

GOVERNANCE

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Editorial Note

In recent years, the extreme weakness or sometimes total absence of governance has been identified as a leading factor in Africa's poor development record and related economic, social and political crises. Informed observers, analysts and reformers of different ideological persuasions are in basic agreement with the claim in the World Bank's influential 1989 report - Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth - that "underlying the litany of Africa's problems is a crisis of governance".

Ghana, like other African countries, has suffered a serious deficit in governance. Governmental operations, especially under unelected/military regimes, have been lacking in accountability and transparency; rule of law has not prevailed; the trust of citizens in public institutions and authorities has been exceedingly low; participation in the political and policymaking processes has been sporadic and ineffectual; and the legitimacy of regimes and their programs have been woefully inadequate.

The democratic transition of 1991, the return to constitutional rule and multi-party competition provide a fresh opportunity to promote good governance in the country. However, with Ghana's history of failed economic and political reforms in mind, and considering the present social, economic and political situation of the country, the return to constitutional and democratic rule will not automatically deliver improvements in governance. The change from "bad" to "good" government, from personal rule to rule of law, from arbitrariness to consistency in governmental actions, from apathy to citizen participation in the political and policy processes, as well as the empowerment of civil society and creation of an environment favourable to private sector development, will surely run against the constraints of Ghanaian political history, the prevailing political culture, and the social and economic conditions. Therefore, all the possibilities offered by effective political leadership, statesmanship, as well as technological and intellectual resources of the country would have to be deployed to achieve the goal of establishing democratic governance. The Governance Newsletter is intended to contribute to this effort.

The Newsletter will provide a forum for an objective, high-quality, and whenever appropriate, policy-oriented discussion of issues of governance in Ghana today. Each issue will be devoted to a single topic related to democratic governance in Ghana, and will feature an article based partly on contributions from Ghanaians and non-Ghanaians selected on the basis of their expertise and or experience.

Dr. E. Gyimah-Boadi

POLITICAL PARTIES AS INSTRUMENTS OF NATIONAL UNITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN GHANA

With the political transition of 1992, and the inauguration of the 4th Republic on 7th January 1993, Ghana has embarked on yet another attempt at liberal democratic and constitutional rule. To those who believe that free political association, free speech and press, as well as decentralization of political and economic power, provide the most solid basis for sustained national unity and development, the return to liberal and multiparty democracy is indeed welcome. But to those who take the view that liberal democracy in general, and multi-partyism in particular, increases the threat to national unity and induces other national calamities, the transition represents an alarming threat.

Has democracy, and especially political party activity harmed the cause of national unity in Ghana? If yes, what has been done in the past to minimize such negative side effects? What are some of the

outstanding issues of national unity and democratic politics in Ghana today, and how may they be addressed? The discussions below are intended to shed light on these issues and to indicate ways in which political parties could maximize their contribution to national unity and development within a liberal democratic context.

As in all complex societies, there are many divisions in Ghanaian society. For example, there are divisions and tensions between the youth and the elderly; along ideological lines between the populists and the elitists, traditionalists and modernists; along class lines between the establishment and anti-establishment groups; and between rural and urban dwellers. But it is the perceived threat to national unity posed by ethnic divisions and conflicts that has occupied the attention of Ghana's political leaders and nation builders.

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As a country put together by colonial authorities without regard to the ethnic affinities of the inhabitants, Ghana is a typical multiethnic state. And a concern has persisted, on the part of both colonial and post-colonial governments, that divisions among the various ethnic groups and administrative regions of the country might widen instead of closing over time. For instance, there have been worries over the possibilities that an Ewe secessionist movement might arise, and that conflicts over land rights between settlers and their host communities of the Northern and Eastern Regions might get out of hand, and so on.

Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, the approach of independence and the lifting of the veil of colonial authoritarianism, provoked an upsurge of ethnic assertions. For instance, northern Ghana declared a feeling of social and economic distance from the rest of the colony; Ewes asserted a desire to separate from the rest of Ghana and to join their "cousins" in Togoland; and Ashantis demanded special protections for their cocoa and mineral wealth, and for their culture. In addition, there was a strong ethnic character to the leaderships, core memberships and platforms of some of the main parties which had emerged to contest the pre-independence elections of 1954 and 1956 (eg. Togoland Congress Party, Northern Peoples' Party and National Liberation Movement). Further threats to national unity and development were experienced around the time of the 1969 elections and during the Progress Party administration from 1969 to 1972. There was a rise in tensions between Akans and Ewes, and relations between the ruling party and the opposition National Alliance of Liberals were largely acrimonious. And some would claim that between 1979 and 1981, there was a "northern bias" in the administration of President Limann and the Peoples' National Party.

It is on the basis of this admittedly thin evidence that some regimes and their supporters propounded theories that democratic pluralism was either impossible in, or inappropriate for, Ghana. They argued that liberal democracy in general, and multi-party politics in particular, was inimical to national unity and to the rapid social and economic development of the country. And they used that argument, at least, as one of the main justifications for executing a retreat from liberal democracy and imposing authoritarian single- or no-party rule of either the civilian or military type.

In Ghana, the trend of promoting national unity by retreating from democratic pluralism started a few years after independence. It began with the CPP Government introducing measures to abrogate the

provisions of the 1957 Constitution that provided for the establishment of quasi-federalist regional assemblies, and prohibiting the formation of parties along regional, ethnic and religious lines (Avoidance of Discrimination Act). And it continued with the vast expansion in presidential/executive powers, ostensibly to give the president a stronger hand in dealing with threats to national unity and development. The trend reached its height in the 1st Republic with the establishment of a de jure single-party system, and continued under various military regimes (between 1966 and 1992) in which political parties were banned altogether.

Consequently, Ghana has had longer periods of military rule than of multiparty democracy. In fact, since 1966 there has been a total of some twenty two years of military rule as compared with a total of just over six years of multiparty democracy. Those who criticise and condemn party politics in Ghana overlook this obvious historical fact. A tradition of multiparty politics needs time to grow and become deeply ingrained in a country. Frequent military intervention has hitherto made Ghana an arid soil for multiparty democracy. Any assessment of the multiparty system which fails to take account of this historical factor must of necessity be flawed. The system cannot flourish in circumstances where it is struck down after two years to be followed by longer periods of military despotism.

It may be true, in general, that the case against liberal democracy and multipartyism rests on thin empirical grounds. It may also be true that the evils of multiparty politics may have been exaggerated by unelected regimes and their supporters in a self-serving manner. And certainly, the record of national unity and development under Ghana's unelected and no-party governments has been no better than unelected and party-based ones. But it is equally true that there is a small body of opinion in Ghanaian politics that is still uncomfortable with liberal democracy and multipartyism.

Indeed suspicions that party politics could pose a threat to national unity and development may be read into the provisions of Article 55 of the 1992 Constitution. The provisions reflect a lingering doubt in the minds of a segment of the Ghanaian public or, at least the framers of that constitution, that the country's political parties cannot be relied upon to act voluntarily to maintain a national profile, or that left on their own, the parties will assume a sectarian character. Thus, the provisions of the article specifically enjoin the parties not only to have a national character, but also to ensure that their membership, leadership, administrative structures and platforms have a national spread.

Section 7 of that article includes the requirements that a party seeking registration must satisfy the Electoral Commission that

"there is ordinarily resident, or registered as a voter, in each district of Ghana, at least one founding member of the party",

"the party has branches in all regions of Ghana and is, in addition, organised in not less than two-thirds of the districts in each region ".

" the party's name, emblem, colour, motto or any other symbol, has no sectional connotation or gives the appearance that its activities are confined only to a part of Ghana";

And section 9 provides that

"the members of the executive committee of a political party shall be chosen from all the regions of Ghana. "

In addition, there are important aspects of the practice of multiparty democracy that may create an erroneous impression of heightened conflict in a multiethnic country. First, the relative openness with which the grievances of ethnic, regional and other groups find expression in liberal democratic settings, such as within parliament, in the mass media, and sometimes in the courts, as well as on party platforms, do give an impression of increased tension and sectarian conflict. In such a situation, it is tempting to contrast the democratic practice of free and open debate with the practice under authoritarian governments where conflicts are suppressed or swept under the carpet. Second, and perhaps more damaging to the image of multiparty politics is the tendency for voting in Ghanaian elections to follow an ethnic pattern. For instance, at least, a similar pattern of voting could be detected in the PP versus NAL, and NDC versus NPP in the elections of 1969 and 1992, respectively.

This background of limited experience of multi-party politics, and the prevalence of sentiments against it amongst a section of Ghanaians, present a major challenge to political parties and their leaderships in the 4th Republic. It will certainly be unwise of the parties and the advocates of multipartyism, to adopt a complacent attitude to national unity and development in the new Republic.

NATIONAL UNITY

Fortunately, the tradition in Ghana has been one of ethnic and religious tolerance. With very few

exceptions, the political parties in general have followed this tradition of tolerance, and gathered in their folds people from all ethnic groups, religious persuasions and social status. In addition, in multi-party electoral contests, Ghanaian political parties have been following an informal practice of carefully balancing their presidential tickets and important offices (chairmanships, general secretaryships, treasurers) regionally and ethnically. Indeed, the readiness with which political parties in the 1992 elections complied with the provisions of Article 55 indicates an ability to confound their detractors and to contribute to national unity.

However, it will take continued compliance with both the letter and spirit of those provisions in the day to day operations of political parties and around elections, to convince skeptics that party politics does not necessarily impede progress towards national unity. In this regard, parties may consider going beyond the requirements of Article 55 of the constitution and formalising the existing informal practice of ethnic representation in party (and government) structures. In addition, the parties and their leaders must try to restrain themselves and their followers from saying and doing things that may inflame ethnic passions in the country.

NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Development must be viewed in very wide terms. It has become fashionable in some quarters to view development only in the economic sense. This narrow view carries the danger of blinding policy makers to other aspects of development which are equally important such as development of the democratic order and social development. Indeed, all these aspects of development must be seen as inseparable and interdependent.

The Constitution has provided the grand plan for a new democratic order. This fledgling democratic order must however be nurtured with dedication over the years. Political parties are well placed to play a very important part in this nurturing process. They constitute powerful pressure groups. They can develop the tradition of tolerance and inter party dialogue which is essential for the practice of democracy. They can act as champions of the victims of abuse of power. In this way they can prevent the democratic order from being stifled, and ensure that it can take root.

The contributions political parties can make to economic development are many. They can formulate alternative policies and programs aimed at fostering the growth of the economy. They can draw attention to the lapses and mistakes of the agencies of the state which are in charge of the economy. They can exert

pressure to ensure accountability. Economic development depends on many factors: competent planning and implementation of proper policies and programs; creating an atmosphere which will encourage and promote enterprise and productivity, and create employment; husbanding the resources of the country and, in particular, handling the finances of the nation with honesty, competence and prudence. Political parties are in a particularly good position to ensure that these vital ingredients of economic development are fostered.

The parties have among them men and women of skill, competence and experience to do so. They are also well equipped to stir the imagination and mobilise the efforts of the people. It must be conceded that not every political party may be able to meet the demands of economic development. It is almost certain, however, that a political party which is seriously committed to winning power and governing in a democratic country, will try to meet the demands of economic development.

Again the aim of social development is to meet the needs of society generally in all parts of the country. These needs are wide and include education, medical care, urban and rural development, adequate communication, supply of water, sanitation and so on. One problem which every country faces is the impossibility of meeting all the needs of society at all levels to the satisfaction of all people. This means that for effective social development, there must be recognition of the need for a scheme of priorities. The priorities must necessarily differ from town to town, village to village, district to district and region to region. The significant role which political parties can play in social development is to identify the priority needs of particular regions, districts or communities, and to focus attention on them. For some communities, the priority need may be an access road; for some it

may be water or health facilities, a post office or police station. Because political parties which operate on a national basis have members and supporters everywhere, they form good clearing houses for information about the priority needs of communities. Even a party in opposition can play a useful role in identifying priority social needs and pressing for their satisfaction.

CONCLUSION

On the whole, parties in the 4th Republic have shown an inclination to contribute to the unity and development of the country. However, to fully live up to their promise, the parties must overcome the problems of weak organisation, inadequate finance, and policy (maybe ideological) incoherence that plague them currently. For instance, a stronger research capability will put them in a better position to develop alternatives to government policies and programs, make constructive criticisms, and contribute to the public policy process. Similarly, the development of coherent policies as well as stronger institutional identity would minimise the tendency to personalise the parties around their respective leaderships. It would also reduce their reliance on the ethnic origins of party leaderships as a key basis for canvassing votes.

However, in the end, political parties must be around long enough to develop their organisational and research capacities, financial bases and identities. They need to be around long enough to learn from their mistakes and correct them; to learn to live with political victories and defeats; and to learn how to relate to each other and to the electorate at large. That, in turn, depends very much on the survival of the 4th Republic and its constitution which guarantee the existence of the political parties. And that is a responsibility shared by all Ghanaians and supporters of the country's economic and political progress .•

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