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Promoting Democratic Stability in Ghana:

Strategies for Resilience in Elections

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Abstract

Ghana's democratic stability, while widely lauded, faces recurring threats from electoral violence driven by political patronage, youth vigilantism, and socio-economic vulnerabilities. This policy brief examines the root causes and dynamics of electoral violence, using the 2020 elections as a case study to analyse incidents across pre-election, election day, and post-election phases. Key findings highlight how political patronage fosters violent youth mobilisation, distrust in state institutions exacerbates tensions, and unresolved grievances lead to violent confrontations. To safeguard democratic integrity ahead of the December 2024 elections and future ones, this policy paper proposes actionable recommendations: enhancing election security through specialised training for security forces and enforcing neutrality; combating political vigilantism with public awareness campaigns and rapid-response mechanisms; fostering inter-party dialogue through peace pacts; and addressing socio-economic drivers by creating employment opportunities for vulnerable youth. By adopting these strategies through a collaborative effort involving government, civil society, and international partners, Ghana can reinforce its democratic resilience and ensure peaceful electoral processes.

Keywords: Electoral Violence, Democratic Stability, Ghana, Election Security

Introduction

Ghana has long been regarded as a beacon of democracy in West Africa, with a history marked by peaceful transitions of power and a commitment to democratic principles.¹ At the same time, Ghana's three phases of elections (pre-, during, and post-electoral periods) have witnessed various forms of violence, questioning Ghana's accolade as a peaceful and maturing democracy. Electoral violence jeopardises hard-won democratic gains. Electoral violence not only threatens the safety of voters, but it also undermines public confidence in the electoral process itself.

Historically, Ghanaian elections have been marred by incidents of violence, often fueled by deep-seated political rivalries and patronage networks prioritising party loyalty over national interest. The significance of addressing these issues cannot be overstated.² Indeed, failure to do so may lead to increased unrest and instability, further complicating an already fragile political landscape. This policy brief explores the underlying causes of electoral violence in Ghana and its implications for democratic stability. By examining recent trends, this paper explores strategies to mitigate these challenges and promote a more resilient democratic environment in elections, with the aim of ensuring stability for future electoral processes as well.

The 2020 general elections in Ghana served as a critical case study for understanding the dynamics of electoral violence because of the repertoire of violent incidents that occurred at the various phases of the election.³ Reports indicated clashes between rival party supporters in several regions, leading to injuries and property damage.⁴ Specific incidents during the 2020 elections underscore how quickly tensions can escalate into violence. For instance, confrontations between supporters from opposing parties resulted in fatalities in some areas,⁵ prompting calls for increased security measures during elections. These events illustrate how unresolved grievances can erupt into violent confrontations if not adequately addressed.

The policy paper first discusses the causes of electoral violence, focusing on political patronage and the growth of vigilante activities. It then focuses on the 2020 election as a case study, analysing violent incidents during the three phases of the election, with a particular focus on Techiman South Constituency. The paper concludes and provides policy recommendations, highlighting opportunities for enhancing democratic stability in Ghana ahead of the December 2024 elections.

Factors Contributing to Electoral Violence and Its Impact on Democratic Stability

Role of Political Patronage

Political patronage remains a significant driver of electoral violence not only in Ghana, but also in many African countries, where winner-takes-all politics is deeply ingrained.⁶ Lamptey and Salihu argue that the return of multi-party democracy in Africa in the early 1990s was greeted with euphoria, and that it would remedy the patronage politics and the associated violence.⁷ However, after many years of democratic practice and transitions, neo-patrimonialism and the attendant violence remain a fixture of Africa and, for that matter, Ghana's politics and elections.⁸ The phenomenon is expressed differently as neo-patrimonialism or patron-client relationship in many African politics.⁹ In Ghana, although political patronage occurs at various levels, one that spawns violence is the relationship between parliamentarians (known as 'big men' or patrons) and youth groups known as (small boys or clients) as described by Nugent.¹⁰ The pursuit of political power by parliamentarians in Ghana has fostered patron-client relationships, where vulnerable youth or vigilante groups are often willing to engage in illicit activities, such as ballot stuffing, box snatching, and assaulting political opponents, all in an effort to secure victory for their patrons. In recent times, this behaviour manifests during the counting and collation of election results, where supporters of parliamentary candidates sense that their patron is likely to lose the election.¹¹

¹Dodsworth, S., Alidu, S. M., Bauer, G., & Alidu Bukari, G. (2022). Parliamentary primaries after democratic transitions: explaining reforms to candidate selection in Ghana. *African Affairs*, 121(483), 275-297; Graham, E., Gyampo, R., Faanu, P., & Yobo, E. (2017). The third peaceful transfer of power and democratic consolidation in Ghana. *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 10(5), 99-128.

²Amankwaah, C. (2013). *Election-related violence: The case of Ghana*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Lamptey, A. and Salihu, N. (2012) Interrogating the relationship between the Politics of Patronage and Electoral Violence in Ghana in Aning, K. & Danso, K. (eds) *Managing Election-Related Conflict and Violence for Democratic Stability in Ghana*, Accra: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Lindberg, S. I. (2003). 'It's Our Time to "Chop"': Do Elections in Africa Feed Neo-Patrimonialism Rather than Counter-Act It?. *Democratization*, 10(2), 121-140; Nugent, P. (1995). *Big men, small boys and politics in Ghana: Power, ideology and the burden of history, 1982-1994*. Pinter Pub Ltd; Van de Walle, N. (2007). *The Path from Neopatrimonialism: Democracy and Clientelism in Africa Today*, Centre for International Studies, *Working Paper Series*, No. 3-7.

¹⁰Nugent, P. (1995). *Big Men, small boys and politics in Ghana: Power, ideology and the burden of history, 1982-1994*. Pinter Pub Ltd.

¹¹Interview, CSO, Accra, 25 October, 2024, Accra.

This mutually beneficial relation explains the violent behaviour and intrepid posture of these vigilante groups in recent times (2024). The practice becomes worrying, especially when politics is intertwined with economic incentives, creating an environment where loyalty to party leaders often supersedes adherence to democratic norms. Politicians frequently engage in practices that reward loyalists with jobs and contracts, fostering a culture where dissent is met with hostility. Largely, it arises from the winner-takes-all politics in Ghana over the past three decades.¹² “In fact, such politics has created an awfully acrimonious and partisan politics that excludes those perceived as opponents”¹³. As Gyampo also indicates “... all other Ghanaians who are not part of the ruling party [are excluded] from national governance and decision making in a manner that [does not only] polarise [...] the nation, [but also creates enmity, leading to attacks during elections].”¹⁴

Influence of Vigilante Groups and Party Youth

The mobilisation of youth through party-affiliated vigilante groups has exacerbated tensions during election periods.¹⁵ These groups often operate outside legal frameworks, especially the Vigilantism and Related Offences Act, 2019 (Act 999) and engage in violent confrontations with rival parties. Their actions intimidate voters and contribute to a climate of fear that discourages participation in the electoral process. They continue to mutate in different forms within the Fourth Republican democratic dispensation.¹⁶ Although some genuinely started during the 2000 elections as watchdog groups to protect ballot boxes and to ensure the credibility of elections, they have metamorphosed into what Edu-Afful and Allotey-Pappoe describe as “violent, aggressive, or even criminal gangs that unleash fear and terror into constituents of the population who may be perceived as opponents, rivals or enemies”.¹⁷ Their activities manifest during bye-elections and all three phases of parliamentary and presidential

elections in Ghana.¹⁸ Several reasons, including political, economic and social conditions, account for the activities of vigilante groups in Ghana.¹⁹ These relate to the unfair distribution of state resources, inequality and marginalisation of groups who do not belong to parties in government. Such practice by the two alternating governments “has created a class of youth groups who are vulnerable, unemployed and remain a cannon fodder for exploitation by political party leaders.”²⁰ Other responses suggest that political parties, especially those in opposition, do not trust state institutions, particularly, the Electoral Commission and the Ghana Police Service (GPS), leading to such violent reactions from disgruntled and frustrated youth groups.²¹

Electoral Violence: The Case of 2020 Elections

Like previous elections, international and domestic observers declared the 2020 elections as relatively peaceful and successful.²² However, several instances of contestations and violence marred the success of the electoral process. These incidents occurred in various phases of the election process and were indicative of underlying political tensions. Analysing these incidents across the pre-election, election day, and post-electoral periods can provide critical insights into challenges and opportunities for enhancing democratic stability in Ghana ahead of the December 2024 elections.

The pre-election phase in Ghana’s 2020 elections was marked by heightened political tension and inter-party rivalries.²³ Key issues included disputes over voter registration, campaign activities, and accusations of political interference. The new voter registration exercise conducted by the Electoral Commission (EC) triggered tensions, with claims from opposition parties, especially the NDC, that the process sought to disenfranchise certain regions perceived as their strongholds.²⁴ Consequently,

¹²Interview, Senior Lecturer, UDS, 24 October, 2024, Tamale.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Gyampo R (2013) Dealing with Winner-Takes-All Politics in Ghana: The Case of National Development Planning. Accra: Institute of Economic Affairs.

¹⁵Kumah-Abiwu, F. (2017). Issue framing and electoral violence in Ghana: a conceptual analysis. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 55(2), 165-186.

¹⁶Dumenu, M.Y. and Adzraku, M.E. (2020) Electoral Violence and Political Vigilantism in Ghana: Evidence from Selected Hotspots, *Research Paper*, 27. Accra: Center for Democratic Development (CDD)-GHANA-UNDP

¹⁷Edu-Afful, F., & Allotey-Pappoe, S. (2016). Political vigilantism and electoral violence in Ghana. In Aning, K., Danso, K. & N. Salihu (Eds.), *Managing election-related violence for democratic stability* (pp.63-84). Accra: KAIPTC.

¹⁸Interview, CSO, 21 October, 2024, Tamale.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Interview, CSO, 23 October, 2024, Tamale.

²¹Interview, Gender Activist, 23 October, 2024, Tamale.

²²African Union. (2020, December 9). Preliminary statement: AU Election Observation Mission to the Presidential and Parliamentary Elections in the Republic of Ghana. Retrieved from <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20201209/preliminary-statement-au-election-observation-mission-presidential-and-parliamentary-elections-in-the-republic-of-ghana>

²³Center for Democratic Development (CDD)-Ghana (January 14, 2022). Election 2020: Validation Report of Electoral Violence Cases, January 14, 2022. Retrieved from <https://cddgh.org/2022/01/election-2020-validation-report-on-electoral-violence-cases/> Accra: CDD-Ghana.

²⁴GhanaWeb, (July 19, 2019) Limited Registration: 500,000 Ghanaians disenfranchised – NDC, Retrieved from <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Limited-Registration-500-000-Ghanaians-disenfranchised-NDC-764927>

violent clashes occurred in areas such as Kasoa in the Central Region and Banda in the Bono Region over alleged voter suppression.²⁵ These incidents involved physical altercations, the use of weapons, and the deployment of military personnel, which was criticised as an intimidation tactic. Similarly, campaign activities including political rallies, occasionally turned violent, particularly in areas with strong partisan divisions. This occurs because of the “vulnerable youth who want to satisfy their paymasters, I mean politicians, MPs, who must come to power or maintain power by all means”.²⁶

Election Day saw varying levels of violence across different regions, which significantly influenced public perception of the electoral process. Security forces, vigilante groups, and party loyalists were involved in several incidents. A case in point that generated significant apprehension in the country is the incident that occurred in the Techiman South Constituency, where violence erupted among the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the New Democratic Congress (NDC) supporters over the collation of election results. Security forces opened fire during a confrontation with voters, leading to the deaths of two individuals and injuries to others.²⁷ The incident heightened tensions nationwide and raised questions about the proportional use of force by security personnel. While the intervention by the security forces to restore security was not out of place, the level of force and the shooting made people to believe the security forces were irregular and did the bidding of the ruling party. As an interviewee indicates:

“I cannot fathom why misunderstanding over counting or collating election results should lead to this level of force. Were those security forces there to do the bidding of the government, he queried”²⁸

Although the Ghana Police Service (GPS) commenced an investigation into the alleged shooting incident, there remains a perception that there is a grand agenda to shield the perpetrators of the crime. It is, therefore, not surprising that a report is yet to be

released on the perpetrators of the alleged crime. The post-election period was characterised by protests, legal disputes, and continued violence in some areas. The NDC, led by the erstwhile opposition leader, John Dramani Mahama made a statement, rejecting the presidential election results, claiming irregularities and discrepancies in the collation process.²⁹ Protests erupted in parts of the country, with some escalating into violent confrontations between demonstrators and security forces.³⁰ These protests were particularly pronounced in areas like Accra and Tamale, where demonstrators alleged electoral fraud³¹. Security forces intervened with a heavy-handed approach in dispersing protests, leading to injuries and the death of at least five individuals during the post-election period.³² Indeed, the highhanded nature of the security forces in dealing with alleged perpetrators and the lack of prosecutorial justice will continue to engender public mistrust in the forces. This tends to spawn more violence in the upcoming 2024 elections, with implications for injuries and deaths, especially in hotspot constituencies.

Conclusion

Investing in strategies that address electoral violence is paramount for safeguarding Ghana’s democratic stability as it approaches its 2024 elections. By understanding the root causes and implementing targeted strategies aimed at fostering resilience within its democratic processes, Ghana can uphold its reputation as a leader in democracy within West Africa. A collaborative approach involving government entities, civil society organisations, and international partners will be essential in creating a secure electoral environment that protects both voters and democratic integrity.

²⁵GhanaWeb, (July 23, 2020) Banda, Kasoa voter registration violence: Prosecute instigators – GBA, July 23, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Banda-Kasoa-voter-registration-violence-Prosecute-instigators-GBA-1014088>

²⁶Interview, Security Analyst, 25 October, 2024, Accra.

²⁷MyJoyOnline, (December 21, 2020). Techiman South election day shooting: The incident that led to the death of persons at collation Centre. Retrieved from <https://www.myjoyonline.com/techiman-south-election-day-shooting-the-incident-that-led-to-death-of-persons-at-collation-centre/techiman-south-election-day-shooting-the-incident-that-led-to-death-of-persons-at-collation-centre/>

²⁸Interview, Security Analyst, 25 October, 2024, Accra.

²⁹Citi News Room. (December 10, 2020). Mahama rejects 2020 election results. Retrieved from <https://citinewsroom.com/2020/12/mahama-rejects-2020-election-results-full-speech/>

³⁰Commission for Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) (n.d.) Retrieved from <https://chraj.gov.gh/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Decision-On-2020-election-violence-Ruling.pdf>

³¹Citi News Room. (December 16, 2020). Tamale: NDC supporters march to protest election results despite police caution. Retrieved from <https://citinewsroom.com/2020/12/tamale-ndc-supporters-march-to-protest-election-results-despite-police-caution/>

³²DW (December 09, 2020). 5 people killed in Ghana election violence. Retrieved from <https://www.dw.com/en/5-people-killed-in-ghana-election-violence/a-55883334>

Recommendations

To prevent violence and enhance democratic stability in Ghana ahead of the December 2024 elections, as well as future elections, we make the following recommendations based on the analysis;

- **Promoting Election Security:** Provide specialised election security training to police and military personnel on crowd control, conflict de-escalation, and human rights. This will work when the Government enforces strict neutrality and accountability for security forces during elections;
- **Prevent Political Vigilantism:** Increase public awareness of laws against vigilantism and establish rapid-response teams to address violence that is likely to emerge from vigilante;
- **Promote Inter-Party Dialogue:** Establish pre-election peace pacts among political parties to commit to peaceful conduct and acceptance of results; and
- **Addressing Socio-economic Drivers of Electoral Tensions:** Create Economic Opportunities for Youth and Implement programs to provide skills training and employment opportunities to reduce the vulnerability of youth to recruitment by political vigilante groups and patrons.

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