

GOVERNANCE

Vol. 2 No.1

A publication of the Institute of Economic Affairs

Feb. 1996

IN SEARCH OF A DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL CULTURE IN GHANA

By
*K wasi Prempeh**

Introduction

Ghanaians once again are gearing up for multiparty national elections. In December this year, voters will be choosing a president and a multi-party parliament for another term of four years. If all goes well, the upcoming elections will mark the first time in Ghana's political history that the tenure of a democratically elected government has run its constitutional course and a succeeding government is elected through multiparty elections. Regardless of the actual outcome of the elections, the passing of that milestone should restore some faith in the *possibility* of a democratic Ghana.

Still, many serious obstacles continue to bedevil the prospects of democratic *consolidation* in Ghana. Not least among these is the present government's self-professed aversion to democratic politics and the occasional anti-democratic rhetoric and posturing of some key political insiders, behaviour which calls into question the democratic *bona fides* of a critical faction of the national political elite. Another potentially destabilising factor is the increasing pauperisation of a large segment of the Ghanaian population. Mass

poverty and unemployment, especially among the urban youth (amidst a growing, but still small affluent class) could create a *crisis of legitimacy* even for a democratically elected government. And if Ghana's post-independence experience is instructive, this state of affairs might provide an *excuse* for yet another self-appointed "redeemer" to shoot his way into power. At any rate, the spectre of another coup d'etat in Ghana has not altogether receded and, indeed, will continue to cast a gloomy shadow over our infant democracy until *civilian* authorities assert effective and lasting control over the military.

Pro-democracy activists, of course, can do little to ameliorate the dangers that mass pauperisation or military adventurism poses to democracy. There is however a great deal more that can be done to favourably influence other more controllable variables. Thus far, pro-democracy activists across Africa have tended to put all their "democracy eggs" in the "multiparty basket" and not paid enough attention to other avenues of consolidating democracy. Unfortunately, because of the enormous advantages of prolonged

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 the 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, PO Box 01936, Christianborg, Accra. Tel. 77 66 41

incumbency, multiparty elections, instead of facilitating a transition to democracy, have simply provided a path to legitimacy for certain authoritarian regimes in Africa. It is such perverse outcomes that should counsel against placing too much faith in multiparty elections as a guarantor of democracy.

Another reason to look beyond multiparty elections is the periodicity of elections. Where multiparty politics exist at all, contested national elections are held only periodically: once every four years in Ghana's case. But democratic consolidation requires far more than a quadrennial ritual of proforma multiparty elections. The ultimate challenge is for the Ghanaian polity, and especially the political elite, to internalize and reflect democratic values, attitudes, and habits. In short, the process of democratic consolidation must be centered on building a *democratic political culture*. And one avenue that holds great promise in this regard is the promotion of *internal party democracy*.

Multiparty politics tends to create a "democratic paradox" of sorts. Because it allows for inter-party competition, multiparty politics generally promotes greater political pluralism. Thus, in one sense, multiparty politics can be said to generate "*more* democracy". At the same time, however, intense competition *among* political parties creates pressures for greater cohesion and unity *within* the competing parties, since each party believes that only by submerging all internal differences and presenting a "united front" can it effectively and successfully compete at the polls. It is in this latter sense that multiparty politics tends to produce *less*, not more, *intra-party* democracy. However, because democracy is often understood in terms of "multiparty democracy," the diminution in intra-party democracy that tends to accompany multiparty politics is hardly noticed or recognised as a problem.

Of course, the absence of democracy within political parties does not represent as ominous a threat to the success of Ghana's democratic experiment as, say, an insubordinate or partisan military. But neither must it be assumed that internal party democracy is irrelevant to the issue of democratic consolidation. On the contrary, intra-party democracy is an important variable and resource which, given proper attention, could greatly enhance the prospects for democratic consolidation, but which, ignored, might frustrate

efforts at developing a democratic culture and ethos, particularly among the political elite. Because political parties constitute the building blocks of Ghana's constitutional democracy, promoting democracy at the party level is a way of securing the *foundations* of the democratic political system. Furthermore, because they serve as recruitment and training grounds for the development of national political leadership, political parties are ideal starting points or avenues for introducing the political elite, both present and future, to democratic habits and practices.

Using political parties as nurseries or laboratories of democracy has an added advantage in terms of cost. Democracy does not come cheap. Still, compared to such democratic necessities as periodic elections, a fully-functioning parliament, a credible judicial system, and a well-staffed executive, promoting and institutionalising democracy within political parties will come at little cost to the national treasury, especially in the light of the fact that the 1992 Constitution of Ghana already *requires* all political parties to conduct their internal affairs in accordance with "democratic principles," thereby shifting the "cost" of internal party democracy to the parties themselves. Furthermore, because parties are smaller and more defined political units, it should be relatively easier and, thus, less costly to make them democratic than it would be to democratise the polity at large. In short, internal party democracy is a feasible and economical way to proceed with the task of building a democratic political *culture*.

The Role of Political Parties In Building A Democratic Political Culture

Much intellectual effort has been squandered debating whether or not precolonial African political systems were "democratic." However that question is answered and no matter what historical precedents can be marshalled in defence of the proposition that democracy is not alien to traditional African society, it is fair to say, given Ghana's *colonial* and *post-colonial* history of authoritarian governments, that the present generation of Ghanaians, including even the pro-democracy segment of the political elite, has had little preparation or experience in the art or practice of democracy. It is this present "democratic deficit," not the pre-colonial past, that has greater relevance in the contemporary search for democracy in Ghana. Indeed, all talk of democratic consolidation will come to nought unless this "democratic

deficit" in our national political culture is acknowledged and remedied because "*you cannot build a democracy without democrats.*"

The dearth of democrats and democratic values among Ghanaians does not mean, as some might suppose, that democracy is an unattainable dream in Ghana. Even if a democratic political culture is considered a prerequisite for democracy, it must be recognised that democracy is a *learned behaviour*, and not some natural endowment bestowed on some societies and denied others by some divine chance. None of the established democracies in the world today started off as a democracy. Rather, each has had to learn and work its way to that desirable end. In short, democracies and democrats are made, not born. Thus, for democracy to take root and thrive in Ghana, as it has elsewhere, Ghanaians must cultivate and develop, through practice, the habits of civility in public discourse, resolution of conflict through dialogue, toleration of dissent, and transparency and accountability in the exercise of authority. Simply put, for Ghana to be a well-functioning democracy, Ghanaians must learn to become democrats.

Obviously, it will be impracticable for all Ghanaians to become democrats. Nor is such mass "democratic conversion," even if desirable, necessary. It is, however, imperative that those who individually or collectively aspire to political office first learn to play by the rules of the democratic game. And since political parties are the primary vehicles for recruiting, developing, and sponsoring individuals for national political office, they are ideally suited to impart the necessary democratic learning to their members. Indeed, there is no better place to begin sowing the seeds of democracy and cultivating democrats than within the very organisations that are each designed to bring together politically interested citizens and to prepare them both individually and collectively for high political office. In short, promoting internal party democracy is one way of ensuring that democracy (like charity) begins, as it should, at "home" where the political elite prepare themselves for political office.

There is, of course, more to intra-party democracy than simply a means of bringing democracy home to politicians. Internal party democracy is also crucial because it affects the practice and quality of democracy at the national level. The manner in which parties select their electoral candidates and how parties generally conduct their affairs internally can have both positive and negative *externalities* on the quality of representative democracy in the society at large. A thriving democracy at the party level (i.e., *micro-level*

democracy) tends to reinforce democracy at the national level (i.e., *macro-level* democracy), while the absence of democracy at the *micro* level tends to undermine the quality of *macro-level* democracy. For this reason, democracy advocates should not cavalierly dismiss whatever goes on within a political party as simply a matter of that party's "internal affairs".

The quality of democracy within a governing party is particularly crucial to the preservation of *macro-level* democracy in a *de facto* one-party state. As unwelcome as it might be, the spectre of a *de facto* one-party state lawfully emerging in Ghana is not altogether far-fetched. Although article 3, section 1, of the 1992 Constitution prohibits a *de jure* one-party state, the constitution leaves wide open the *possibility* of a *de facto* one-party state. Even under conditions of free and fair elections, it is quite conceivable that a governing party might defeat the opposition in *successive* national elections. This outcome is indeed likely if the opposition is perennially fragmented into a number of small parties. Of course, it is always likely that a governing party will repeatedly prevail over the opposition at the polls simply because the electorate is satisfied with its performance in government. Whatever the reason, repeated defeats at the polls could demoralise the opposition and cause significant numbers of opposition party members to defect to the governing party, further consolidating the latter's hold on power. In any event, it would be a mistake to expect or assume from the mere existence of competing parties, that the reins of government will necessarily oscillate from one governing party to a party in opposition.

If, indeed, a *de facto* one-party state remains a constitutional possibility in Ghana, then the absence of democracy within a party that continuously wins control of governmental power would gravely endanger the quality of representative democracy in the society at large. To be sure, opposition parties will continue to exist, and the two-term constitutional limit on holding the office of president will produce new faces at the head of the executive. Still, a hegemonic governing party that is also anti-democratic is a recipe for self-dealing, mediocrity, and a lack of accountability in government.

Furthermore, not even the most democratic constitution can forever prevent an anti-democratic ruling party from taking the country down the authoritarian path. A dominant party that is hostile to democracy, if it can command the requisite numbers in the legislative chamber for purposes of amending parts of

the Constitution, can *constitutionally* undo or override important democratic safeguards provided for in that Constitution. In that regard, the *promise* of democracy embedded in a democratic constitution such as Ghana's 1992 Constitution is unlikely to be realised if the Constitution is operated by political actors or parties that do not demonstrate a commitment to democratic values and principles.

Although the quality of macro-level democracy will suffer somewhat if a *de facto* one-party regime emerges, to the extent that the governing party is internally democratic, the fact that members of that party could freely debate, dissent, and compete with each other individually or in factions within the party, would ensure the survival of *some* competitive and democratic politics in the state. Take the example of Japan.: Japan has been a *de facto* one-party state for virtually its entire post-World War II history. That notwithstanding, democratic politics generally has survived in the Japanese state. Part of the reason is that competition, dissent, and debate have continued to thrive within and among different factions of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party. To some extent, the same is true of post-independence politics in Botswana. Although a multiparty democracy, Botswana has been ruled by a single party throughout its post-colonial history. Despite this fact, Botswana has remained, by and large, a democracy, in part because the govern-

ing party has tolerated, if not encouraged, a good measure of democracy internally. In contrast, whenever a ruling party has demonstrated a hostility toward democracy even within the party, its emergence as the dominant party in the state has often meant the death of democracy in the society at large. Indeed, the journey down the path of totalitarianism which many African states look in the earlier post-independence period often be~{withL1} the governing party.

Macro-level democracy might also suffer as a result of a failure of democracy within the *non-governing* or opposition parties, especially the party most likely to form the alternative government. An opposition party that itself is internally undemocratic will lack the *moral standing* to challenge undemocratic behaviour on the part of the government. Indeed, by setting a bad moral example itself, an undemocratic opposition party may *reinforce* anti-democratic behaviour by the government. Moreover, as long as the possibility exists of an opposition party someday winning control of government, it is important to ensure that its members have acquired the necessary preparation, including preparation in the art of democracy, prior to assuming office. In sum, every political party, whether in or out of government, must serve both as a nursery and as a role model for democracy. Only if the political elite shows the way by example, will democratic habits and norms take root within the body politic at large .•

* The author is a Ghanaian legal practitioner currently based in Washington, D. C., U.S.A.

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 the 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, Christianborg, 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.