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**THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF GHANA'S
2002 DISTRICT LEVEL ELECTIONS
IN THE UPPER EAST REGION**

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THE INSTITUTE OF
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KWESI JONAH



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PREFACE

This paper attempts to analyse the social structure of the District Assemblies created by the District Assembly Elections of 2002. The Upper East Region of Ghana, which is the poorest region in the country, is the focus of the study. The analysis is situated against the background of the social, economic and political conditions of the region at the time of the District Assembly Elections of 2002.

It was discovered in the study that some 61% of the 270 people who were elected to the District Assemblies were mainly teachers and farmers, and that out of thirty-five women candidates only seventeen, or 48.55% were successful. In addition, only one out of ten disabled candidates was able to make it to the Assembly.

The Assemblies created by the Election of 2002, therefore, are predominantly constituted by able-bodied male teachers and farmers.

Both society and Government have a major responsibility to ensure that more women get elected in future elections, to ensure their full and free participation in Ghana's democratic political system.

Mrs. Jean Mensa
Administrator
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Accra, October 2003

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THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF GHANA'S 2002 DISTRICT LEVEL ELECTIONS IN THE UPPER EAST REGION

In 1987/88 the military government of the Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) led by Jerry John Rawlings introduced a new local government system in Ghana, as a first step towards returning Ghana to civil constitutional rule. The central institution on which the new system devolved was the District Assembly, known in larger towns and cities as the Municipal or Metropolitan Assembly.

The first elections to the 110 District Assemblies were held in 1988 and 1989, several years before Parliamentary and Presidential Elections were conducted in December 1992. The District Level elections of August 2002, the fourth under the new system, were organized under unique political circumstances. The party of President Jerry John Rawlings who introduced the new local government system had been voted out of power and a new government and president were in office. Ghana had experienced its first ever transfer of power from one elected government to another and democracy was growing in the country. Three Parliamentary and Presidential elections and four district level elections had been successfully conducted by August 2002. As yet the social basis of Ghana's local government system has not been subjected to any comprehensive and thorough study.

The time is now ripe to examine critically the social basis of the new democratic institutions in Ghana. The principal objective of this paper, therefore, is to unravel the social basis of local governance in Ghana by analyzing the social forces thrown up by the District level elections of August 2002. The focus will be on Ghana's Upper East Region, and the major question to be answered will be "What social classes did the District Level elections of August 2002 bring to the District Assemblies of Ghana's Upper East Region?"

THE APPROACH AND ARGUMENT

Traditional public administration and political science with their central focus on institutions, structures and functions have concentrated their research attention in the area of local government and decentralization on structural organization, reorganization and structural change. An alternative political sociological approach pioneered by S.M Lipset (1960) focuses on social structure or the social basis of political institutions, processes and behaviour. While the institutional orientation in political science and public administration has many benefits, it is not without its shortcomings and should not preclude the advantages of the many insights that could be derived from the full understanding of the social basis of institutions of governance.

In this brief essay about Ghana's District Level elections of August 2002, the central argument is that the District Assemblies that resulted from the District Level elections are nothing more than a mirror image of the social structure of the districts in which the Assemblies are located. The membership of the Assemblies therefore reflects a preponderance of the numerically and socially dominant classes in the districts. In rural districts this means peasants and the rural elite such as teachers. In urban areas the working classes and middle classes dominate the Assemblies. By extension, the dominant cultural values and prejudices would work against the representation of important sections of the population, especially women and special minorities such as the visually impaired and the physically challenged.

RECENT TREND OF THOUGHT

The third wave of democratization has generated a sustained and substantial interest in the subject as a process. As a consequence, a good proportion of the research that has been conducted in the area has sought to capture the sense of a process. A significant number of published works in this area are based on "measuring" (Beetham: 1994) or "Surveying" (Baechler: 1995) and "comparing" democracy (Duc and others: 1996).

Other studies have focused on “establishing” (Fischer: 1996), and “developing” (Budge: 1996), “Strengthening” (Gould: 1995) or even “reforming” institutions (Sandbrook and Oelbaum: 1997) to achieve democracy.

A major oversight in these studies is the almost total silence on the contribution, which local government and decentralization could make to the democratization process. Not surprisingly, the neglect of local government and decentralization in the study of democratization has consigned to oblivion the importance of elections to grassroots democracy and local governance as a whole.

Elections constitute a major political mechanism through which society is effectively linked with key institutions of the State, especially the Legislature, the Executive, and Local Government structures and sub-structures. Elections determine who runs these key institutions of State.

Contrary to the teachings of traditional political science, elections perform a political recruitment function, but not in a social vacuum. In a democracy elections link specific vertical and horizontal structures of the society to the key institutions of the State. For electoral studies to miss this aspect is to leave out the social foundations on which political institutions are constructed.

While local level elections might not have attracted adequate research interest, local government and decentralization in itself has become a subject of growing interest. Haruna (2001), Ahwoi (2000), Olowu (1998), Ayee (1996), Good (1996), Southall and Wood (1996) and Vaughan (1995) have all in various ways helped to throw the needed intellectual searchlight on different aspects of decentralization and local government, especially in Africa.

Significantly, these studies are silent on the role elections can play in effective local governance and democracy. Even more important, the majority of these studies are cast in the mould of traditional political science and public administration that focus on political institutions, structures, functions and the organization and re-organization of administrative and political institutions. The alternative paradigm that would shift the focus

onto the social structure of institutions has so far proven to be relatively unpopular.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL STRUCTURE OF UPPER EAST REGION

The Upper East Region of Ghana is predominantly agricultural, with an estimated 90% of the population engaged in peasant agriculture. Farms are small because of a high population density estimated at over 100 per square kilometer. The main crops produced are corn, millet, groundnuts, beans and rice. As a result of the population explosion and over exploitation the soils are impoverished and the yield low.

Owing to two large modern irrigation dams constructed under the Nkrumah regime (1951-1966), approximately 3,700 hectares of land were developed, 2,500 hectares at Tono near Navrongo and 1,200 at Veve near Bolgatanga. These have made possible large scale production of tomato, rice, cotton and maize (Dery: 1982, Asongbee: 1989). These irrigation schemes opened the way for the entry of a few commercial farmers, mainly civil servants.

Livestock and poultry keeping also constitute important economic activities in the Upper East Region. Almost every household keeps some cattle, goats, sheep, pigs, guinea and ordinary fowls (Baffoe: 1993).

Cottage industries, such as basket weaving, pottery, pito-brewing and food preparation, also constitute a principal economic activity. Whereas in agriculture the large-scale projects established by the Nkrumah government have survived, in the manufacturing industry there has been total collapse and de-industrialization. Two large factories, Beef Processing at Bolgatanga and a Tomato Cannery at Pwalugu, have been standing idle for more than a decade and attempts at divestiture have not been successful.

Government administration has become the main source of formal sector employment, especially in major urban centers such as Bolgatanga, Bawku and Navrongo.

The schools in the towns and villages of the region, however,

constitute by far the largest source of wage employment. The economic structure of the region is the major determinant of its social structure. Peasant farmers and teachers are found in both town and countryside, while civil servants and professionals are found largely in the regional capital, Bolgatanga, and to a limited extent in other urban towns such as Navrongo and Bawku.

Low rainfall, perhaps the lowest in the country, combined with depleted soils has produced in the Upper East region Ghana's worst-case poverty scenario. The overall trend in poverty in Ghana has been generally positive. The proportion of the poor in general dropped from 52% in 1991/92 to about 40% in 1998/99. However, the decline is not evenly distributed across regions, and in the northern part of Ghana as a whole the proportion of the population defined as poor has increased dramatically. The Upper East is the one region in the north of Ghana where as much as 88% of the population is characterized as poor by the 1998/99 Ghana Living Standards Survey. In the 1991/92 Survey only 65% of the people were poor. By contrast, in the adjacent Upper West region the proportion of the poor has dropped from 88% in 1991/92 to 84% in 1998/99. The Upper East, Ghana's poorest region, is also the region where poverty reduction efforts have failed to yield positive results. (Ministry of Finance March 1, 2000).

Hard core poverty has combined with land shortage and population pressure to produce in the Upper East region one of the highest rates of out-migration in Ghana. Migration to the South has become a habitual practice. Many young men leave their homes for Ashanti and other regions to seek employment on cocoa and maize farms. Some return but many do not, and this negatively affects the local economy (Asongbee: 1989, Dery: 1982).

The political and administrative structure of the Upper East region contains both traditional and modern components. The modern political structure comprises six District Assemblies, namely, Bolgatanga, Builsa, Bongo, Bawku East, Bawku West and Kasena Nankana, and thirteen constituencies. Some six Traditional Councils, on the other hand, constitute the traditional political structure, namely Bawku, Bolgatanga Nabdram Tallensi, Paga and Navrongo.

Within this structure the balance of political forces at the time of the District Level elections in August 2002 was the exact opposite of the national political situation. In the national Parliament in Accra, the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) commanded 102 out of the 200 seats and enjoyed the support of approximately half a dozen other M.P.s who are either Independents or belong to Minority Parties. As against this national political dominance only three of the thirteen M.P.s from the Upper East region belong to the ruling NPP. Of the remaining ten M.P.s, eight are from the National Democratic congress (NDC), one is Independent and the other from the Peoples National Congress (PNC).

There is absolutely no doubt, therefore, that on the eve of the August 2002 District Level Elections, the Upper East region was under the control and dominance of the opposition political parties, especially the NDC.

RESULTS OF THE DISTRICT LEVEL ELECTIONS 2002 IN UPPER EAST REGION

By final count, some 270 out of 715 candidates who contested had been duly elected to the six District Assemblies in the region. Some 37.8% of the candidates had been successful. The critical question then is who got elected and why?

In the final analysis, some 31.1% of the 270 elected Assembly members in the region were teachers, 28.8% were farmers, 12.5% were civil servants and some 6.0% trader-businessmen. Altogether some 60% of the Assembly members in the Upper East region now are teachers and farmers.

Nearly 66% of Ghana's population comprises of peasant farmers. In the Upper East region an estimated 90% of all people are engaged in peasant agriculture. At the same time the rapid school expansion programme since the 1960s has brought many schools and teachers to a lot of towns and villages. It can be stated, without any exaggeration, that in rural Ghana, the most important occupational group in terms of numeracy and literacy is teachers. Teachers have, as a consequence, come to play critical roles in local politics and society.

Ghana's decentralization programme has also brought to many district capitals a significant number of civil servants, who have become involved in district politics. The significant representation of traders and shopkeepers can be explained by the fact that trading is the most common occupation in rural and urban Ghana. Neither formal qualifications nor minimum requirements of any kind are needed for entry into trading and shop keeping.

RELATIVE VERSUS ABSOLUTE ELECTORAL SUCCESS

The dominance of teachers and farmers in the Assemblies must be set in context in order to distinguish absolute from relative success. Three key variables need to be analyzed; rural-urban variations, unopposed versus opposed candidates; and index of relative electoral success by occupational groups.

Sharp differences between rural and urban Assemblies were detected, on close observation. Urban Assemblies on the whole have more white-collar occupational groups, such as teachers and civil servants, and very few farmers. On the other hand, in rural districts farmers are in the majority in the Assemblies while white-collar groups have limited representation.

Bolgatanga District and Bawku West epitomise the sharp contrast between town and country. Bolgatanga District Assembly, which is located in the capital of the Upper East Region, is the most urbanized and the largest Assembly in the region. Out of its 54 Assembly members only seven are farmers. At the other extreme, Bawku West District Assembly, which is located in a rural area, has a 30-member Assembly which includes sixteen farmers, six teachers and only one civil servant. In Bolgatanga, teachers, trader-businessmen, nurses, bankers and accountants are in the majority.

Perceived dominance of the District Assemblies by teachers and farmers should be further modified by comparison of the social background of elected and unopposed members. Prior to voting on August 6th 2002 some twenty-five out of the present 270 Assembly members had been declared unopposed in the region. Of the twenty-five unopposed members, 24% were teachers and 16% farmers, making altogether 40% of unopposed members. By contrast, teachers and farmers, as already shown, are a

good 60% of all Assembly members in the region. An interesting pattern that emerged is that civil servants, accountants, bankers, engineers, engineering technicians, surveyors, agriculturists, nurses and ex-soldiers dominate the group of unopposed members. The emergence of unopposed candidates in the August 2002 District Elections is thus a highly selective political process, which primarily favours highly professional occupational groups other than teachers and farmers.

The index of relative electoral success may also be used to test the popularity of specific social aggregates in local politics. By this index is meant the proportion of each occupational group that got elected in the District Level elections in each district. In both the rural and urban districts of the Upper East Region some occupational groups such as bankers and accountants, engineers and engineering technicians, nurses and ex-soldiers, had very few candidates in the elections but in the majority of the districts were able to secure 100% electoral success. By contrast, the number of candidates from the teaching and farming groups was very high, but the proportion elected was rather small. The highest proportion of teachers elected in any district was 57.6%, and for farmers 35.9%. It appears therefore that in the District Level elections in the Upper East Region, though many teachers and farmers registered for the contest very few of them were elected. The reverse is true for other occupational groups; very few of them registered for the election but the majority of them were elected.

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN

A major issue that has remained a source of constant political concern for women activists and the apostles of gender equity in Ghana is the dismally low level of women's participation in the vital decision-making institutions of the State.

From the lowest level, the Unit Committee, through the District Assembly to the Legislature, Executive and the Judiciary, the most visible distinguishing characteristic of Ghana's political decision-making structures is the glaring and woeful inadequacy of women's participation.

On the eleven-member Supreme Court of Ghana only two women are lucky enough to be rubbing shoulders with nine male Justices. Even this modest gain was not achieved until the past decade.

In Ghana's 200-member Parliament only 18 women can be counted, and out of 70 Ministerial positions only nine are occupied by women. Of these nine women four are Ministers and five Deputy Ministers. There are nineteen Cabinet Ministers but only one, the Minister of Women and Children's Affairs (MOWAC), is a woman.

During the count down to the registration of candidates for the District Level elections of August 2002 the under-representation of women in grassroots decision-making structures once again became a very live issue. For women activists, a situation in which women occupied less than ten per cent of the places in Ghana's 110 District Assemblies was hard to take.

In a society where the majority of traditional rulers are male, gender equity and political balance would require the upliftment of the degree of women's participation in modern local government.

UPPER EAST WOMEN IN THE 2002 DISTRICT LEVEL ELECTIONS

Upper East women in the 2002 District Elections recorded a higher than average success. Of the thirty-five women candidates in the election seventeen, or 48.55%, won the mandate of their people. The national average was only 38%. In addition, though Upper East women candidates constituted 3.6% of women candidates nation-wide they were 4.6% of elected women throughout the country. Women now occupy 6.3% of the 270 District Assembly seats in the Upper East.

A problem that was detected and which requires a balanced and careful study is the withdrawal of women candidates before voting day. Between registration of candidates and eventual voting seven out of forty-two women candidates withdrew from the race.

This represents a good 16.6% or one out of every six women candidates. The withdrawal is attributable to a host of reasons: financial difficulties, socio-cultural pressures, male intimidation and blackmail. In a

few cases where the danger of splitting the pro-women vote was perceived to be real, some women's organizations advised less popular women candidates to stand down voluntarily to enhance the chances of popular women candidates at the polls.

Election victory for Upper East women was not random, but fit a clear-cut pattern. Women were very successful only in three out of the six districts of the region. Success was particularly high in the Builsa district, where four out of five women won; Bolgatanga district, where seven out of fourteen women made it to the Assembly; and Bongo district where three out of nine women candidates sailed through.

In the other three districts, victory largely eluded the women candidates. In Kasena-Nankana district only one of the six women won a seat in the Assembly, while in Bawku West and Bawku East the only women candidates in each of the districts failed to win a seat.

There are significant socio-economic differences between women winners and losers. Women winners were predominantly teachers. Nine out of the seventeen, or 53%, were teachers, while three out of seventeen, or 18%, were farmers. The rest were nurses, clerks and social workers.

Defeated women candidates had the same or similar occupational background as the winners. The big difference was in their educational qualifications. The majority of women winners had professional qualifications in nursing, teaching and computer science and several had Bachelor's and Masters degrees from Universities. On the other hand, the most common educational qualification held by women losers was the Middle School Leaving Certificate. Only a few losers had higher qualifications.

In terms of age and maturity it was evident that victorious female candidates were slightly more advanced in age than losers. It is apparent therefore that in the 2002 District Level Elections, the electorate in the Upper East Region of Ghana were more inclined towards relatively older, more mature, better educated, socially secure and economically independent women candidates.

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On the whole, the performance of women candidates in the Upper East Region's District Elections 2002 offers a few useful lessons for the future.

First, wherever there were more than two women contestants they tended to split the pro-women vote.

Second, low educational attainment is more of a disadvantage for women than for men.

Third, in spite of the importance of educational qualifications, whenever two or more women contested in the same electoral area, voters tended to place a higher premium on experience and age rather than qualification.

Fourth, a significant proportion of women winners won by a landslide, and on the whole when women lost they tended to lose honourably, as the margin of defeat tended to be narrow.

Fifth, financial constraints, social/cultural pressures, male intimidation and blackmail turned out to be much greater obstacles to female success in the election than was previously imagined.

Finally, the various training workshops organized for the women candidates were less effective and helpful to women than the organisers had originally thought. The kind of women who won would have won with or without the workshops. Indeed, one of the women who won in the Bolgatanga district did not attend any of the workshops for women candidates (Paulina Ampusiwa: Interview).

INCUMBENCY

Every election year, the abuse of incumbency in politics has come up for critical comment. Incumbents have been accused of using the enormous financial and material resources of the State for party and personal advantage. The political playing ground, it is said, is therefore not level for all players and incumbents appeared electorally invincible.

Since December 2000 the myth surrounding incumbency has been shattered. The incumbent National Democratic Congress (NDC) was

defeated in both the Parliamentary and Presidential elections and many incumbent NDC M.Ps were soundly defeated by non-incumbents.

The place of incumbency in Ghana's electoral politics is now very clear. In Presidential elections incumbency is a big advantage, but it is not invincible. In Parliamentary elections incumbency is only an advantage in the hard-core strongholds of a party. What is less well understood is the role of incumbency in District Level Elections.

The earliest media reports that came out soon after the District Elections of August 2002 painted the picture that the majority of incumbents had failed to retain their seats in the Assemblies. An Accra tabloid, the Chronicle, reported in its Wednesday September 11, 2002 issue that, "65 per cent of incumbent Assembly Members who contested elections in the Eastern Region failed to win the mandate of the people".

The situation in the Upper East Region was the exact opposite of this media report. Incumbents were very successful in the District Level elections of August 2002. More than half of all incumbents who registered to enter the Assembly again retained their seats. Altogether of 141 incumbent Assembly members who registered to contest, seventy-six retained their seats and only sixty-five were defeated. Therefore some 28.1% of the 270 Assembly members are old faces.

Variations across districts were very high. In the Kasena Nankana district all nine incumbents won. In the Builsa district, of the twenty-two incumbents who registered for the election, sixteen or 72.7% were retained, while in Bawku West out of the nineteen incumbents who contested thirteen or 68.4% were retained.

On the other hand incumbents did not do so well in the Bongo district where only seven out of thirty incumbents or 23.3% made it to the Assembly - a situation similar to that of Bawku East where only nine or 23.6% out of thirty-eight incumbent Assembly members could make it back to the Assembly. In Bolgatanga district, which represents some kind of median point, twelve or 52.2% of the 23 incumbents in the election were able to retain their seats.

Field interviews revealed that many incumbents in the Upper East Region were able to retain their seats because they were able to take advantage of donor-funded programmes such as the EU micro-credit facility and IFAD loans to bring development to their people. While this explanation may have a general validity, it is inadequate for addressing differences between districts and regions with access to the same or similar donor programmes.

A critical examination of incumbents who successfully retained their seats clearly shows that they were relatively older, more experienced, wealthier and better educated than incumbents who lost. The younger a successful incumbent the more important were better education and relative wealth to his or her success. These characteristics are probably indicative of the qualities necessary for an Assembly member to effectively harness or mobilize available resources or facilities and channel them into development.

REASONS FOR DISTRICT ELECTORAL SUCCESS

The absence of political parties in District Level elections has deprived both candidates and voters of a major intermediary institution, which links them to the political community. The result is a virtual aggregational vacuum. There is neither party ideology, history, tradition nor policy to link candidates with the electorate. In the face of this aggregational vacuum voters have had to focus on the personal qualities or characteristics of candidates as the most reliable guide to electoral choices. Candidates, whether they are incumbents or non-incumbents, are subjected to the same personal-qualities-test by the electorate.

In accordance with the personal-qualities-test, in the Upper East Region, District Election candidates were successful, first, if they were perceived by the electorate as capable of bringing development to their electoral area. Second, the candidates who got the mandate of the people were the candidates perceived to be influential enough to lobby the Government, the Assembly and NGOs to site development projects in their areas. Third, financially generous local politicians who could buy drinks for people and give cash gifts were more likely than others to get the nod from the people. Fourth, people who in local terms were seen as good social mixers or friendly to people both high and low also won the elections hands down.

On the other hand arrogant, snobbish and egocentric candidates lost heavily.

TURNOUT IN DISTRICT ELECTIONS 2002

By far the most controversial political fall-out of the District Elections of August 2002 was the low turnout and the institution, which should bear most of the blame for the failure of Ghanaians to exercise their franchise. The two key questions are “Was the turn-out really low? and “ If low, was it attributable to exceptional circumstances or a systemic failure?”

Reports of low turnout are usually unreliable because they are based on media reports rather than scientific study. The ideal-typical approach, which is the most common method used in the study of turnout, is fraught with loopholes and limitations. This approach compares the turnout of one election with the same or a different type of election in the past and draws conclusions. Circumstances may not be the same for the elections compared, and the electorate attach different degrees of importance to different types of election. European voters may not attach the same importance to Local Government, Parliamentary and European Parliament elections. Neither do Ghanaian voters put Presidential, Parliamentary and District Level elections on the same pedestal.

The popularity of the ideal-typical approach stems from the fact that it is based on global figures that are relatively easy to access. Global figures, whether national or regional, are deceptive and conceal more than they reveal. On the other hand, the micro-level approach based on disaggregated electoral area and polling station figures can unravel a world of difference between districts and regions but are comparatively more difficult to obtain.

The overall turnout for the six districts of the Upper East Region was 49.5%. Approximately half of the registered voters came out to vote. The highest turnout of 59.98% was recorded in the Bawku-West region, and the lowest of 42.73% in the Kasena-Nankana district. The wide gap between the lowest and highest turnout by district pales into insignificance when the turnout by electoral area is factored into the equation.

The lowest turnout by electoral area was 17.16% in the Atubalbisi area of Bolgatanga, and the highest was 89.98% recorded in the Ayebia electoral area of Bongo District.

A critical analysis of turnout figures by electoral area shows that the so-called low turnout by electoral area occurred in only a handful of electoral areas, where the turnout was really bad.

In a majority of the electoral areas of the Upper East region the turnout was impressively high and does not support the screaming headlines about low turnout in Ghana's District Assembly elections of August 2002. There are approximately 270 electoral areas in the Upper East region but only thirty-seven or 13.7% of them obtained turnouts of less than 40%. Therefore it is the very few areas with poorest turnout that distorted the region's turnout figures. It is very significant that 58.7% or 141 out of the 270 electoral areas recorded turnouts of more than 50%.

The social significance of the relatively high turnout in the District Level elections in the Upper East cannot be fully appreciated unless it is situated in a broader national political context. The essential message which the turnout figures in the 2002 District Assembly elections conveyed was that poorer and more rural districts and populations perceive the Assemblies as a major source of development and political participation than the richer and more urban districts and populations. As a consequence, turnout was higher in rural poor and more deprived districts, especially in the northern part of Ghana, than in the urban richer and more industrialized parts of the country.

We have already noted how nearly half of the registered voters in the Upper East region turned out to vote. By sharp contrast overall national turnout was only 33.3 per cent.

In the three regions in the north of Ghana where the proportion of the population afflicted by poverty ranges from 69% to 88% the turn-out was 44.7 percent.

By comparison in the Greater Accra region, the most industrialized region, with only 5 per cent of the population in poverty, the turn-out was a paltry 16.6 per cent. (Donald Dapatem; 2002; p11).

The inevitable conclusion to be drawn is clear. The turnout figures in the 2002 District Elections may be construed as a significant vote of confidence by the poor people of Ghana, especially in the north, in the potential of the District Assemblies.

On the other hand, the richer and more urban populations of the country have eloquently demonstrated by their voter apathy that they can live their lives with or without the District Assemblies.

Dr. Afari Gyan, Chairman of Ghana's Electoral Commission, came close to capturing the social significance of the turnout when he stated that "a closer look at voting figures in the recent District Level Elections shows higher turnout rates in the countryside than in the cities and big towns with large concentration of voters" (Donald Dapatem: 2002: p11).

If the observations made are valid, then vital lessons must be picked from the turnout figures of the District Assembly Elections of 2002.

First, District, Municipal and Metropolitan Assemblies in richer areas will have to improve their performance if they want to gain and retain support and confidence of their people.

Second, office holders in these relatively privileged Assemblies should know that the electoral support that gave them their positions is only skin-deep. There is urgent necessity for them to improve their performance in order to widen their support base and strengthen their political relationship with the people.

Third, the correlation between voter turnout and the political legitimacy of District, Municipal and Metropolitan Assemblies is a subject that deserves much deeper study. District Assemblies will be one and a half decades old in 2004, and firm conclusions on this subject should be beneficial to the Assemblies and their office holders.

A major controversy surrounding the generally low turnout in the 2002 District Assembly Elections centred on the underlying cause of the apparent lack of interest on the part of voters. One hypothesis that is already known is the linkage between Assembly performance and voter turnout.

ELECTION COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

The immediate aftermath of the elections saw a lively “blame game” in which one public institution after another blamed each other for the low turnout. The National Association of Local Authorities of Ghana (NALAG), the Electoral Commission (E.C) the National Commission on Civic Education (NCCE) and even the Government either blamed or was blamed by, somebody.

At the centre of the blame was either lack of publicity or inadequate publicity for the election (Donald Dapatem: 2002: p11)

The causes of low turn-out could be varied and complex. Poor publicity alone cannot fully account for such a complex political phenomenon as low turnout.

To the extent that publicity has anything to do with it, it is the lack of co-ordination within the Election Communication System (ECS) which should be blamed for poor turnout.

The Election Communication System comprises the State and private media, both print and electronic, that have the capacity to communicate information about the elections to the voting public. In addition, the Executive, through the Information Services Department and leading politicians, should provide election information to the populace.

Finally, the Electoral Commission and the NCCE bear a Constitutional responsibility to educate the public about elections. Significantly missing is an effective mechanism for co-operation and co-ordination within the system. This is a major problem for all elections in Ghana.

CONCLUSION

We conclude therefore that the Upper Eastern District Assemblies that have arisen from the District Level Elections of August 2002 have a distinct social character. Approximately two-thirds of their members are teachers and farmers, the occupational groups that are socially and demographically dominant in rural Ghana. Only 6.3% of Assembly members are women, and only one of ten disabled contestants could win a seat. Up to 28% of Assembly members were members in the former Assemblies. The Upper Eastern District Assemblies are therefore substantially constituted by members who are male teachers and farmers, a significant proportion of whom are not new to Assembly work. It is obvious therefore that any attempt to improve on local governance and democracy in rural Ghana must start from the social basis of the District Assembly. The proportion of women would have to be increased, and obstacles to the participation of the disabled removed.

Finally, the social background of unopposed candidates appears to be the model most Assemblies should aspire to attain.

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