

# What's So Special About Ghana?

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President Obama's July visit focused global attention on Ghana. His speech to the Ghanaian Parliament, however, was clearly a message to the African continent as a whole. He declared that "...this moment is just as promising for Ghana—and for Africa—as the moment when my father came of age and new nations were being born. This is a new moment of promise. Only this time, we have learned that it will not be giants like Nkrumah and Kenyatta who will determine Africa's future. Instead, it will be you—the men and women in Ghana's Parliament, and the people you represent. Above all, it will be the young people—brimming with talent and energy and hope—who can claim the future that so many in my father's generation never found." Explaining why Ghana was a particularly relevant place to discuss Africa's future, President Obama stated, "Here in Ghana, you show us a face of Africa that is too often overlooked by a world that sees only tragedy or the need for charity. The people of Ghana have worked hard to put democracy on a firmer footing, with peaceful transfers of power even in the wake of closely contested elections. And with improved governance and an emerging civil society, Ghana's economy has shown impressive rates of growth." More pointedly, President Obama recognized that "time and again, Ghanaians have chosen Constitutional rule over autocracy, and shown a democratic spirit that allows the energy of your people to break through."

I will go even further, however, and assert that, despite challenges that remain, Ghana has the best developed democracy on the continent. How Ghana reached this happy situation would demand more space than I have, although I would like to raise four factors that might provide some lessons for the continent as a whole. Three of these factors are positive: a political system that minimizes the divisive effects of ethnic or regional politics, strong political leadership, and Ghana's small but professional military. The fourth factor is potentially negative: a political system that centralizes the power to appoint key municipal, district, and regional officials in the presidency, raising the stakes for each election.

## The Strongest Democracy on the Continent?

I believe that Ghana has the most developed democracy on the African continent. Of course, increasing numbers of other African countries have free and fair democratic elections. What sets Ghana apart is not the existence of free and fair elections, but **peaceful interparty transitions**. Ghana is a multiparty democracy (eight parties contested the 2008 presidential election) that is currently dominated by two parties, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC). Between them, these two parties received about 93 percent of the presidential votes in the first round of the 2000 election and over 97 percent of the presidential votes in 2004 and 2008. Both the NPP and NDC have won elections and assumed power. More importantly, both the NPP and NDC have lost elections and handed over power. In practical terms, this means that when President Mills gave his last State of the Nation Speech, two former, democratically elected

Presidents from two different parties were in the audience. I believe this makes Ghana almost unique on the continent. The major exception that comes to mind is Benin, which should be recognized for having led the way in the sub-region with its 1990 National Conference and its own subsequent interparty transitions. (Off the continent, the island nations of Cape Verde and Mauritius can make similar claims.) The importance of this distinction, between democratic elections and democratic transitions, cannot be overestimated. In fact, I wonder if international attention on elections rather than transitions doesn't set the democratic bar too low. Yes, any democratically elected government has a mark of legitimacy conferred by its people. But a democratically elected government in a country that has repeated interparty transitions, in practice, feels pressure to respond to its electorate that governments/parties that have never lost do not feel. The current NDC government won the last presidential election by a margin of only 40,000 votes (0.46 percent) out of 9,000,000 cast. The fact that they could be voted out in the next election by a similar margin is not lost on them. The reality of interparty transitions is the defining factor in Ghanaian political life today. For example, Ghana has been very successful at reducing poverty in recent years. But a President who has just won an election by a margin of 40,000 votes likely views a poverty rate around 29 percent as an electoral imperative as much as a moral imperative. I am frequently asked about whether Ghana's newly discovered oil will truly benefit the Ghanaian people. My response to this is that I think it is critical that Ghana's oil development is coming after democratic development. If high ranking government officials start showing unexplained wealth, they and their party know they will have to answer to skeptical voters. We already see an increasing awareness among government officials that allegations of malfeasance or misfeasance will likely be investigated with great enthusiasm by new administrations rather than accepted or swept under the carpet. Ultimately, democracy as represented by interparty transitions will provide the major push for good governance.

Successful democracy, of course, requires far more than just political transitions. It requires an electorate that uses its franchise to demand performance from its government, an independent legislature and judiciary, and a vibrant civil society. The reality of interparty transitions encourages progress in all these areas. Ghanaian voters know they have the power to insert or remove governments and they are demanding good governance and efficient services. The legislature is currently almost evenly divided, with the NDC holding 115 seats out of 230. Given its slim plurality, the government cannot take for granted its ability to impose its will on Parliament. This gives the legislature as a whole an opportunity to assert itself, and the opposition party an opportunity to play its most powerful role in government since the onset of democracy in 1992. Members of Parliament, regardless of party, are under pressure from constituents to perform. Twenty-eight incumbents lost their seats in the last election and voters have made clear their willingness to engage in "skirt and blouse" voting in which they divide their parliamentary and presidential votes rather than vote along party lines. Aiding public awareness, of course, is that Ghana's vibrant civil society is well represented by its unfettered free press (around 200 radio stations and 70 daily and weekly newspapers).

### What Makes Ghana Different?

First and foremost, although Ghana is ethnically and linguistically diverse, ethnicity and regionalism have not played the divisive role in Ghana that they have in some other countries due to special characteristics of Ghana's Constitution and demographics. The NPP is associated with the Ashanti and the NDC is associated with the Ewe and Fante, major ethnic groups in Ghana, but none of these individual ethnic groups comprises more than about 15 percent of the population. For either the NPP or the NDC to win, they must reach outside of their own ethnic groups, making it counterproductive to play the ethnic card. The parties recognize this, and both the NPP and NDC vice presidential candidates were openly discussed as having been chosen at least partially for being attractive to swing voters, particularly in the North. Both the NDC and NPP campaigns focused on broad issues such as economic growth and corruption.

Ghana's Constitution also moderates the harmful affects of ethnicity and regionalism. Article 55 prohibits political parties from basing membership on ethnic, religious, regional or sectional divisions. To contest elections, parties must be represented in every region of Ghana and must be organized in at least two-thirds of the districts of each region. As a result, while the two major parties have strongholds in certain regions and ethnic groups, they cannot succeed electorally without broader national support.

A second factor is Ghana's very small, but highly professional military that supports rather than threatens democracy. Ghana's Army, Navy, and Air Force have a total manpower of approximately 13,000 men and women. Of those 13,000, approximately 3,000 are deployed on international peacekeeping operations at any given time. (Ghana is consistently among the top ten contributors of troops to global peacekeeping.) At a cost of about 0.8 percent of GDP, Ghana's military does not strain the national budget. Perhaps as a result, Ghanaian soldiers receive a living wage and they receive it on time.

Moreover, the heavy peacekeeping rotation provides substantial benefits to the Ghanaian armed forces as well as to peacekeeping operations. Substantial expenses for training and equipping Ghanaian troops are picked up by the international community in the interest of supporting peace operations. The Ghanaian troops themselves benefit from increased opportunities for international training and cooperation. (We estimate that approximately 70 percent of the Ghanaian military has been exposed to US training and many more have been exposed to other international training.) Peacekeeping allowances enable returning Ghanaian soldiers to make down payments on homes and cars, helping them to jump into Ghana's middle class. At least partly as a result of its peacekeeping role, the Ghanaian military has a well-deserved reputation as a disciplined force that respects civilian authority and human rights. During the 2008 elections, the military shared responsibility for election security with the police and other security services and received high marks for neutrality and professionalism. In short, the Ghanaian Armed Forces prove that "small is beautiful." Ghana now plays a significant role in transferring its peacekeeping experience to other African militaries at the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Center.

A third factor is clearly Ghana's fine political leadership. Both former President Jerry Rawlings and former President John Kufuor deserve accolades for respecting constitutional term limits and accepting electoral losses by their immediate successors. Both Rawlings and Kufuor also should be recognized for resisting the urge to use the powers of incumbency to cripple opposition parties. Their actions make it extremely difficult for their successors to do less. Ghana's losing political candidates also deserve credit. Current President John Evans Atta-Mills accepted losses in presidential elections in 2000 and 2004, just as Nana Akuffo-Addo did in 2008, although there have been tense moments in each election. These leaders have resisted a "winner-take-all" mentality.

This leads us to the potentially negative factor, a political structure that raises the stakes of elections through centralization of power in the hands of the presidency. The winning presidential candidate has the right to appoint regional, district and municipal level executive officials. This creates a situation in which the President names the executive officials in Ashanti region, despite the fact that the opposition NPP won 36 of 39 seats there. This marginalization of the losing party is a built in incentive not to accept election results if there is even the smallest reason to object. (It also tends to limit regional and district governments' accountability toward citizens on the local level.) The Mills administration has promised to decentralize government and to conduct a constitutional review. Given the disincentives for any party to give up patronage power, the President may face resistance.

Ghana certainly faces many challenges, but it is clearly an African success story. As other African nations seek to build their own success stories, I think Ghana provides several examples worth studying. Perhaps other nations cannot replicate Ghana's society in which no single ethnic group has a clear majority, but they can seek to design electoral systems that encourage (or require) parties to seek majorities that reach beyond the lines of any single ethnicity or region. Other nations should demand that their leaders respect the letter and spirit of democracy by respecting term limits, allowing opposition parties a level playing field, and winning or losing gracefully. They can consider making this easier by ensuring that decentralization allows opposition parties to play a significant role, particularly at the local and regional levels in their own strongholds. Similarly, other nations can consider right-sizing their militaries to a sustainable level that allows for real professionalism and a role that supports democratic governance rather than challenges it.