

GOVERNANCE

Vol. 1 No.4

A publication of the Institute of Economic Affairs

Dec. 1995

SURVIVAL OF MULTIPARTY DEMOCRACY IN GHANA

by

B.J. da Rocha

The politics of Ghana have, unfortunately, not evolved along a smooth and steady path. In colonial times our politics was substantially a politics of protest against foreign domination by the colonial power. There was not and could not be multi party democracy in any real sense. A few political parties movements and societies functioned but the power was in the heads of the colonial government and not the people.

With independence came the hope that a system of multi party democracy would be firmly established in Ghana. Unfortunately this was a vain hope. Those into whose hands power fell did not believe in political pluralism. Opposition to the government was not tolerated and was actively stifled because the government was committed to Marxist or communist principles. Under the Marxist/communist/socialist regime of the immediate post independence government the dominant doctrine was the one party state and total control by an over centralised government. Opposition politicians were either detained without trial or driven into exile.

The fall of the first post independence civilian government through a military coup in 1966 could have paved the way for the firm entrenchment of

multiparty democracy. Unfortunately, however, the military did not allow this to happen. The fate of the Second and Third Republics are well known. Each lasted barely thirty months only to be overthrown by a military coup. As is well known, military governments do not tolerate political activity or political parties. They see the usual manifestations of democracy as threats to state security.

As a result of these developments Ghana has missed the opportunity to develop firm foundations for multi party politics. The advent of the Constitution of the Fourth Republic therefore offers to the people of Ghana a unique opportunity to build those institutions and develop the traditions which alone can ensure a lasting democratic order.

In this essay, an attempt is made to highlight two topics which must be of interest to all those who want to see the survival and consolidation of the new democratic order of the Fourth Republic.

In the immediate aftermath of the end of colonial rule in Ghana, and indeed in all of the former colonial territories in Africa, the trend was towards the one-party political system. The

Governance is a bi-monthly publication of the Institute of Economic Affairs, Ghana, a non-partisan, non-profit research Institute and co-sponsored by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy in UK. Subscriptions to Governance are made available to those who make voluntary donations to the IEA. Address all correspondence to The Editor, Institute of Economic Affairs, EO. Box 01936, Christiansborg, Accra. Tel. 77 66 41 & 77 9568/9

proponents of the system saw in it certain merits. Some of the merits were:

1. it was supposed to foster national unity and break down tribal barriers and differences.
2. it provided a strong government which was needed to ward off any erosion of the country's new Independence.
3. the combination of national unity and strong government would mobilise the people and ensure the rapid economic and social development of the country.

Political pluralism was, on the other hand, seen as inimical to national unity since it tended to foster tribalism and sectarianism. A plurality of parties would create instability because opposition to the ruling party would disrupt orderly government and development.

The advocates of the multiparty democracy for their part saw in such a system the merits of providing the people with freedom to associate and to hold and propagate divergent views. To them the one-party system, far from fostering national unity, bred intolerance and oppression. Those who refused to fit into the one-party mould were condemned as trouble-makers and enemies of the state. In practical terms, the ruling party became synonymous with the state. Outside of the ruling party a citizen had no real political or constitutional rights. And even within the ruling party everything was controlled by a small powerful elite who progressively ceased to be in real touch with the people. Genuine choice by the people was impossible because only members of the one ruling party could hold office. Elections, if ever they were held, were a stage-managed farce.

The track records of the governments of post-independence African states have demonstrated that

the one-party system and the totalitarian and over-centralised government that went with it could not foster democracy. Abuse of power, deep-rooted hatred and resentment were the bitter fruits of the system rather than national unity.

The Marxist communist system of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was the model for the one-party system in Africa although some African leaders disclaimed communism and pretended that their system had indigenous roots. The dramatic collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and the rest of Eastern Europe demonstrated the shallow foundations of a system which could be sustained only by fear and repression. There can be little doubt that in the greater part of the world multiparty democracy has won the debate and is now the order of the day.

Here in Ghana our new Constitution has adopted and entrenched the right to form and join political parties. It is this right which is the basis of multi party democracy. Article 55(1) and (2) provide:

1. The right to form political parties is hereby guaranteed.
2. Every citizen of Ghana of voting age has the right to join a political party.

The multi-party system is now entrenched by the Constitution. This, however, is not by itself enough to ensure its survival. The system must prove its worth in Ghana. There must be a collective will in the people of this country to save the system and make it achieve its true purpose which is to ensure freedom of association and expression without which there can be no democracy. The object of this paper is to explore the various ways in which multiparty democracy can be preserved.

To begin with, it is necessary to look at the political parties. The manner in which political parties

are structured, organised and led, has a great deal to do with the credibility and allegiance they command among the people. The Constitution provides a few important guidelines. It requires that every party should be national in character, the internal organisation should be democratic and its founding members and leaders should be persons fit to hold public office.

One must also consider the functions and the role of a political party in a democratic society. Many people seem to think that the fighting of elections is the only function of a political party. Fighting and, if possible, winning elections is a very important function of a political party. The winning of power is the greatest opportunity a party has to attempt to realise its policies and objectives. Every political party therefore seeks to win power or have a share in the running of government. There is, however, a great deal more to a political party's role in national affairs than fighting or even winning elections. The Constitution is illuminating on the role of the political party. Article 55 (3) provides: "Subject to the provisions of this article, a political party is free to participate in shaping the political will of the people to disseminate information on political ideas. Social and Economic programmes of a national character and sponsor candidates for elections to any public office other than to District Assemblies or lower local government units. "

Article 55(10) provides that, "every citizen of voting age has the right to participate in political activity, to influence the composition and policies of Government". The Constitution is even-handed in relation to political parties. Article 55(11) provides that "the State shall provide fair opportunity to all political parties to present their programmes to the public by ensuring equal access to the state owned media. "

The survival of multi-party democracy involves several factors - some within and some outside the

specific provisions of the Constitution. A few of these factors will now be considered.

1. First and foremost the existence and operation of more than one party with different ideas and objectives must be accepted as a way of life. The Constitution recognises this in Article 56 which provides that "Parliament shall have no power to enact a law to establish or authorise the establishment of a body, or movement with the right or power to impose on the people of Ghana a common programme or set of objectives of a religious or political nature". No party should think that it can have any excuse to opt out of the clear provisions of the Constitution entrenching the rights of political parties to exist. The moment any party opts out, the system is jeopardised.
2. Every political party, whether in power or out of power, must recognize the rights of other parties to exist and operate within the framework of the Constitution. Diversity of opinions, programmes and objectives need not necessarily breed hostility and mutual exclusion.
3. Where elections are free and fair, a party voted into power must be constantly conscious of the fact that it can also be voted out of power. In the latter event it must gracefully accept the verdict of the people. By the same token, a party beaten must accept defeat with dignity and brace itself for the next round. The acceptance of election results is of the essence of multiparty democracy. It is therefore essential that the electoral system be so organised and managed and elections so conducted that the results commend universal acceptance and credibility. Political leaders must recognise and accept the duty to ensure free and fair elections.
4. In a multi-party system, the ruling party or parties and the parties in opposition must know that they could easily change places at the next

election. In the conduct of their relations with one another therefore, the ruling party should not forget that it is a potential opposition; nor must the opposition forget that it is a potential government in the waiting.

A tradition whereby the ruling party tries to crush the opposition or the opposition tries to make it impossible for the ruling party to govern, undermines the multi-party system and will eventually discredit and destroy it. Opposition may be strong of even uncompromising on serious matters of principle, but it must be understood always that this must be done within the constitutional framework. The government party must also realise that it is no sign of weakness to listen to what the opposition has to say; neither is it prudent to dismiss out of hatred, opinions expressed by its opponents. Neither the government nor the opposition has a monopoly of wisdom or good ideas.

5. Leaders of political parties must recognise their responsibility to build bridges across party lines and to treat one another with courtesy and decorum. All citizens are equal in the eyes of the law. The election or appointment of a person to a high office of state does not overnight turn him into some Superior being. Political leaders must realise that in a free, democratic republic, the respect which goes with public office must be earned. Respect may be and has often been

commanded and exacted by force and fear but such respect is really a kind of hypocrisy not genuine respect.

6. If political leaders treat one another with mutual respect and frankness, their followers and supporters cannot fail to take notice and be influenced.
10. Political leaders must be able to identify matters of national importance on which consensus among them is possible. It is a good thing for the public to know that on some particular issue of national importance all political parties are of one mind. Even in areas where there are irreconcilable differences, the art of reasoned discussion and debate must be cultivated instead of the exchange of invectives and abuse.
11. An encouraging feature is the enthusiasm Ghanaians have for political parties. One revealing aspect of the forums conducted by the National Commission for Democracy in 1990 was the overwhelming expression on the part of the people for a return to multi-party democracy. Ghanaians like their political parties. There is great hope for the survival of multi party democracy if the effort will be made by all, politicians, chiefs, the military and the general populace to preserve it .•

Governance is a bi-monthly publication of the Institute of Economic Affairs, Ghana, a non-partisan, non-profit research Institute and co-sponsored by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy in UK. Subscriptions to Governance are made available to those who make voluntary donations to the IEA. Address all correspondence to the Editor, Institute of Economic Affairs, P.O. Box 01936, Christiansborg, Accra. Tel. 77 66 41 & 77 95 68/9

Note: Nothing written herein is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of the Institute of Economic Affairs or as an attempt to aid or hinder government policy