

The Uncertainties of Ghana's 2020 Elections

Abdul-Gafaru Abdulai and Naaborle Sackeyfio

GHANA IS AMONG THE FEW countries in sub-Saharan Africa where each Presidential election has the potential to lead to power alternation. Between 1992 and 2016, power alternated thrice between Ghana's two dominant political parties, the current ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the main opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC). On 7 December 2020, Ghanaians will go to the polls to elect a new president and members of parliament. This will be the eighth successive Presidential and Parliamentary election since the country's return to multiparty democracy in 1992. While the Electoral Commission (EC) has already cleared 12 qualified candidates to contest the upcoming Presidential Elections¹, there is little doubt that the contest will be a two-horse race between the NDC and the NPP, given their overwhelming dominance of all elections held since 1992. Although constitutionally a multiparty democratic state, in reality Ghana operates a *de facto* two-party system in which the NDC and NPP have consistently accounted for over 90 percent of total votes in both Presidential and Parliamentary elections. Between these parties, a pattern of power alternating every eight years is emerging: after one of them serves for two terms in office, a small majority of voters often give the other party a turn.

Like most recent elections in Ghana, the outcomes of the December 2020 elections are highly uncertain: will the NPP be able to secure a second term in office, or will the NDC manage to recapture power? Will Ghana be able to escape widespread post-election violence as it has

¹ Joy News, 'EC disqualifies 5 presidential aspirants ahead of Election 2020', 19 October 2020 <<https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/full-text-ec-disqualifies-5-presidential-aspirants-ahead-of-election-2020/>> (20 October 2020).

managed to do in the past seven elections? This latter question is especially important because prospects for widespread violence appear to have increased due the emergence of new secessionist groups, a deep mistrust between the main opposition NDC and the Electoral Commission, and the increasingly violent posture of vigilante groups associated with the NDC and NPP. A recent pre-election survey points to ‘considerable apprehension about violence by party and candidate supporters’.² Yet, no decisive answers can be offered to the two questions posed above until after the elections are conducted.

Before introducing the articles in this virtual issue, we highlight five key features that make the 2020 elections unique and discuss some likely scenarios. This year’s polls are significantly different from previous general elections in a number of respects. First, for the first time in Ghana’s political history, an incumbent President (Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo of the NPP) is contesting the Presidential election against a former President (John Dramani Mahama of the NDC) who lost the 2016 election after being in office for a single term. Thus, this will be the first time that the presidential candidates of the two dominant parties have both been in power as presidents and have defeated each other in previous elections.³ For the two leading presidential candidates, the stakes in this election are particularly high because its outcome could have important implications for the political future of the defeated candidate. While Akuffo Addo is unlikely to be given another opportunity to represent the NPP in future Presidential elections at least on grounds of age, a loss for John Mahama would be his second successive electoral defeat in a row, and this could be used to oppose his candidature in future internal elections of the NDC.

² Ghana Centre for Democratic Development, ‘Highlights of Findings from the CDD-Ghana Pre-Election Survey’ (Press Release, CDD-Ghana, Accra, 2020), p.2

³ Akufo Addo lost the 2012 elections to John Mahama, who in turn lost to Akufo Addo in 2016.

Second, this is also the first time in the history of Ghana's Fourth Republic that any of the two dominant political parties has selected a female vice-presidential candidate. In July 2020, the NDC announced Prof. Naana Jane Opoku Agyemang as the party's running mate for the December polls. A native from the Central region, one of the key swing voting regions in Ghana, Opoku-Agyemang served in the Mahama-led NDC administration as Minister for Education (2013-2016), prior to which she was Vice-Chancellor of the University of Cape Coast (2008-2012), the first female to occupy such a position in Ghana. The impact of Opoku Agyemang's nomination has been widely debated in the media, and there seem to be a fair degree of consensus that her relatively 'scandal-free'⁴ background and the decency with which she campaigns has brought integrity not only to the NDC ticket but also to wider political discourse, shifting it from one of issuing insults to one focused on issues-based discussions.⁵

Others suggest that as an ethnic Fanti, Prof. Opoku's nomination has the strategic advantage of enabling the NDC to win the Presidential elections in Central and Western Regions, both swing voting regions dominated by ethnic Fantis.⁶ Yet such arguments are arguably misplaced given the manner in which election outcomes have swung back and forth between the NDC and NPP in these two regions, irrespective of the ethno-regional backgrounds of presidential candidates. It is notable, for example, that in the 2000 presidential run-off election,

⁴ Robert E. Hinson, 'What Ghana's first woman vice presidential candidate of a major party offers'. *The Conversation*, 16 July 2020, <<https://theconversation.com/what-ghanas-first-woman-vice-presidential-candidate-of-a-major-party-offers-142402>> (20 October 2020).

⁵ Adwoa Serwaa Bondzie, 'A Woman's Place is in Politics – The Case For Ghana's First Female Vice President'. *Centre for Development Studies* <<http://blogs.bath.ac.uk/cds/2020/09/08/a-womans-place-is-in-politics-the-case-for-ghanas-first-female-vice-president/>> (20 October 2020).

⁶ Peter Jeffery, 'It's a coalition of group voters that wins elections not swing voters', 14 September 2020, <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/features/It-s-a-coalition-of-group-voters-that-wins-elections-not-swing-voters-1059112>> (21 October 2020).

John Atta-Mills, a Fanti from the Central Region and the NDC's presidential candidate was decisively beaten in the region by John Agyekum Kufuor of the NPP (by 39 to 60 percent).⁷

However, the euphoria that accompanied the announcement of Opoku Agyemang's nomination can best be understood when viewed within the context of Ghana's disappointing progress in promoting gender parity in political office. For example, although females constitute over half of Ghana's population (51.2 percent), only 36 women (representing 12.75 percent) were elected into the 275 member parliament in the last Parliamentary elections held in December 2016.⁸ Evidence from the Global Gender Gap Reports suggest that even as Ghana has increasingly been hailed as a model for democracy in Africa, the level of women's political participation in Ghana is much lower than in several countries in the region, including electoral authoritarian countries like Uganda and Zimbabwe. In the most recent report published in December 2019⁹, Ghana was ranked 107 out of 152 countries for the gender index on political empowerment¹⁰, with a score of merely 0.129, compared to 0.563 for Rwanda, 0.497 for South Africa, 0.427 for Ethiopia, 0.309 for Uganda and 0.238 for Zimbabwe.¹¹

Third, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed somewhat the dynamics of the elections, including by altering the nature of electioneering campaigns. Unlike previous elections where campaigns parties 'are usually loud, chaotic and ... crowd-centred', there have been no huge rallies in the run-up to the December polls due to the dangers and restrictions associated with the pandemic.¹² The fear of infection could also limit the level of citizens' participation in the

⁷ Peter Arthur, 'Ethnicity and Electoral Politics in Ghana's Fourth Republic', *Africa Today*, 56, 2 (2009), pp. 44-73.

⁸ West Africa Network for Peace, 'Presidential and Parliamentary Elections 2020: Building Confidence and Generating Trust Amid COVID-19 Pandemic' (WANEP, 2020), p.4.

⁹ World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2020* (Geneva, World Economic Forum, 2019).

¹⁰ This is measured on the basis of the percentage of women in both Parliament and in the distribution of ministerial positions, as well as the years with female/male head of state.

¹¹ The highest possible score is 1.0.

¹² BBC News, 'Coronavirus in Ghana: Online funerals, face masks and elections without rallies', 30 April 2020, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-52467495>> (20 October 2020).

electoral processes, and potentially impede the large voter turn outs that have characterized previous Presidential elections (Table 1).

Table 1: Trends in voter turnout, 1996-2016

Year	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012	2016
Turnout	77.9%	61.7%	85.1%	69.5%	80.2%	69.3%

Source: <https://ec.gov.gh/election-statistics/>

From a low of 50.2 percent in the 1992 Presidential elections, voter turnout was 77.9 percent in 1996, and was slightly above 80 percent in both 2004 and 2012 (Table 1). Although voter turnout in the 2008 Presidential elections dropped from the impressive 85.1 percent recorded in 2004, the turnout rate (69 percent) was still high by international standards and considerably higher than the rate of 61.7 percent in the November 2008 Presidential elections in the United States.¹³

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided both opportunities and constraints for the governing NPP in dispensing patronage ahead of the elections. The Finance Ministry estimates that the slowdown in economic activities associated with the pandemic could reduce GDP growth to a mere 1.5 percent in 2020 (from a projected 6.8 percent), and non-oil tax revenues are projected to record a shortfall of some GH¢2,254 million.¹⁴ All of these point to the fiscal challenges that the winning party will face in the post-COVID environment. However, amidst the pandemic, the NPP government managed to implement a number of relief measures that could work to shore up its re-election bid. Notable among these measures included the provision of soft loans to an estimated 20, 000 small and medium enterprises; the free supply of water to all households from March to December 2020; and the daily distribution of food items

¹³ Abdul-Gafaru Abdulaia and Gordon Crawford, ‘Consolidating democracy in Ghana: progress and prospects?’, *Democratization* 17, 1 (2010), pp.26–67, p. 33.

¹⁴ Ministry of Finance, ‘Statement to Parliament on Economic Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the Economy of Ghana’ (Ministry of Finance, Accra, 2020), pp.11-13.

to an estimated 400, 000 poor and vulnerable people during the partial lockdown of the country. In general, Ghana's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic has received significant praise, including by potential voters in a recent pre-election survey by the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development.¹⁵ However, some media accounts suggest that the distribution of welfare benefits at the peak of the pandemic were characterised by political favouritism, motivated by the desire of the incumbent NPP to shore up its electoral chances in the forthcoming elections.¹⁶ Indeed, the NDC's 2020 manifesto accuses the ruling NPP for its 'chaotic, partisan and selective distribution of food and other relief items during the COVID-19 lockdown'.¹⁷ While such accusations are hard to verify, they are also hard to refute in the context of Ghana's highly charged partisan political environment where most public investments are made not with the objective of achieving inclusive development, but with short-term political considerations in mind.¹⁸

Fourth, while the Presidential and Parliamentary elections provide the first major opportunity for testing Ghana's commitment to recent institutional changes aimed at enhancing fiscal discipline and maintaining macroeconomic stability, this opportunity is somewhat undercut by challenges posed by the COVID-19 environment. Since the return to multiparty democracy in 1992, all Ghanaian governments have struggled to maintain fiscal discipline during election

¹⁵ Ghana Centre for Democratic Development, 'Highlights of Findings from the CDD-Ghana Pre-Election Survey'; Africa Confidential, 'Economics in a time of corona', 28 May 2020, <https://www.africa-confidential.com/article-preview/id/12974/Economics_in_a_time_of_corona> (31 October 2020).

¹⁶ Kirchuffs Atengble and Mohammed S. Awal, 'Evidence and policy practice in the fight against COVID-19: the Ghanaian experience, *Africa Evidence Network*, 25 June 2020, <<https://www.cddgh.org/evidence-and-policy-practice-in-the-fight-against-covid-19-the-ghanaian-experience/>> (30 October 2020).

¹⁷ NDC, 'Jobs and Prosperity for All: The People's Manifesto' (National Democratic Congress, Accra, 2020), pp. 77.

¹⁸ Abdul-Gafaru Abdulai, 'Competitive clientelism, donors and the politics of social protection uptake in Ghana', *Critical Social Policy*, (2020), Abdul-Gafaru Abdulai, 'The Political Economy of Regional Inequality in Ghana: Do Political Settlements Matter?' *European Journal of Development Research* 29, 1 (2017), pp. 213–229; Abdul-Gafaru Abdulai and David Hulme, 'The Politics of Regional Inequality in Ghana: State Elites, Donors and PRSPs', *Development Policy Review*, 33, 1 (2015), pp. 529-553; Lindsay Whitfield, 'The state elite, PRSPs and policy implementation in aid-dependent Ghana', *Third World Quarterly*, 31, 5 (2010), pp. 721-737.

years, as political elites engage in excessive spending in order to avoid the cost of losing power in a winner-takes-all political system¹⁹. Thus, election years have been characterized by excessive spending, leading to higher fiscal deficits.²⁰ As a result, Ghana has suffered from great fiscal volatility along electoral cycles.²¹ To address this problem, Parliament passed a new law in December 2018, the Fiscal Responsibility Act, which caps the annual fiscal deficit at five percent of GDP in any fiscal year and also requires governments to maintain an annual positive primary balance.²² Whether these efforts will succeed in curbing patronage spending in election years is the subject of ongoing speculation.

However, in July 2020 the Finance Minister sought and received parliamentary approval for a temporary suspension of implementing the Fiscal Responsibility Act, arguing that a fiscal deficit of less than 5 percent was unattainable in the context of the pandemic.²³ In the government's mid-year budget presented on 23 July 2020, the expected budget deficit for 2020 was substantially revised (from 4.7 percent to 11.4 per cent of GDP).²⁴ Thus it will be hard to assess the extent to which the overall budget deficit for the year will be elections-driven.

¹⁹ Kwaben A. Anaman, 'Impact of democratic political transition on the economy of Ghana, in Kwame A. Ninsin (ed), *Issues in Ghana's Electoral Politics*. Dakar: Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), Dakar), pp. 135-151; Robert Darko Osei and Henry Telli, 'Sixty years of fiscal policy in Ghana', in Ernest Aryeetey and Ravi Kanbur (eds), *The Economy of Ghana Sixty Years after Independence* (Oxford University Press, Oxford). pp. 66-73.

²⁰ Abdul-Gafaru Abdulai and Giles Mohan, 'The politics of bureaucratic 'pockets of effectiveness': Insights from Ghana's Ministry of Finance' (ESID Working Paper No. 119, The University of Manchester, 2019).

²¹ Paul Mosley and Blessing Chiripanhura, 'The African political business cycle: Varieties of experience', *Journal of Development Studies*, 52, 27 (2016), pp. 917-932.

²² International Monetary Fund, 'Ghana Seventh and Eighth Reviews under the Extended Credit Facility Arrangement and Request for Waivers of Nonobservance of Performance Criteria' (IMF Country Report No. 19/97, Washington DC), p.17.

²³ B&FT Online, 'Assibey-Yeboah justifies suspension of Fiscal Responsibility Act', 29 July 2020, <<https://thebftonline.com/29/07/2020/assibey-yeboah-justifies-suspension-of-fiscal-responsibility-act/>> (31 October 2020); Nerteley Nettey, 'Parliament approves suspension of Fiscal Responsibility rules for 2020', *Citibusiness News*, 7 August 2020, <<https://citibusinessnews.com/parliament-approves-suspension-of-fiscal-responsibility-rules-for-2020/>> (31 October 2020).

²⁴ Government of Ghana, 'Mid-Year Review of the Budget Statement and Economic Policy of the Government of Ghana & Supplementary Estimate for the 2020 Financial Year' (Ministry of Finance, Accra), p.92.

Fifth, and finally, is the increasingly polarized nature of the electoral environment and the growing prospects for widespread violence. As the National Peace Council observes, the level of tension associated with the upcoming elections appears much higher than has ever been witnessed since 1992:

“We have gone through elections before and we’ve come out clean. In all those elections that we went through, there was tension. But come to look at the 2020 election, there seems to be more tension than any of the past elections. Why? Because from the two major parties, we are having people who have tasted the seat before and they know what it means to sit on that seat. So, everybody’s eyes are wide-opened. It’s creating a lot of tension in the country”²⁵

Although Ghana has held seven general elections and changed governments thrice without slipping into nation-wide violence, election-related violence continues to pose a potential threat to future political stability. This threat stems mainly from the persistent manipulation of electoral processes by party elites and supporters in their ethno-regional strongholds – the Ashanti region for the NPP and the Volta region for the NDC.²⁶ In the 2008 elections, electoral malpractices in these regions led to heightened tension in Ghana, culminating in the closure of banks and shops in anticipation of widespread violence.²⁷ Indeed, as Nic Cheeseman and colleagues rightly observe, there are ‘good reasons to doubt the sincerity of Ghana’s dominant

²⁵ STAR FM News, ‘Tension in 2020 polls higher than previous elections – Peace Council’, 15 October 2020 <<https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Tension-in-2020-polls-higher-than-previous-elections-Peace-Council-1084954> > (19 October 2020).

²⁶ Jockers Heinz, Dirk Kohnert, and Paul Nugent, ‘The Successful Ghana Election of 2008: A Convenient Myth?’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 48, 1 (2010), pp. 95–115.

²⁷ Abdulaia and Crawford, ‘Consolidating democracy in Ghana’, p. 32.

political parties when it comes to clamping down on ... electoral fraud'.²⁸ Both parties have regularly engaged in 'sophisticated electoral fraud' in their strongholds, including assisting minors and even foreigners in voting.²⁹ Thus, the propensity by some elements of the political elite to resort to non-democratic strategies and practices in winning or maintaining power remains significant, representing a latent threat to future democratic stability .³⁰

Importantly, a number of factors have coalesced to further heighten the prospects for widespread violence in this year's elections: the emergence of a new secessionist group whose activities have become increasingly violent as the elections draw closer, continuous inter-party disputes around the electoral register underpinned by the NDC's mistrust of the Electoral Commission, and the growing phenomenon of party vigilantism. Political vigilante groups are largely made up of unemployed youth who are mobilized as party foot soldiers to provide security for political parties and act as monitoring agents at various stages of the electoral process. As the West Africa Network for Peace Building (WANEP) notes, these groups, whose activities have become increasingly violent, represent 'the most potent threat to the country's peace and political stability ahead of the 2020 General Elections'.³¹ We return to this issue of vigilantism in a subsequent section, and focus here on highlighting the extent to which the NDC's mistrust of the EC and the activities of secessionist groups represent a threat to the peaceful conduct of the elections.

²⁸ Nic Cheeseman, Gabrielle Lynch and Justin Willis, 'Ghana shows a troubling willingness to accept political corruption, our recent survey shows'. *Washington Post*, 21 December 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/12/21/yes-ghana-had-a-peaceful-transfer-of-power-but-its-citizens-accept-some-troubling-practices-as-part-of-democracy/> (30 October 2020).

²⁹ George Bob-Milliar and Jeffrey W. Paller, 'Democratic Ruptures and Electoral Outcomes in Africa: Ghana's 2016 Election', *Africa Spectrum*, 53, 1 (2018), pp.5–35, p.15.

³⁰ Abdulaia and Crawford, 'Consolidating democracy in Ghana: progress and prospects?'

³¹ West Africa Network for Peace Building, 'Presidential and Parliamentary Elections 2020: Trust amid COVID-19 Pandemic: Building Confidence and Generating Trust amid COVID-19 Pandemic', (Policy Brief, WANEP, 2020), pp.7.

Separatist impulses stem from a decades-long gambit by five different groups that have been campaigning to carve out parts of the Volta and Northern regions of Ghana to form a new country called Western Togoland. Recent police reports suggest that one such affiliate group, the Homeland Study Group Foundation, has been engaged in recruiting and training young people as part of their plan to form a militia arm in support of their movement.³² The activities of these groups have apparently intensified in recent months, evidenced by their engagement in multiple violent attacks. On 25 September 2020, the Western Togoland Restoration Front – another group linked to these separatist movements – attacked two police stations in the Volta region and seized sophisticated weapons and a police vehicle in the process.³³ These groups justify their demand for secession on grounds of both political history and socio-economic marginalization by successive post-colonial governments. British-administered Togoland did not fall within the borders of the former Gold Coast region which now defines most of modern-day Ghana. But in 1956 its people voted to unite with the newly independent Ghana. While the United Kingdom parliament subsequently enacted the Ghana Independence Act of 1957 to effect a union, the groups demanding secession argue that the union was never formally established.³⁴

Prospects for post-election violence have also been heightened by the NDC's mistrust for the EC in acting as a fair referee in the election.³⁵ Although suspicions and mistrust between the EC and opposition parties has been a recurrent issue in Ghanaian elections, some developments

³² West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, 'Ghana: Current Peace and Security Dynamics in Perspective' (WANEP, June 2019).

³³ Joy News Online, 'Secessionists' attacks: 5 more arrested for invading Police stations, stealing AK47 rifles', 3 October 2019, <<https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/secessionists-attacks-5-more-arrested-for-invading-police-stations-stealing-ak47-rifles/>> (3 October 2020).

³⁴ Thomas Naadi, 'Suspected separatists attack bus station in Ghana', BBC News, Accra, 29 September 2020, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/topics/cnx753jejilt/ghana>> (2 October 2020); West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, 'Ghana: Current Peace and Security Dynamics in Perspective'.

³⁵ West Africa Network for Peace Building, 'Political Insecurity in West Africa: A Call for Democratic Stability and Peaceful Elections – Analysis and Call for Immediate Action' (WANEP, Accra, 2020).

that occurred after the 2016 elections have further deepened the mistrust between the EC and the NDC. At the time of the 2016 election, the EC's chairperson was an appointee of the then incumbent President, John Mahama, who was contesting that election on the ticket of the NDC. When the opposition NPP, led by Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo won that election, the appointment of the EC chairperson and that of two deputy commissioners were terminated on the basis that they had breached the country's procurement laws in the award of contracts prior to the 2016 general elections. President Akufo-Addo appointed a new EC chairperson and some new commissioners in July 2018. The NDC has consistently questioned both the competence and neutrality of some of the newly appointed EC officials, claiming that both the Commissioner herself (Dr. Jean Mensah) and one of her deputies (Dr. Boossman Asare) are members of the ruling NPP.³⁶

This mistrust was deepened by the decision of the new EC team to compile a new voter register for the 2020 elections – an issue on which the NPP has been advocating since 2012. The announcement of this decision was accompanied by polarized debates in which leading members of the ruling NPP supported the EC's decision, whilst the NDC and various interest groups (e.g. the Ghana Medical Association) and a coalition of civil society organizations opposed it. That the EC completed the compilation of a new voter register amidst the COVID-19 pandemic further deepened the NDC's suspicions that the Commission was bent on pursuing the interests of the ruling party, and that it was for this reason that government had taken an active interest in replacing the top leadership of the EC team.³⁷

³⁶ Rainbow Radio, 'We cannot allow Jean & Bossman to plunge Ghana into civil war – Nketiah', 29 May 2019, <<https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/We-cannot-allow-Jean-Bossman-to-plunge-Ghana-into-civil-war-Nketiah-750216>> (19 October 2020).

³⁷ Graphic Online, 'Minority defends boycott of 2020 State of the Nation Address', 20 February, 2020, <<https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/minority-defends-boycott-of-2020-state-of-the-nation-address.html>> (2 October 2020).

These controversies could potentially lead to disputes about the outcome of the election, which could in turn lead to nation-wide violence in the post-election period. This simmering tension was exposed during the new voter registration exercise which took place from 30 June 2020 to 6 August 2020.³⁸ Although deemed generally successful by both the NPP and NDC, the registration processes were characterized by violent confrontations between supporters of these parties in some constituencies, leading to injuries and the death of at least two persons.³⁹ While such incidences of violence might be considered isolated, they nevertheless signal the potential dangers that surround the 2020 general elections.

A few days prior to voter registration, more military personnel were deployed to border towns in the Volta region, the traditional ‘vote bank’ of the opposition NDC. Leading members of the NDC interpreted this move as a deliberate effort aimed at intimidating and preventing residents in their electoral strongholds from participating in the registration exercise. Such concerns were somewhat corroborated by one ruling NPP MP, who explained that the increased military personnel in the Volta Region was partly meant to prevent ‘foreigners’ from participating in the impending voter registration exercise.⁴⁰ For the NPP, if foreign nationals are able to cross the Ghana-Togo border to vote illegally in Ghana, this would most likely benefit the NDC, given that a vast majority of the electorate in the region belong to the Ewe ethnic group which mostly votes for the NDC. In the sections that follow, we discuss several factors that are likely to shape voter choices in the 2020 elections, before turning to outline the papers included in this virtual issue.

³⁸Compilation of the new voter register took place from 30 June, 2020 to 6 August 2020.

³⁹ Xinhua, ‘Roundup: Ghana's mass voter registration for presidential polls met with violence’, 10 August 2020 <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-08/10/c_139280058.htm> (17 October 2020).

⁴⁰ Joy Online News, ‘NDC minority condemns increased military deployment in Volta, Oti Regions ahead of voter registration exercise’, 27 June 2020, < <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/ndc-minority-condemns-increased-military-deployment-in-volta-oti-regions-ahead-of-voter-registration-exercise/> > (3 October 2020).

Potential determinants of voter choice in the 2020 elections

This section identifies and discusses five key factors that are likely to play important roles in shaping the fortunes of the two dominant parties in the forthcoming elections. These factors include: the banking and microfinance sector crisis; corruption; illegal mining; the promise of infrastructural development and free secondary school education. Taken together, these issues will determine how the political parties appeal to the voters in the upcoming elections.

Financial sector crisis

One of the NPP government's most radical reforms that will undoubtedly shape the outcomes of the 2020 elections has been the closure of several financial sector institutions between 2018 and 2019. When the new government assumed office in January 2017, the entire financial system was reportedly 'under a considerable state of distress', with several banks unable to meet the capital adequacy requirement of 10 percent due mainly to high non-performing loans.⁴¹ To address these challenges, the newly appointed leadership of the Bank of Ghana (BoG), the country's central bank, pursued a radical reform agenda that eventually led to the revocation of the licenses of nine (9) universal banks.

While the reasons behind these failures varied from one bank to the other, in general, they included:

“ Macroeconomic factors, poor corporate governance and risk management practices, related party transactions that were not above board, regulatory non-compliance, and

⁴¹ Bank of Ghana, 'Update on Banking Sector Reforms' (Bank of Ghana, Accra, 2019), p.1.

poor supervision, (questionable licensing processes and weak enforcement) leading to a significant build-up of vulnerabilities in the sector”.⁴²

Among the litany of allegations made regarding the conduct of these collapsed banks included significant non-performing loan portfolios, liquidity shortfalls, under-capitalization and excessive loans to shareholders.⁴³ Similar developments occurred in May 2019 when the BoG revoked the license of 347 insolvent and dormant microfinance institutions on grounds that these institutions had ‘denied depositors access to their deposits’ and thereby represented a threat to the stability of the financial system.⁴⁴

While proponents, most notably the International Monetary Fund, have hailed these reforms for contributing to a more resilient financial sector,⁴⁵ it is important to point the policies debates within which the reforms were undertaken and the potential implications for the December elections. With some of the collapsed banks owned by leading opposition party politicians, the NDC argued that the bank closures were ‘politically motivated’, driven by a deliberate targeting of businesses belonging to politicians associated with the NDC. Leading figures in the NDC have criticized the bank closures and related job losses, arguing that the NDC would have supported smaller indigenous banks to recapitalize, rather than closing them down.⁴⁶ Although not sufficiently backed by empirical evidence, it has been claimed by political

⁴² Bank of Ghana, ‘Press release: government establishes new indigenous bank; Bank of Ghana revokes licences of five banks and appoints receiver in respect of their assets and liabilities’ (Bank of Ghana, Accra, 2018).

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ Bank of Ghana, ‘Press release notice of revocation of licences of insolvent microfinance companies and appointment of receiver’, (Bank of Ghana, Accra, 2019).

⁴⁵ International Monetary Fund, ‘Ghana: Seventh and Eighth Reviews Under the Extended Credit Facility Arrangement and Request For Waivers of Nonobservance of Performance Criteria’, IMF Country Report No. 19/97, p.10

⁴⁶ Emily Jones, *The Political Economy of Bank Regulation in Developing Countries: Risk and Reputation* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020).

opponents that nearly 20,000 people lost their jobs as a result of the financial cleanup⁴⁷, and some leading NPP economists admit that the overall impact of the financial sector reforms is likely to undermine the party's re-election bid.⁴⁸

Corruption

Another salient issue for Ghanaian voters in the forthcoming elections is the pervasive nature of corruption. Since the 2000 general elections, public perceptions of corruption have been an important determinant of voter choices in Ghana.⁴⁹ In the run-up to the elections, the Mahama-led NDC government faced a number of high-ranking and highly publicised cases of corruption in office, which shaped its public image and contributed to its electoral defeat.⁵⁰ The NPP labelled then President Mahama as a corrupt leader who did not deserve another term in office, and made a key campaign pledge to fight corruption when elected.⁵¹ With executive monopoly over state prosecutorial powers long blamed for high levels of political corruption in Ghana⁵², a particularly important campaign issue that attracted voters' attention was a promise to set up an

⁴⁷ Antoine Galindo, 'Ghana's financial sector crisis is now part of the election campaign', *The Africa Report*, 1 October 2019, <<https://www.theafricareport.com/17893/ghanas-financial-sector-crisis-is-now-part-of-the-election-campaign/>> (31 October 2020).

⁴⁸ APA News, 'Ghanaian economist makes bold election prediction', 22 January 2020, <<http://apanews.net/index.php/en/news/ghanaian-economist-makes-bold-election-prediction>> (31 October 2020).

⁴⁹ Klaas van Walraven, 'The End of an Era: The Ghanaian Elections of December 2000', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 20:2 (2002), 183-202; Paul Nugent, 'Winners, Losers and Also Rans: Money, Moral Authority and Voting Patterns in the Ghana 2000 Election', *African Affairs* 100 (2001), pp. 405-428; Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi, 'Another Step Forward for Ghana', *Journal of Democracy*, 20, 2 (2009), pp. 138-152.

⁵⁰ Kaunain Rahman, 'Overview of corruption and anti-corruption in Ghana' (Transparency International, Berlin, 2018).

⁵¹ Graphic Online, 'NDC lost the elections because of corrupt government officials – Rawlings', 31 December 2016, <<https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/politics/ndc-lost-the-elections-because-of-corrupt-government-officials-rawlings.html>>; Ransford Edward Van Gyampo, Emmanuel Graham and Eric Yobo, 'Ghana's 2016 general election : accounting of the monumental defeat of the National Democratic Congress (NDC)', *Journal of African Elections*, 16, 1 (2017), pp.24-45; Joseph R.A. Ayee, 'Ghana's elections of 7 December 2016: A post-mortem', *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 24, 3 (2017), pp. 311-330.

⁵² Daniel Appiah and Abdul-Gafaru Abdulai, 'Competitive clientelism and the politics of core public sector reform in Ghana', (ESID Working Paper No. 82, University of Manchester, Manchester, 2017).

office of an independent special prosecutor to pursue corruption. As the NPP's 2016 manifesto captured this issue:

“The monopoly of prosecutorial authority by an Attorney-General, who is hired and fired by the President, has been singled out by governance experts as one of the key factors that stand in the way of using law enforcement and prosecution as a credible tool in the fight against corruption. Such institutional bottle-necks impede the fight against corruption. To this end, we intend to establish, by an Act of Parliament, an Office of the Special Prosecutor, who will be independent of the Executive, to investigate and prosecute certain categories of cases and allegations of corruption and other criminal wrongdoing, including those involving alleged violations of the Public Procurement Act and cases implicating political officeholders and politicians”.⁵³

In December 2017, Parliament passed the Office of Special Prosecutor (OSP) Bill into law⁵⁴, and by February 2018, President Akufo-Addo had appointed a new special prosecutor. Designed to combat corruption, opportunism and public office exploitation, the OSP Act empowered the special prosecutor to investigate cases involving actors in both the private and public sectors.⁵⁵ Many heralded this as a positive development in part because of the appointment of Martin Amidu, a well-respected anti-corruption crusader and an NDC politician, as the first special prosecutor. After operating for three years, however, the OSP has very little to show for its existence and there has been widespread disappointment with the Office.⁵⁶ As Amidu is yet to

⁵³ New Patriotic Party, ‘Change: An Agenda for Jobs - Creating Prosperity & Equal Opportunity for All’. New Patriotic Party (NPP) Manifesto for Election 2016, pp.134-35).

⁵⁴ The OSP Act, 2017 (Act 959).

⁵⁵ E. Kofi Abotsi, ‘Introspecting the Office of the Special Prosecutor’s Act and Ghana’s Constitutional Framework on anti-corruption,’ *African Journal of International and Comparative Law* 28, 2 (2020), 219-243.

⁵⁶ Ghanaweb, ‘Office of Special Prosecutor has done 'poorly'; Amidu 'disappointing' – Bentil’, 17 May 2019, <<https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Office-of-Special-Prosecutor-has-done-poorly->

complete a case or prosecute any of the numerous alleged cases of corruption involving politicians of the previous and current government, the OSP has been criticized for inaction with some even demanding his removal from office.⁵⁷ While the establishment of the OSP was accompanied by high public expectations, critics argue that corruption remains pervasive, and the President has been accused of clearing some of its appointees of corruption charges.⁵⁸

A nation-wide survey data in 2019 showed that a majority (53 percent) of Ghanaians felt that corruption had increased between 2017 and 2018, with only 19 percent feeling that corruption had decrease. As the survey report concludes, ‘Compared to 2017, there has been a 27-percentage-point drop in popular approval ratings of the government’s performance in fighting corruption – a dramatic reversal of earlier gains. Only a minority (40 percent) say the government is doing a “fairly” or “very” good job’.⁵⁹ Yet, these trends have little, if anything, to do with incompetence on the part of Martin Amidu, but are instead reflective of the inherent challenges of fighting corruption in clientelist political contexts like Ghana where ‘[p]atronage and the associated distribution of spoils are the primary payoff for campaign and party donors as well as a means of securing new financiers’.⁶⁰ In the context of increased electoral competition, the growing cost of running electoral campaigns, and the absence of state funding for political parties, competition for rent through corruption has become a principal means winning elections

Amidu-disappointing-Bentil-746949>; Classfmonline, ‘Woes of the Special Prosecutor’, 18 July 2019), <<https://www.classfmonline.com/features/Woes-of-the-Special-Prosecutor-5606?ID=5606>> (30 October 2020).

⁵⁷ Myjoyonline News, ‘I crusaded against corruption more effectively before becoming Special Prosecutor – Martin Amidu’, 29 October 2020, <<https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/i-crusaded-against-corruption-more-effectively-before-becoming-special-prosecutor-martin-amidu/>> (30 October 2020).

⁵⁸ Myjoyonline News, ‘Fight against corruption: Akufo-Addo lowered bar at Bar conference – NDC jabs’, 10 September 2019, <<https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/politics/fight-against-corruption-akufo-addo-lowered-bar-at-bar-conference-ndc-jabs/>> <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/i-crusaded-against-corruption-more-effectively-before-becoming-special-prosecutor-martin-amidu/>> (30 October 2020).

⁵⁹ Ghana Center for Democratic Development Accra, Ghana 3 December 2019, Ghanaians perceive increase in corruption level, give government low marks on fighting graft, new Afrobarometer study shows, News release) (p1).

⁶⁰ Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi and Henry Kwasi Prempeh, ‘Oil, Politics, and Ghana’s Democracy’, *Journal of Democracy* 23, 3 (2012), pp. 94-108, p.101.

and maintaining ruling coalitions. As elections have become more competitive, running successful campaigns has become increasingly costly and so the need to reward entrepreneurs who provide financial support to ruling coalitions has heightened. This has given rise to collusive forms of state business relations, including granting illicit tax exemptions to politically-connected businesses in return for campaign financing.⁶¹ Thus, there is an observed pattern across the two dominant political parties when in power whereby domestic capitalists are politically networked into ruling coalitions through which they are able to access state resources, mostly through procurement corruption.⁶² In this context, party financiers have become so powerful that they are sometimes able to blackmail

“incumbent governments by threatening the withdrawal of their support unless they secure certain appointments or are otherwise awarded certain contracts whether or not they qualify for these’. The resultant compromises on the part of public officials in seeking to accommodate the interests of these financiers have created spaces for corruption within the rank and file of the Ghanaian body politic through special and preferential treatment of persons with special ties to sitting governments.”⁶³

This analysis suggests that corruption in Ghana is not simply an economic problem requiring technical solutions, but is instead a constituent part of ‘a wider set of exchanges within patron-client-networks through which incumbent elites construct political compromises with

⁶¹ Abdul-Gafaru Abdulai, The political economy of taxation in Ghana: the centrality of political settlement dynamics’. ESID Working Paper, Manchester, 2020).

⁶² Lindsay Whitfield, Ole Therkildsen, Lars Buur and Anne Mette Kjaer , *The Politics of African Industrial Policy: A Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2015); Appiah and Abdulai; Competitive clientelism and the politics of core public sector reform in Ghana’; Fortune Agbele, ‘Political Economy Analysis of Corruption in Ghana’ (Working Paper No. 28, European Research Centre for Anti-Corruption and State-Building, 2011).

⁶³ E. Kofoi Abotsi, ‘Introspecting the Office of the Special Prosecutor’s Act and Ghana’s Constitutional Framework on anti-corruption’, p.232.

clients who would otherwise threaten the political stability of the system'.⁶⁴ In such contexts, technocratic fixes such as the creation of so-called independent office of prosecutors will, at best, produce only sub-optimal results. As we see below, high levels of corruption linked to party financing has been one key reason behind Ghana's unsuccessful efforts in fighting against illegal mining, another key policy issue that has been central to election debates in Ghana.

Fight against illegal mining

The NPP government's mixed records in fighting illegal mining is another key factor that will likely contribute to shaping the outcomes of the 2020 elections. Despite broad-based consensus that illegal mining has had significant adverse environmental impact in mining communities, the fight against this phenomenon remains a highly politicized policy issue. Artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) operators are an important political constituency for Ghana's two dominant political parties both because of the large number of unemployed youth who obtain their livelihood from the sector, and the significant concentration of ASM operators in the Western and Central regions, both of which are part of Ghana's three key swing voting regions that determine the outcomes of Presidential elections. As a result, the fight against illegal mining has increasingly taken on a partisan character in which opposition parties often bolster the position of illegal miners in order to make those in power unpopular and gain partisan political advantage.⁶⁵

By early 2017, widespread media campaigns resulted in an unprecedented national consensus against illegal mining. In response, President Akufo Addo announced an indefinite

⁶⁴ Mushtaq H. Khan, 'The Role of Civil Society and Patron-Client Networks in the Analysis of Corruption', in OECD/UNDP (eds). *Corruption and Integrity Improvement Initiatives in Developing Countries*. (UNDP, Management Development and Governance Division, New York, 1998), pp. 85-99, p.85.

⁶⁵ Anthony Bebbington, Abdul-Gafaru Abdulai, Denise Humphreys Bebbington, Marja Hinfelaar, and Cynthia Sanborn, *Governing Extractive Industries: Politics, Histories, Ideas* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018).

ban on all small-scale mining activities. The government set up a joint military and police taskforce, dubbed Operation Vanguard, to enforce the ban in various mining communities, while an Inter-Ministerial Committee on Illegal Mining (IMCIM) was commissioned to develop a roadmap towards lifting the ban and devise measures for regularizing the ASM sector. These initiatives angered some ASM operators, who threatened to vote against the President and his party in the 2020 elections. Although President Akufo Addo noted his preparedness to put his re-election bid on the line in order to help curb illegal mining activities, the government's fight against illegal mining soon began to falter as the 2020 elections drew closer. Indeed, by the time the ban on ASM was lifted in late 2018, the work of the IMCIM and the military task force had been plagued by widespread reports of corruption. Explaining how corruption undermined the operations of the anti-illegal ASM taskforce, Michael Eduful and colleagues draw attention to how "powerful" illegal ASM operators with the backing of some politicians and traditional leaders, are able to influence the operations of the taskforce by offering them bribes'.⁶⁶ In February 2020, it emerged that over 500 excavators seized from illegal miners were 'missing', giving rise to suspicions that the equipment seized from illegal miners were being reallocated to key party activists in order to help finance the NPP's re-election bid in the December 2020 elections.⁶⁷ While the Criminal Investigation Department of the Ghana Police is still undertaking investigations on this issue, it is apparent that the allegations of corruption did undermine the government's fight against illegal mining, and many illegal miners have since returned to site with impunity. Combined with ongoing economic development challenges, urban-rural

⁶⁶ Michael Eduful, Kamal Alshari, Alexander Eduful, Michael Acheampong, Joyce Eduful, and Lubana Mazumder, 'The Illegal Artisanal and Small-scale mining (Galamsey) 'Menace' in Ghana: Is Military-Style Approach the Answer?' *Resources Policy* 68 (2020), pp. 1-14.

⁶⁷ Joy Online News, 'Minority accuses police of cover-up in over 500 seized missing excavators case', 7 October 2020, < <https://www.myjoyonline.com/news/national/minority-accuses-police-of-cover-up-in-over-500-seized-missing-excavators-case/>> (3 October 2020).

disparities, and lingering inequality, the lure of illicit mining for people looking to eke out a living is inevitable. Consequently, efforts to minimize illegal or illicit gold mining are a long-term challenge that is unlikely to dissipate.

As a larger phenomenon of extraction in some of the fastest growing economies on the continent, illegal mining activity remains symptomatic of institutional weakness and corruption.⁶⁸ Foreign direct investment and heightened interest in the country's resources have spurred growing concerns from non-governmental as well as local organizations about a race to the neoliberal bottom in mining activities. Enduring narratives around poverty in rural locales and opportunism only partly account for these dynamics. As economic giants like China, India and Brazil look to the global south for raw materials, key mineral and other resources, Ghana and other countries face a heightened resource extraction complex. There are complaints that the farmland of residents in particular areas are continuously encroached upon, with considerable consequences that include degradation, unsafe wells, conflict and even violence in some areas.

Regulatory and policy regimes and more critically, ambiguous relationships between government, large scale mining companies, traditional authorities and illegal miners perpetuate the phenomenon.⁶⁹ The competition for land use amid land-related conflicts and agricultural development complicate an already contested and contentious municipal landscape. The heightened coverage in Ghanaian media also stems from displacement and blurred lines of governance that complicate mining rights, municipal areas as industrial hubs for mining activity and local participation in galamsey.⁷⁰ Successful policy interventions to stem the tide of an activity some deem a consequence of Chinese investment, however, remains unlikely but is

⁶⁸ Gordon Crawford and Gabriel Botchwey, 'Conflict, collusion and corruption in small-scale gold mining: Chinese miners and the state in Ghana', *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 55, 4 (2017), pp. 444-470.

⁶⁹ Afriyie, et, al, 'The good in evil'.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p.3.

demanded.⁷¹ However, Osman Antwi-Boateng and Mamudu Abunga Akudugu find that Ghana's mining laws are rarely enforced. The laws are circumscribed by bribery and in turn, institutional lapses in Ghana's immigration and mining sectors have assisted Chinese migrants who falsely acquire immigration documents and engage in small-scale mining, an activity forbidden for foreigners. Little appears to have changed as this upcoming election season will see more of the same allegations of in-party collusion, charges of complicity and public perception that the current government is doing too little.

In all, renewed efforts at anti-galamsey crackdowns will undoubtedly continue and will remain contentious. When a significant economic player like China exercises considerable economic power in the country's current trajectory, it is little surprise that Ghana's regulatory and policy regimes obfuscate or appear to reinforce ambiguity about government responsibility. Under a sharper microscope, a seeming appetite for extraction as a boon to the economy may well be tested in future elections. Just as illegal mining activities are a key fulcrum of this year's election, so too is infrastructural development which involves China as a consequential actor as discussed below.

The Promise of Infrastructural Development

Like corruption and illegal mining, infrastructural expansions have become important for Ghanaian voters. One survey in 2019 showed that for the first time since 2002, majority of Ghanaian voters (59 percent) identified infrastructure/road expansion as the single most

⁷¹ Emmanuel Debrah and Richard Asante, 'Sino-Ghana bilateral relations and Chinese migrants' illegal gold mining in Ghana,' and Osman Antwi-Boateng and Mamudu Abunga Akudugu, 'Golden Migrants: The Rise and Impact of Illegal Chinese Small-Scale Mining in Ghana'. *Politics & Policy* 48, 1 (2020), pp. 135-167.

important problem that they want government to address.⁷² While the NPP declared 2020 as a year of infrastructure, the NDC's manifesto includes an ambitious pledge to implement a \$10 billion accelerated infrastructure development plan to help drive economic transformation if it wins the elections.⁷³ Yet as noted above, given the fiscal challenges that the winning party will most likely face in the post-COVID environment along with unpredictable patterns of FDI inflows, some of these ambitious promises will be hard to deliver.

Under a cloud of global economic uncertainty owing to the pandemic, anticipated levels of investment are unlikely to materialize. Although FDI flows and infrastructural development along with natural resources appear decisive for attracting further FDI flows, an important drawback is the persistent need for external injection of capital and finance which complicates the country's long-term development goals. As details of the much contested two billion dollar loan from China trickled out, they were met with public consternation.⁷⁴ Concerns about power dynamics and agency also emerged owing to the country's petro-status. This is the ubiquitous petro-curse. On a related note, the heavy reliance of municipalities on budgetary allocation schemes from central governments reflects a larger quandary about governance in terms of urban problems across physical, economic, social and environmental manifestations.⁷⁵ The absence of performance based allocation systems inevitably skews the impetus for revenue generation by municipalities and thus the ability to finance urban infrastructure is a significant impediment.⁷⁶ Although 2020 was declared the year of roads and infrastructure - a timely but not unexpected

⁷² Ghana Center for Democratic Development Accra, 'News release Infrastructure/roads Ghanaians' most important problem, new Afrobarometer study shows' (CDD-Ghana, Accra, 2019), p.1.

⁷³ NDC, 'Jobs and Prosperity for All', p.88.

⁷⁴ For details on this loan, see Jon Phillips' article in this virtual issue

⁷⁵ Nicholas Addai Boamah and Maxwell Okrah, 'Challenges to property rate administration in the Offinso South Municipality, Ghana,' *International Journal of Public Administration*, 39, 11 (2016), pp. 843-851; Michael E. Leary and John McCarthy (eds). *The Routledge companion to urban regeneration* (Routledge, 2013).

⁷⁶ Lewis Abedi Asante and Ilse Helbrecht, 'The urban dimension of Chinese infrastructure finance in Africa: A case of the Kotokuraba Market Project, Cape Coast, Ghana,' *Journal of Urban Affairs* (2019), pp 1-21.

development given the dynamics of discretionary spending- the unexpected ravages of the coronavirus will likely put a halt to much of these plans. This would have been an unprecedented election year even without the pandemic, but we anticipate that the issues identified above will endure into the future. As the world adapts to what many dub ‘a new normal,’ foreign investment and donor interests will predictably play decisive roles in how a post-pandemic Ghana adjusts to an altered context in terms of financial governance.

Free senior high education

In addition to corruption, voters have demanded changes to the country’s educational systems and in particular secondary school education. The promise of a free senior high education was central to the NPP’s election victory in 2016⁷⁷, and remains a major campaign issue for the two dominant parties in the upcoming elections. Since the 2008 elections, electoral campaigns in Ghana have been dominated by discussions over the introduction of free senior secondary education. Although the fiercely competitive nature of elections has helped to push education up the policy agenda, there has been an apparent shift away from basic education and targeted equity measures towards politically favourable policies for universal secondary education.⁷⁸ Whilst in opposition in 2016, the NPP argued that free secondary education for all was achievable and pledged that if voted into power, it would implement a free and ‘universal’ Senior High School (SHS) education policy for the benefit of ‘all Ghanaians’.⁷⁹ In contrast, the then ruling NDC government argued that such a universalistic approach to free secondary education would be difficult to implement in the context

⁷⁷Gyampoh, Graham, and Yobo, ‘Ghana’s 2016 general election’.

⁷⁸ Blampied, C., Chattopadhyay, S., Greenhill, R., Aziz, I., Ellison, C., Thompson, R., Abdulai, A.-G. and Salifu, A., ‘Leaving no one behind in the health and education sectors in Ghana’ (Overseas Development Institute, London, 2018).

⁷⁹ New Patriotic Party, ‘Change: An Agenda for Jobs’, p.107.

of limited infrastructure, and instead favoured a gradualist approach with an initial ‘emphasis on needy students’.⁸⁰ In some respects, the NPP’s electoral success in the 2016 elections demonstrates the political clout of popular universal policies over targeted and redistributive policies in Ghana – an approach which one of the papers in this virtual issue explains in terms of the incentives generated by Ghana’s competitive clientelist political environment.⁸¹ Implementation of this highly ambitious policy⁸², which entails the absorption of all approved fees charged to students in public SHS, commenced in September 2017 and presently covers about 1.2 million young people at a cost of over 3.5 billion cedis so far.⁸³ The NPP touts the Free SHS as a basis for re-election while the NDC repeatedly highlights its implementation weaknesses, and pledges to reform and even extend the policy to private schools.⁸⁴

Barely a year into the policy’s implementation, significant challenges emerged, including overcrowding in schools, as well as inadequate teaching staff and learning materials to cope with increased enrolments in schools.⁸⁵ By September 2018, these challenges had compelled government to introduce a ‘double-track’ system as a temporal measure of coping with the increased enrolments in selected schools. By allowing schools to have a calendar of two semesters

⁸⁰ National Democratic Congress, ‘Changing Lives, Transforming Ghana: 2016 Manifesto’, p.15.

⁸¹ Abdul-Gafaru Abdulai, and Sam Hickey, ‘The Politics of development under competitive clientelism: insights from Ghana’s education sector’, *African Affairs*, 115/458 (2016), pp.44–72.

⁸² President Akufo-Addo highlighted the highly ambitious nature of this policy, stating that ‘By free SHS we mean that in addition to tuition which is already free, there will be no admission fee, no library fee, no science centre fee, no computer lab fee, no examination fee, and no utility fee; there will be free text books, free boarding and free meals, and day students will get a meal at school for free’. See ‘President Akufo-Addo ‘abolishes’ admission, exams fees in Free SHS rollout’, Daily Graphic, February 11, 2017, <<https://www.graphic.com.gh>>(7 October 2020).

⁸³ Graphic Online, ‘Defining issues of Ghana’s 2020 elections’, 24 September 2020, <<https://www.graphic.com.gh/features/opinion/defining-issues-of-ghana-s-2020-elections.html>> (6 October 2020).

⁸⁴ NDC, ‘Jobs and Prosperity for All’; NPP, ‘Leadership of Service: Protecting Our Progress, Transforming Ghana for All’ (New Patriotic Party, Accra, 2020).

⁸⁵ Dominic Moses Awiah, ‘Report on free SHS shows overcrowding in schools’, Graphic Online, 23 July 2018.

<<https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/education/report-on-free-shs-shows-overcrowding-in-schools.html>> (29 October 2020); PIRAN-Ghana, ‘Review The Implementation Plan Of The Free SHS Policy In The Next Two Academic Years To Guarantee Its Sustainability’ 23 April 2018 <<https://www.modernghana.com/news/849122/review-the-implementation-plan-of-the-free-shs.html>> (20 October 2020).

in a year to be shared between two batches of SHS students, the ‘double track’ system aimed to create adequate space for students within the limited available school infrastructure. Although intended to be a temporal measure, the double track system has been heavily criticized for leading to a reduction in contact hours in schools, with potential adverse implications for quality secondary education. As one recent study concludes, ‘The double track system has not only reduced the contact hours by half but it has also compelled parents and guardians to pay for private classes or tuition for their wards while they are at home for half of the term’.⁸⁶

To an extent, these problems have been self-inflicted in a number of ways. First, several observers have noted that for political reasons, implementation of the policy was rushed without careful planning and full understanding of its cost implications. Second, suggestions for a targeted approach to implementation were ignored in favour of an ‘instantaneous wholesale free SHS programme’⁸⁷, despite concerns about limited school infrastructure and financial constraints. Indeed, at the outset, a universal approach to implementation was adopted, even without any consideration for pilot testing. This approach to implementation, which amounts to subsidizing secondary education for financially capable parents who would otherwise be able to cater for their wards’ education without free SHS, has been central to the implementation challenges noted above. As previous studies have argued, these dynamics are driven by the increasingly vulnerable nature of ruling coalitions in Ghana. As a result of the keenly contested nature of elections and the potential of each general election in resulting in power alternation, ruling elites tend to be characterized by short-time horizons with priority considerations given to policy choices that

⁸⁶ Abdulai Kuyini Mohammed and Ahmed Bawa Kuyini, ‘An evaluation of the Free Senior High School Policy in Ghana, *Cambridge Journal of Education*, (2020), pp.1-30, p.15.

⁸⁷ Business Day, ‘Prof. George Oduro speaks: ‘Free SHS – Emerging Challenges’’, 19 November 2019, <<http://businessdayghana.com/prof-george-oduro-speaks-free-shs-emerging-challenges/>> (31 October 2020).

enhance their short-term political survival. In this context, narrowly targeted programmes are not as appealing as universalistic policies given the need the need to appease a wide spectrum of voters.⁸⁸

Summary of articles in this virtual issue

Lindsay Whitfield addresses the questions of how and why Ghana's *de facto* two-party system emerged, why elections have become increasingly competitive between the NDC and NPP, and why the country has so far been able to escape widespread violence, especially in 2008 when the elections almost drew the country into nation-wide violence.⁸⁹ Her article demonstrates that the closely competitive nature of Ghanaian elections is the result of the two-party system in which both voters and political elites are mobilized around two political traditions – the Danquah/Busiah tradition and the Nkrumahist tradition. These political traditions emerged during the decolonization processes in the 1950s and have remained salient, providing ideological images and founding mythologies for the two dominant parties. Both the NDC and NPP have established institutional networks in all regions of the country, and their support base cuts across such social cleavages as ethnicity, region, urban/rural, and social status. While each party has strongholds, the outcomes of elections are determined by so-called swing regions, which contain a large number of floating voters who are not party loyalists and may switch their vote based on government performance. Partly as a result of this, elections in Ghana are not dominated by ethnic politicization. The article further argues that Ghana has thus far been able to escape widespread electoral violence because of a number of stabilizing characteristics of the

⁸⁸Abdulai, 'The Political Economy of Regional Inequality in Ghana: Do Political Settlements Matter?' Abdul-Gafaru Abdulai, 'Competitive clientelism, donors and the politics of social protection uptake in Ghana'.

⁸⁹ Lindsay Whitfield, 'Change for a Better Ghana': Party Competition, Institutionalization and Alternation in Ghana's 2008 Election', *African Affairs*, 108, 433(2009), pp. 621-641

political system: an independent EC and transparent electoral processes, integration of the political elite alongside the creation of norms and institutions structuring their behavior, and the institutionalization of parties. Based on the Ghanaian experience, the article concludes that it is possible for political parties in Africa to be institutionalized even in the absence of strong party ideologies. What may be needed for institutionalization to occur in such contexts is for parties to have ‘a founding mythology based on issues which cut across region and ethnicity’.⁹⁰

However, as the discussion above shows, not only have the credibility and impartiality of the EC been increasingly questioned, but the threat of widespread elections-driven violence is also becoming increasingly real in Ghana. As Mariam Bjarnesen argues in relation to the upcoming December 2020 elections, Ghanaians ‘have all the reasons to be fearful’⁹¹, not least because of the increasingly violent posture of the country’s political vigilante groups and the dangers that such groups pose to political stability. Although political vigilante groups have a long history in Ghana dating as far back as independence in 1957, such groups have gained increased attention in recent years because of their ambivalent role as both security providers within parties, and as intimidators and perpetrators of violence in times of elections. The NDC and NPP political vigilante groups have taken the role as party security apparatus, providing protection for the party and political leadership during times of elections, especially when in opposition, due to the lack of trust in state security agencies. The more than 20 active vigilante groups include the Invisible Forces and Delta Force mobilized in the name of the NPP and the Hawks and the Azorka Boys that operate in the name of the NDC. Highlighting the increasingly violent posture of these groups, Bjarnesen notes that ‘Vigilantes, predominantly of the two main political parties, have been engaged in everything from riots, violent protests to property

⁹⁰ Ibid, p.640.

⁹¹ Mariam Bjarnesen, ‘Briefing: The Foot Soldiers of Accra’, *African Affairs*, 119, 475 (2020), pp.296-307,p.296.

destruction, while they also have been known to harass, threaten, assault, and even assassinate political opponents'.⁹² Based on an analysis of a series of violent actions by vigilante groups since the last general election in 2016, the article notes that 'Ghana's political vigilantes are much closer to party militias than they are to legitimate political vigilantes providing private initiatives for securing political parties in an emerging democracy'.⁹³ Importantly, political vigilante groups have occasionally engaged in the use of violence to repay broken promises or perceived mistreatment from their political patrons, suggesting that vigilantes in Ghana are not merely a group of passive party supporters who are manipulated by political elites. In this context, it is possible for political vigilantes to resort to violence even though their political patrons may not have had such intentions. Bjarnese notes that this is what makes Ghana's political vigilantes potentially even more dangerous for democratic political stability.

Nathalie Raunet Robert-Nicoud explores the issue of cross-border voting in Ghana, with a focus on the Volta region, which has been at the heart of national debates on cross-border voting in the country. In the nationwide debates in the build-up to the December 2016 elections, the NPP, then in the opposition, claimed that 76,000 individuals were registered on both the Togolese and the Ghanaian voters' registers, casting doubt on the citizenship status of voters who crossed the borders from Togo to vote in Ghana. Drawing from qualitative interviews undertaken in border villages on the southern part of the Ghana-Togo border, Nathalie Raunet Robert-Nicoud provides us with some deep insights into the local dynamics of cross-border voting in Ghana. Her article first demonstrates the difficulty that the Ghanaian state faces in improving knowledge of its citizens, by analyzing the law in detail and showing the gaps between theory and practice. The overall evidence shows that the complexity and ambiguity of

⁹² Ibid, p.304

⁹³ Ibid, p.305

the law about citizenship facilitates a political discourse that centres on the question of ‘who should have the right to vote’, with party-political interests leading to varied interpretations of the ‘correct’ criteria for voting.⁹⁴ Finally, she argues that the most important decisions about who belongs to the nation are made at the local level since cross-border voters are not merely instrumentalized by political parties, but also engage in the practice of cross-border voting as a means of realizing and expressing their local belonging and fulfilling their local obligations.

While much international attention has usually focused on highlighting Ghana’s democratic achievements, there are apparently some downsides to the increased electoral competition in Ghana that have received little attention. One example is the challenge of reducing historical spatial inequalities between the northern and southern parts of the country, a problem that dates back to colonial times. The article by Abdul-Gafaru Abdulai and Sam Hickey draws on Mushtaq Khan’s concept of political settlement to explain this problem in terms of the nature of successive ruling coalitions in Ghana, and the manner in which northern political elites have historically been incorporated within them. Their analysis of education sector expenditures (1993-2008) shows that although budgetary allocations are often somewhat informed by equity considerations, actual expenditure distribution often deviate substantially from the budget estimates because ministers and other high public officials are able to set aside the budget and distribute public resources in line with their short-term electoral calculus. In this context, dominant factions within successive ruling coalitions have been able to secure higher levels of resource allocation to their regions, whilst excluding those from outside and paying rhetorical lip service to factions within the ruling coalition with weaker levels of influence over how public resources are distributed. This clientelist political environment explains the differing fortunes of

⁹⁴ Nathalie R. Robert-Nicoud, ‘Elections and Borderlands in Ghana’, *African Affairs*, (2019), pp.1-20, p.5

various administrative regions in terms of their access to public education expenditures, with the north particularly disadvantaged because of the adverse incorporation of its political elites into successive ruling coalitions. Poorer citizens in the north of the country therefore tend to suffer from socio-economic exclusion because their political representatives have rarely been part of the inner circles of political power. In sum, their article challenges current efforts to understand the politics of public goods provisioning in Africa through the prism of voting patterns alone. They argue instead that a focus on ‘how elites and broader social groups struggle to gain holding power within ruling coalitions, and also the ways in which these struggles shape the character and performance of bureaucratic institutions, enables a clearer view of the actual mechanisms that shape the distribution of public resources’.⁹⁵

The article by Prince Young Aboagye and Ellen Hillbom raises important questions as to how the profligate 2020 election promises by the two dominant parties would be financed.⁹⁶ Their article points to a rather weak fiscal capacity of the Ghanaian state, evidenced in the large and consistent fiscal balances experienced since the 1960s. Based on a historical analysis of four major tax reforms in Ghana from the 1850s to the late 1990s, they find that the Ghanaian state’s fiscal capacity has been consistently limited by its inability to secure political support for its revenue mobilization efforts. This is in turn explained by a history of misappropriation of tax revenues, overt corruption and wasteful government expenditures, all of which combine to diminish citizens’ support for governments’ tax efforts. As a result, tax reforms were often met with violent protests and demonstration, and there have been several instances ‘when the state

⁹⁵ Abdul-Gafaru Abdulai and Sam Hickey, ‘The politics of development under competitive clientelism: insights from Ghana’s education sector’, *African Affairs* 11,458, pp.44-72, p.71.

⁹⁶ In particular, the NDC’s manifesto not only promises to reduce several taxes (as the NPP did while in opposition in 2016), but also pledges to set up a \$10 billion Fund to build robust infrastructure across the country; provide unemployment benefits to several informal sector workers; and absorb 50 percent of fees of all tertiary students for the 2020 /2021 academic year, among others.

made explicit concessions to taxpayers in response to the reality or threat of opposition from interest groups'.⁹⁷

Jon Phillips' article explores the politics of Ghana-China relations in the context of Ghana's oil economy. Following the 2008 financial crisis, Chinese oil companies made several new investments in Africa, including the extension of a US\$ 3 billion oil-backed infrastructure loan to Ghana. Phillip set out to assess whether the extension of Chinese finance and investment to Ghana afforded Ghanaian elites greater agency in their bilateral and multilateral partnerships. The article makes two key arguments. First, it argues that although the agency of Ghanaian elites has shaped the outcomes of recent bilateral investments, Ghanaian state agency has been exercised primarily in brokering external sources of finance and in relation to domestic institutions and political factions. Second, Chinese investment did shift the aid modalities and the relative power of Ghana's traditional development partners but international finance institutions and US agencies nonetheless maintained influence over macro-economic governance and sectoral policy respectively. As such, the scope of Ghanaian agency in relation to external finance and bilateral and multilateral relations was narrow, and market orthodoxies of development remained dominant

Karen E. Ferree's and James D. Long's article recasts long held assumptions that African political parties lack the capacity to implement contingent electoral strategies deemed as reward or punishment of voters based on their voting choice. Presenting what they note is a nuanced picture, Ghana's urban and metropolitan areas confirms that the National Patriotic Party (NPP) and National Democratic Congress (NDC) - two major parties which command significant votes - wield targeted continent strategies by shaping perceptions about ballot secrecy. Drawing from

⁹⁷ Prince Young Aboagye and Ellen Hillbom, 'Tax bargaining, fiscal contracts, and fiscal capacity in Ghana: A long-term perspective', *African Affairs*, pp.1-26

Afrobarometer surveys from the December 2008 election they demonstrate convincingly that urban areas are where incentive structures and the capacity of parties to shape perceptions about ballot secrecy are highest owing to strategic campaign efforts. Intrinsic to perspectives on clientelism is rural bias. Yet the authors cogently point out that high turnout in urban areas and a high risk of violence illustrates how contingent strategies are most feasible not just in Ghana, but for developed areas across the continent. If voters in Ghana perceive an absence of ballot secrecy, the provision of campaign ‘gifts’ requires reciprocation in what is tantamount to coercive tactics, which they argue deserves greater attention by scholars and policymakers.

In a similar vein, Michael Amoah suggests that besides campaigning, vote-buying and rigging, cyber warfare is a new and compelling battleground for African elections.⁹⁸ An examination of election management mechanisms, institutional design and electoral management bodies (EMBs), in several countries, including Ghana during the 2016 elections, reveals a seeming cyber war that occurred after the NPP announced the results of the elections in real time and ahead of the electoral commission utilizing an internal electoral data management system secured through a Ghanaian geodetic engineer and technology manager. Allegations of rigging of the Electoral Commission’s (EC) data systems, Adofo Rockson contends, raises critical questions about the country’s electoral process, especially in light of Amoah’s observation that ‘when the incumbent NDC party could not have utter control of the rigging apparatus—the Commission’s computer servers and database - the incumbent lost the election’.⁹⁹ Ultimately Amoah’s observation that the loss of control over the electronic process by the EC owing to non-

⁹⁸ Michael Amoah, ‘Sleight is right: Cyber control as a new battleground for African elections.’ *African Affairs* 119, 474 (2020), pp. 68-89.

⁹⁹ Cf. Michael Amoah, ‘Sleight is right: Cyber control as a new battleground for African Elections’ Rockson, Adofo, ‘Did NPP employ a NASA computer Analyst to hack into the E. C.’s computers?’ *Modern Ghana News*, 25 December 2016, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/745346/did-npp-employ-a-nasa-computer-analyst-to-hack-into-the-ecs.html> (16 October 2020).

incumbent influence over electronic computation in Ghana suggests that we must attend to the mechanisms of election monitoring in a presumed democracy.

The importance of chieftaincy institutions in Ghana as Edem Adotey's article establishes cannot be overstated.¹⁰⁰ In his case study of the Tongu-Ewe ethnicity, he demonstrates how hierarchical status, paramount chiefs and appeals for paramountcy reflects the dependence of traditional institutions on the state. Although not representative of all traditional institutions, he nonetheless argues that chieftaincy institutions and the state are not always parallel institutions. Adotey explains in this case study of the Tongu-Ewe that the former often acts as power brokers who are sought out by politicians for electoral campaign support and in turn state intervention in chieftaincy. Despite the country's 1992 constitution which conveys autonomy for chieftaincy institutions, the reverse remains the norm well into the 21st century.

Following these observations, George Bob-Milliar's exploration of the Nkɔsuohene/hemaa, a new chieftaincy institution in Ghana highlights the perpetual role of indigenous governance, cultural capital and relative malleability as a catalyst for dynamic changes grounded in development project mobilization.¹⁰¹ The contribution of this work stems from the multifaceted and integral as well as the enduring role of chieftaincy in economic development. Given the inauguration of the 'Year of Return' in 2019, the evolving and potent role of chieftaincy as a cornerstone in Ghanaian politics raises the prospect of a magnified diasporan presence as a new conduit for economic mobilization.

Abena Dove Osseo-Asare, in *Atomic Lands: Understanding Land Disputes Near Ghana's Nuclear Reactor* tracks the history of land disputes at Kwabena, Haatso and other

¹⁰⁰ Adotey, Edem, 'Parallel or dependent? The state, chieftaincy and institutions of governance in Ghana,' *African Affairs* 118, 473 (2019), pp. 628-645.

¹⁰¹ Bob-Milliar, 'Chieftaincy, diaspora, and development: The Institution of Nkɔsuohene in Ghana' p.543

neighboring locales near Atomic Junction, a network of roadways that converge at the Ghana Atomic Energy Commission.¹⁰² The roots of this dispute are myriad and involve customary or traditional leaders and public lands owned by the state that are compounded by competitive interpretations of land space occupied by a nuclear reactor with considerable implications beyond Ghana. She argues that the potential for nuclear contamination on Atomic Lands is heightened by contested claims over land and resulting disputes. Particularly salient to her analysis is that regulations involving an exclusion zone constructed owing to the installation of a nuclear reactor in 1994, amplified the Ghana Atomic Energy Commission's expropriation of land for scientific research amid ambiguous messaging on radiation risks to outbid competing lands claims. These developments, as she compellingly illustrates, simultaneously exacerbated contested legal terrain among traditional leaders, government officials, landless citizens and multinational actors. Distinctions between customary land owned by traditional leaders or by chiefs and public lands owned by the state, are such that considerable uncertainty remains as Abena Dove Osseo-Asare observes. In all, these are contested spaces of power as Ghana and other states hurtle towards expanding their nuclear capacities.

In sum, the articles included in this virtual issue not only help us understand the roles of Ghana's relatively resilient political institutions in explaining why large-scale elections violence have thus far been avoided, but also highlight some inherent weaknesses that could undermine political stability in the future.

Conclusions

¹⁰² Abena Dove Osseo-Asare, Abena Dove 'Atomic lands': Understanding land disputes near Ghana's nuclear reactor.' *African Affairs* 115, 460 (2016): pp. 443-465.

Ghana is, understandably, considered to be one of Africa's most consolidated democracies, and the forthcoming December 2020 general elections provides the country an opportunity for solidifying this reputation, especially if the election results in yet another alternation of power between parties. However, the reverse is also possible: the elections can as well result in democratic backsliding. Although Ghana has previously held seven successful elections and experienced the peaceful transfer of political power thrice during the last two decades, current dynamics suggest that the December 2020 polls could be different. If nothing else, the bloody 2008 elections in Kenya, a country which had also hitherto held successful elections, coupled with the simmering tensions ahead of the December 2020 elections, suggest that the number of successful and peaceful elections held in Ghana may not be a guarantee against the horrific election-related violent conflicts that have occurred elsewhere in Africa. This is especially important because, as Jasper Ayelazuno reminds us,

“...the very factors that have made elections an ‘intoxicating brew’ of ethnic conflict elsewhere in Africa (Kenya, Cote d’Ivoire, and so on) are also inherent in Ghana’s social structure. Indeed, Ghana bears striking similarities to these countries in many ways: it is an ethnically divided society; elections are zero-sum contests which the political elites are determined to win at all costs because of their imperative to accumulate wealth from state resources and distribute patronage to kinfolk and party supporters... and there are many gullible supporters ready to be mobilized by politicians or to self-mobilize to commit atrocities against each other because of ethno-political hatred”.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Jasper Ayelazuno, ‘Ghanaian elections and conflict management: interrogating the absolute majority electoral system’, *Journal of African Elections*, 10, 2 (2011), pp.22-53, p.27.

As the analysis above shows, the possibility for election-related violence has become more real in Ghana than ever before. The most notable factors that underpin the growing prospects for post-election violence are the dangers posed by political vigilante groups, the mistrust between the opposition NDC and the Electoral Commission, the limited credibility in the voter register, and the propensity of opportunistic party elites in manipulating the electoral processes in their regional vote banks. The temptation for electoral fraud is high because the increasingly closed nature of election results means that even a small rigging by any of the two main parties can help tilt electoral outcomes. In this context, any evidence or even suspicion of electoral fraud can give the losing party enough grounds to challenge the final result. While electoral disputes in Ghana have generally been resolved through the electoral commission or the courts, the possibility of rejecting election results through violent means is becoming more likely due to a decline in trust for key institutions responsible for managing elections and resolving electoral disputes.¹⁰⁴

Indeed, if the key to Ghana's relatively peaceful election outcomes has been the independence of the EC, as Lindsay Whitfield has argued, then Ghanaians have reason to worry about the likely outcomes of the 2020 general elections. There is an apparent decline in trust of key institutions responsible for managing elections and resolving electoral disputes. As the article by Mariam Bjarnesen demonstrates, political vigilante groups have become increasingly important because contesting political parties, particularly those in opposition, have very limited trust in state security agencies. The main opposition NDC does not appear to have an iota of trust that EC is committed to acting as a fair referee in the elections, and observers have noted a

104 Dorina A. Bekoe and Stephanie M. Burchard, 'Ghana's Perfect Storm: Is Africa's Model Democracy in Danger of Faltering?', *World Politics Review*, 11 October 2016, <<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/20156/ghana-s-perfect-storm-is-africa-s-model-democracy-in-danger-of-faltering>> (22 October 2020).

decline in the usefulness of the Inter-Party Advisory Committee (IPAC) for building consensus both among contending political parties and between parties and the EC. The dwindling trust in these institutions is a foundation for a post-election crisis, as it provides the losing party the needed basis to question the impartiality of the entire electoral process. These observations not only raise important questions about recent characterizations of Ghana as a ‘durable democracy’¹⁰⁵, but instead also point to the fragility of the country’s democratic experience thus far.

¹⁰⁵ Guillaume Arditti, ‘Ghana’s Durable Democracy: The Roots of Its Success’, *Foreign Affairs*, 6 January 2017. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/ghana/2017-01-06/ghanas-durable-democracy> (25 October 2020).