, the defeat of the incumbent and mounting security concerns, Ghanaians managed

to hold a peaceful and at least seemingly transparent election. The electoral campaign was tight between the two main political parties, the National Democratic Convention (NDC) of current president, John Dramani Mahama, and the National Patriotic Party (NPP) spearheaded by the now president-elect, Nana Akufo-Addo. The NPP's promise of change has generated a lot of hope and expectation, particularly among the youth. This translated into a comfortable victory on the day of the election. But the reality is that the policies espoused by the two parties are not extremely different. What is most relevant about this election, however, is the implementation of institutionalised processes and the signalling effect the election has on the rest of the continent.

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**The willingness of the electorate to accept the results and perceive the electoral process as legitimate is closely tied to the reliability of the Electoral Commission which played a fundamental role.**

**The economy took centre stage in this election. Over the last few years, Ghana's economy has been underperforming: it grows steadily but slower than expected.**

**A collection of institutions formed the structures and processes that have been adopted to ensure peace and enhance response capacity.**

**The most innovative aspect of the Women's Situation Room in Ghana was the effort to include youth in the entire process because of the widespread notion that if violence occurs it is usually at the hands of young men.**

## Ghana's electoral campaign and the reasons for concern

In 1957, Ghana was the first sub-Saharan country to obtain independence. Despite promising beginnings, it suffered four successful coups d'état in fifteen years and did not return to multiparty politics until 1992. Last year, once again, there were valid reasons for concern during the electoral process. As many Ghanaians expressed, the stakes in 2016 were very high for a variety of reasons. Firstly, this electoral cycle was probably the last time both candidates would run for president if not elected. Since the fourth republic was established, all presidents that have sought re-election have obtained it. There have been transfers of power between the main parties but it has never been between an incumbent and the opposition leader. There is the sense of "a president's right to a second term" and it seemed that president Mahama felt entitled to the same. He ran championing the idea that he needed more time to consolidate the gains his party had made. Notwithstanding this, people were tired of the state of the economy, the palpable inequality, and the pervasive corruption. On the other side, it was Nana Akufo-Addo's third round as presidential candidate. It was also understood that it was his last chance. At age 72 and with two close defeats on his back, it seemed unlikely that he would run again if he lost. That produced a situation in which, as the head of the Electoral Commission (EC) stated, one party believed it must win and the other believed it couldn't lose.

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This situation produced a tense environment that many feared could escalate into violence given, among others, high levels of distrust in the EC and the proliferation of vigilante groups. Electoral Commissions play a fundamental role before, during, and after elections. In Ghana, the **EC's main function** is to prepare voter identity cards and issue them, as well as to complete the register of voters, register political parties, and, more generally, to conduct and facilitate fair and free elections. The willingness of the electorate to accept the results and perceive them and the electoral process as legitimate is closely tied to the reliability of the EC. In the 2012 elections, after a very tight election, the NPP accused the EC of tampering with the results and appealed the electoral results to the Supreme Court. This time, there were accusations of partisanship and people were wary of the EC's new chairwoman given her youth and inexperience. Coupled with the unlikelihood of Akufo-Addo running again if he lost and the predicted close result between the two candidates, there were concerns that, if faced with defeat, rather than going back to the courts, NPP supporters would use violence to contest the results.

Additionally, members of "keep fit" groups (groups of people who supposedly gather to practice sport) have been acting as de facto security forces for Ghana's political parties. The most famous vigilante groups, the Azorka Boys, the

Bolga Bulldogs, and the Invincible Forces are known to be associated with the main political parties. There have been violent clashes between the groups in the past and in the heated political environment – partially sparked by the media's incendiary language – many believed that they posed a major threat to the conduct of the elections. Ahead of the elections, Ghanaian police identified 5000 flashpoints, revealing that the proliferation of small arms and chieftaincy issues had been identified as triggers for violence, and the Electoral Commission indicated that 81 of the 275 constituencies were potential hotspots. Multiple personalities came out to condemn the vigilante groups, including former president Jerry John Rawlings and Dr Mohammed Ibn Chambas, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General for West Africa and Sahel.

## The National Patriotic Party's policies

The economy took centre stage in this election. Over the last few years, Ghana's economy has been underperforming: it grows steadily but slower than expected. Inequality levels remain extremely high, with an estimated Gini coefficient of 0.427 that keeps rising (the World Bank alarm boundary is 0.4), as does unemployment. Precise data on unemployment does not exist due to the large size of the informal economy but it is uncontested that large swathes of the youth remain unemployed despite high educational achievements. Ghana, a middle-income country of about 28 million citizens, had a growth strategy that was partially based on the primary-export-led model. In 2007, oil resources were discovered but despite this new source of revenue, its exploitation was inadequate and did not result in the expected economic gains. Many Ghanaians feel that the decline in commodity prices is not solely to blame for this. Rather, many contend that it is the economic mismanagement, corruption, and policies implemented by the NDC that led to the current situation. While Mahama's campaign revolved around boosting economic growth and infrastructure development, Akufo-Addo exploited the idea that Mahama's economic policies and corruption were to blame for high unemployment and lower than expected GDP growth.

Akufo-Addo's promises of change brought him to the presidency. Only time will tell if his promises can actually materialise or change the country's trajectory. The reality is that the two parties' policies are not particularly different. Sometimes, they have been so similar that each party has accused the other of copying its manifesto. Both the NPP and the NDC are centre-right parties with rather vague and sometimes unrealistic policies. In general, the NPP espouses a more conservative ideology but over the years they have had similar political and economic strategies. Additionally, in 2015 Ghana turned to the International Monetary Fund and as a result of the bailout the country's economic and monetary policies are now shaped by international financial institutions. It is unlikely that vastly different economic policies could be pursued no matter what party is in power.

The expectation is that Akufo-Addo will implement more savvy economic and fiscal policies and that he will fight corruption. Akufo-Addo will attempt to improve the economy through tax cuts and business incentives. During his campaign, he promised to bring a factory to each district “one district, one factory” (or, in a different iteration in the north, “one village, one dam”). It will be important to keep track not only of the implementation of these promises but of the environmental policies that accompany them, if any. In Ghana, air pollution is high, air quality is low, and e-waste is spreading.

It is in the realm of fighting corruption – perceived to have increased under the last administration – that Akufo-Addo could have a greater impact. Corruption and some other elements of Ghanaian society are at odds with the image that the West and the international community commonly hold of the country: Ghana is a country in which grand and petty forms of corruption are at least perceived to abound. It is not uncommon to be stopped by police officers and asked for money before being released. According to the *Afrobarometer* – the most reliable pan-African, non-partisan research network – 75% of Ghanaians assessed the government as having performed badly in providing reliable electricity and an impressive 89% perceive corruption among “some”, “most”, or “all” police officers. Akufo-Addo, who has had a long career as a lawyer and held the posts of Attorney General, Minister of Justice and Foreign Minister in previous administrations, has promised to actively tackle this issue by establishing an Office of Special Prosecutor – that will remain independent of the government – to fight corruption, including that perpetrated by political office holders and politicians.

### **Lessons from Ghana: Observation by peace actors – seizing technology, mainstreaming gender and youth, and ensuring response capacity**

In this electoral context, large international delegations of observers (including the American National Democratic Institute, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the EU and national delegations) came to Ghana. Nonetheless, the most impressive initiatives came from Ghana and West Africa itself. Acknowledging the risks that competition in electoral processes can bring about, a series of processes and electoral practices have been institutionalised. The Election Situation Room (ESR) and the Women’s Situation Room (WSR) are two salient examples. The Election Observation Group is an assembly of Ghanaians from an array of participating organisations who monitor, analyse and respond to challenges arising during elections. The Women’s Situation Room is a mechanism that empowers women and youths to ensure peace before, during, and after elections. These are two national and regional approaches to electoral processes that could be replicated across the continent to promote the peaceful conduct of elections. These processes are local, inclusive, and context-specific and respond to a society-wide conscious, active effort to uphold democratic practices.

These efforts coming from Ghana and the region have more legitimacy and greater potential for impact and they are led by a variety of organisations. In Ghana, organisations such as the West African Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) and the National Peace Council (NPC), both of which have a protagonist role in the ESR, stand out. The West African Network for Peacebuilding is a regional peacebuilding organisation with presence in all ECOWAS member states. The NPC is an independent statutory national peace institution with a variety of obligations; for months, the members of the council have been touring the whole country and engaging with relevant actors to promote non-violent resolution of conflicts and assuage tensions.

The National Peace Council, the West African Network for Peace, the Kofi Annan Peacekeeping Training Center, the Legon Center for International Affairs and Diplomacy, Transform Ghana, and other organisations participated in training and the Election Situation Room before, during, and in the direct aftermath of the elections. This collection of institutions form the structures and processes that have been adopted to ensure peace and enhance response capacity. The Election Situation Room was divided into three “rooms”. In the first room, the data-gathering room, observers were in touch with 750 men and women deployed in the field who collected relevant information relating to events happening in different regions and polling stations. Each observer in this room coordinated a team of observers and, based on the data obtained, elaborated a report that was passed to the

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analysis room. Each of the field observers had a standardised form that allowed them to collect information on the opening of the polling stations, the functioning of the polling stations, the closure of the polls and the counting procedures, and provide general observations at the polling stations. A team of trained analysts (which included a number of university professors) then evaluated the data and made a series of recommendations that were handed to the decision-making room. Based on these recommendations, the eminent men and women from the decision-making room adopted the pertinent measures and made press statements.

To carry out their duties, the organisations used context-specific technologies to communicate with each other. The coordinated election observation group used an online platform specifically designed for the elections. It consisted of an SMS platform and other media plus additional information to be uploaded to a WhatsApp group. Through this holistic and countrywide process, the ESR monitored the conduct of the elections, human rights abuses, and corruption that could affect the ethics and integrity of the elections. While the voting was almost uneventful, tensions rose in the aftermath of the voting. After the collation of votes, by law, the only person who can declare the results is the chairperson of the Electoral Commission. The NPP had a sophisticated parallel counting system (as did some of the electoral observation delegations)

and it claimed victory shortly after the polls closed. Regardless, the Electoral Commission took more than two days to publish the official results and frictions between supporters of both the NDC and the NPP emerged. Both took to the streets and for hours there were fears that conflict could occur. The system put in place by the Electoral Situation Room allowed the eminent men and women to respond to this situation, make press statements addressed to the Electoral Commission and the candidates, contact the relevant actors, and adopt the necessary measures.

This is not the first time an Election Situation Room has been put in place in West Africa, but it is perhaps the occasion on which it has been done most effectively. In Cote d'Ivoire, similar efforts were made but as a result of internet deficiencies observers were not able to use the online platform to the fullest. In Ghana, it showed the enormous potential of local initiatives and, despite the alarms raised, the elections and the post-election period remained peaceful.

### **Gender inequality in Ghanaian politics – The innovations of the Women's Situation Room**

The Women's Situation Room (WSR) is a women-led peace-building mechanism. As one eminent woman described it, this is not an organisation but a process that starts well before the election and seeks to incorporate women and

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young people who have traditionally been excluded from politics. In the African context, Ghana is severely underperforming in this realm. In Africa, 23% of parliamentarians are women. Up until the December elections, only 10.9% of seats in the Ghanaian parliament were held by women. In this electoral cycle, women's representation rose from 29 to 35 seats out of 275 in parliament. Only one of the seven presidential candidates was a woman. The conduct of the elections in Ghana is indubitably in general laudable but this is one aspect in which it fails massively. This reflects high levels of discrimination as captured in the **social institutions and gender index**. Given these failures, initiatives such as the Women's Situation Room become indispensable.

As part of the Women's Situation Room, a team of eminent women leaders from Ghana and other international women are selected to serve in the Eminent Women's Room, but as in the case of the Election Situation Room, there are several spaces dedicated to different aspects of the process. In one room, there was a call centre where young men and women received complaint calls and filled out forms accordingly. These forms were then printed and given to the eminent women who decided how to proceed. There was a delegation of the police and a delegation of the Electoral Commission. The eminent women decided on the actions to pursue in moments of crisis, and whether to engage the EC, the police, or adopt other measures.

The most innovative aspect of the WSR in Ghana was the effort to include youth in the entire process. The men and women in the call centre were youths from across the country. Just as there was an eminent women's room, there was a youth room. In the youth group, young women and men from vigilante groups and other youth groups participated in a series of activities and had responsibilities before, during, and after the election. Just as the eminent women responded to the events on the ground, so did the youth. This effort responds to the widespread notion that if violence occurs it is usually at the hands of young men. Given the presence of vigilante groups, it was believed that engaging young people was a way of making sure that, if anything was to occur, there would be a group capable of contacting the culprits and halting the incidents. Interestingly, youths from other ECOWAS countries were invited to partake in the youth room. In this case, young people from Liberia (the country where the WSR was initiated) and Sierra Leone attended. This could be one of many efforts to build a network of African youth that serves the purpose of addressing the multiple challenges that young African men and women are facing.

### **Learning from Ghana's electoral processes**

In the African continent, where a rise in pan-African sentiment and the will to seize the future on African terms remains high, but where elections are a likely trigger of instability and conflict, having a democratic example to follow is essential. In a year in which democracy has been put into question and Africa has seen a series of highly problematic elections – Uganda, Gabon, and most recently, Gambia, to name a few – the celebration of peaceful elections and equally important, a peaceful transfer of power, has a powerful signalling effect. Delegations from many other countries across Africa came to Ghana to witness the elections. Delegations also attended the Women's Situation Room in an effort to learn from the experience and replicate it. Interestingly, one of the delegations that seems most willing to replicate it was that of Somaliland, which will be holding elections in March. It is this knowledge and best-practice cross-pollination between African states that has the biggest potential for enhancing transparent democracy and good governance in Africa. It is only fitting that Ghana – the land of Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's former president and Pan-Africanism's main proponent – is the country to set the example. Ghana is far from being perfect. Corruption still abounds, violent incidents recur, there are regional tensions and dissatisfaction with the government is rife, but still Ghanaians take to the electoral booths and the judiciary and take pride in their democratic record. Many lessons can be learnt from the domestic and regional processes that were put in place before, during and after the elections.