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The 2004 Elections in Northern Ghana

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The December 2004 elections in Ghana were held under the terms of the 1992 Fourth Republic Constitution, with parliamentary and presidential polls being conducted on the same day – Tuesday December 7th. They were held in the context of continuing economic hardship for most of the population, with an estimate of almost a third of the population being below the poverty line. Although the hyper-inflationary experiences of the recent past have now been replaced, the rate of annual inflation remains approximately 25% and there is a slower but on-going devaluation of the cedi against major world currencies. In 2003 it depreciated by 28.5% against the euro, but in the first two months of 2004 it actually appreciated by 2.3%. It has been estimated that in 2003 the economy grew by 5.2%, up from 4.4% in 2002, with increases in both the world price for and production levels of cocoa being particularly beneficial (Industry Canada, 2004).

This article will present some of the historical and constitutional background to the 2004 presidential and parliamentary elections in Ghana. It will then focus on the question of why, despite the resources at its disposal and its overall success in the rest of the country, the ruling New Patriotic Party failed to make significant gains in the north of the country. It will argue that the explanation for this lies partly in historical disputes within the area, combined with more recent socio-economic developments and experiences in north – south relations.

For Ghana as a whole the election results represented a triumph for the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP), with President Kuffuor receiving 52.45% of the vote as against only 44.64% for his nearest rival Professor Atta Mills. However, for the three northern regions their continued support for the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the much smaller People's National Convention (PNC) confirmed their continuing divergence from political trends in most of the south.

As Ayee has put it, “Ghana is one of the few countries in Africa that has had significant experiences with democratic political life (Ayee, 1998, p.35). It had a functioning multi-party democratic system during the pre-independence self-rule and the early independence periods between 1951 and 1960, and again between periods of military rule democracy was re-established from October 1969 to January 1972 and September 1979 to December 1981. In November 1992 the military dominated Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) held multi-party presidential elections to return the country to civil rule, but perceived electoral abuses led four opposition parties to challenge the outcome and boycott the parliamentary elections of December that year. As a result, it was not until the 1996 elections in which opposition parties contested both the presidential and parliamentary contests that democracy with the aura of legitimacy returned to Ghana.

It has generally been accepted that the 1996 elections were ‘free’ in that an independent Electoral Commission compiled a new electoral register “.. with the active collaboration and participation of the political parties” (Ayee, p.61), ensured

that all voters had an identity card with either a photograph or a thumbprint, provided transparent ballot boxes and cardboard screens for voting, and arranged for votes to be counted at each individual polling station. There was a massive campaign of voter education and various groups of international observers were on hand to lend “credibility and legitimacy” to the outcome. Party agents were allowed to be present at every polling station and they were required to sign reporting forms endorsing the results.

This does not, however, mean that the elections were entirely fair, with allegations of bribes being paid to voters in many constituencies, the use of threats and intimidation, claims of fake identification cards and so on. However, most of these claims referred to only a small number of constituencies. Of greater significance is the argument that free and fair elections require equality in access to financial resources, and this gives a great advantage to the incumbents. In the 1996 election President Rawlings was able to use a Ghana Air Force helicopter to reach inaccessible areas and his NDC had a fleet of new campaign vehicles (Ayee, p.71). This led opposition figures to claim that while the 1992 experience was ‘the stolen verdict’, the 1996 one was ‘the bought election’.

In 2000, however, the same electoral regulations and essentially the same conditions existed but Kuffuor and the opposition NPP were able to win both the presidential and parliamentary elections. Although the NPP was allegedly obtaining finance from senior figures in the Nigerian government, had a well-organised network of fund-raisers amongst the Ghanaian diaspora in Europe and North America, and was generally supported by the richer areas of the country, it was still essentially the poor relation of the NDC. This does provide support for the impartiality of the work of the Electoral Commission throughout the period, and suggests that financial resources alone are insufficient to ensure electoral success in contemporary Ghana.

In 2004 the electoral regulations and political conditions were essentially the same as they had been in 1996 and 2000 with the single exception of NPP rather than NDC incumbency. Now it was the NPP which had access to greater sources of finance and had the privileges of government which had formerly belonged to the NDC. Despite the on-going economic hardships, the scene seemed set for an overwhelming NPP success, consolidating its support in the Akan heartlands of the centre, south and west of the country, and moving in to the NDC strongholds of the Volta Region in the east, and the Upper West, Upper East and Northern Regions of the north.

The NPP were able to make significant gains in the Fante areas of the Central Region, despite this being the home of the NDC presidential candidate Atta-Mills (see figure 1 for the ethnic map of Ghana). However, the pockets of NDC resistance in other areas of the south remained largely intact. In the Volta Region they captured just one seat (as against a previous zero), in the Upper West one (again compared with zero), in the Upper East two (compared with one plus a by-election gain and an Independent who crossed the floor) and in the Northern Region eight (as against three in 2000, plus two by-election gains and an Independent who crossed the floor). Even these marginal improvements in the three northern regions were not as pronounced as they might seem, because the number of seats available had increased by six since 2000 (Upper West 8 to 10, Upper East 12 to 13, Northern 23 to 26). The seats won by the NPP were Wa East (Upper West Region), Navrongo and Builsa North (Upper East

Region), and Yendi, Gushiegu, Saboba, Wulensi, Nalerigu, Salaga, Damongo, and Chereponi (Northern Region – see figure 2, the Constituency Map of Northern Ghana for the 2004 Elections). Moreover, in several of these seats the NPP majority was less than a thousand votes (Damongo, Wulensi, Chereponi and Builsa North).

In the North the election day passed peacefully for the most part, although there were actual and attempted physical attacks on electoral officials in three constituencies in the Northern Region by supporters of the NPP who were frustrated at their inability to persuade the officials to falsify the votes (Zabzugu/Tatale, Tolon and Kpandai). Prior to election day there was sporadic violence in Bawku where the long-standing chieftaincy dispute between the numerically-dominant Kusasi and the previously dominant Mamprusi was exacerbated by local resentment against the erstwhile NPP MP Hawa Yakubu, primarily for being unwilling to step aside for a younger candidate. Her house was attacked and robbed in her absence, her security guard shot and wounded on election day, and there were a number of disturbances at polling booths. In Tamale and neighbouring areas of Dagbon there were various incidents before and after the election with allegedly four or five deaths, the poisoning of one party's supporters by contaminated water at the party rally, and a number of shooting incidents. Perhaps the most significant event was the death of Alhaji Mobila, a leading supporter of the Convention Peoples Party, in military custody. Initial reports suggest that he was beaten to death, having been handed over to the military by the police earlier in the day.

So why did the NPP fail to capitalise in the North on the relatively massive resources at its disposal? Any observer could see the greater number of vehicles at the party's disposal and the massive campaigning effort being mounted. The Vice President, Aliu Mahama, himself a northerner from the Yendi area, toured the regions and held many rallies. Promises were made for road improvements and the development of other social amenities. Apparently strong candidates with significant power bases were chosen – several District Chief Executives, who had enjoyed the opportunity to develop local patronage over the previous four years, stood, as did people appointed by the President to be junior ministers in the out-going government. Yet the result essentially showed no significant advancement for the NPP in the north as a whole.

Northern Ghanaian politics cannot be explained in terms of a single mono-causal factor, as traditional disputes, inter-ethnic rivalries, ideological traditions, electoral self-interest, the growth of new interest groups, and the personal appeal of particular candidates or their close supporters all played a role. In the past the few 'local notables', whether traditional chiefs or educated/rich individuals, could mobilise the support of particular villages or sections, but now in every locality there are competing 'notables' as education and elements of a more 'modern' economy and society have spread. This is supported by an examination of the lists of candidates and their educational qualifications. In the Northern region, for example, most constituencies were contested by at least one graduate, with Tamale Central having as its candidates two with PhDs, one M.Phil, one B.A. and one 4-year Cert A teacher. In the three regions combined there were ten candidates with PhDs, and numerous others with post-graduate qualifications, first degrees and diplomas. So the North now provides a highly competitive arena, with well-educated candidates using modern campaign resources in a context where traditional rivalries vie with 'modern' demands and aspirations for political significance.

To understand the overall failure of the NPP in the area, we need to break the North down into more meaningful units. In some the key factor remains the continuation of traditional conflicts. This was most clearly the case in the kingdom of Dagbon in the Northern Region. Here the dispute over the paramountcy between the Andani and Abudulai families has been on-going since the middle of the nineteenth century and the death of Ya Na Yakubu (see Staniland, M, 1975). In March 2002 the paramount chief from the Andani family (Ya Na Yakubu Andani II), together with thirty supporters, was murdered in the Dagbon capital of Yendi and his body dismembered. The NPP regime has contained several leading Dagomba, all from the Abudulai family or with close links with it (Vice President, Minister of the Interior, Northern Regional Minister, Yendi District Chief Executive, National Security Adviser, Member of National Security Council). The failure of the regime to bring any of the culprits to justice angered not only the Andani family, but other less-partisan individuals who saw the government as failing to act on the deep problems of Dagomba society. The scale of turn-out for NDC rallies in Tamale in November and December was indicative of the intensity of feelings, and the result throughout the mainly Dagomba constituencies was that the NDC won nine of the eleven, with only the Abudulai-dominated Yendi and Gushiegu returning NPP candidates. It must be realised, however, that the paramountcy is only the pinnacle of Dagbon society and that chieftaincy disputes occur at other levels – and it is the competition for chieftaincy in general that is the key motivating factor. This probably explains why Prince Imoro Andani from the Andani family stood as a candidate for the NPP in Kumbungu – his father had been an unsuccessful candidate for the Savelugu chieftaincy, and so this failure alienated him from the Andani mainstream; his hopes of succession to a higher traditional office in Dagbon lie with an Abudulai paramountcy overturning Andani chieftaincy appointments. Personal chieftaincy concerns might also explain the alleged support of the Karaga Na for the NPP, even though he is from the Andani family – this position would place him as an ideal reconciliation candidate for the paramountcy under an NPP government. This move was not, however, supported by other members of his household, and the Karaga constituency voted almost 2 to 1 for the NDC presidential and parliamentary candidates (Ghana Government, 2005).

Bawku in the Upper East region is another area where traditional disputes remain strong. Under the British the Chief of Bawku was drawn from the minority Mamprusi tribe, but since Independence successive regimes have been drawn into supporting and enskinning rival candidates from the Kusasi and Mamprusi. In the 2000 election violence again characterised the election with the deaths of more than 50 people (Aye, 2001, P.7). It was alleged that the NDC ‘played the ethnic card’, claiming that an NPP government would revert the chieftaincy to the Mamprusi (Aye, 2001). In practice most of the Mamprusi vote seems to have gone to the NPP candidate in Bawku Central in the hope that a new NPP regime would indeed overturn the ruling that had led to a Kusasi (Azoka II) being enskinned as Bawku Naba. In the event the settlement preserved the place of the Bawku Naba, leading to Mamprusi disaffection and one of their number standing as an Independent candidate in 2004. This reflected the grievance of many Mamprusi that under the Kusasi chief they were losing previous privileges such as their claims to land usage. The vote the Mamprusi candidate achieved in 2004 was almost exactly equal to the margin by which the sitting NPP candidate was defeated (8574 as against 8349). As indicated above,

however, it is not a question of this traditional ethnic dispute being fought out in isolation, but rather it is a significant issue vying for importance with other issues. In the wider Kusasi area this was shown by the victory in Zebilla of John Ndebugre over the incumbent NDC candidate Cletus Avoka. Prior to the election there was considerable pressure within their respective parties in both Zebilla (NDC) and Bawku Central (NPP) for the sitting candidates to step down to give younger or other candidates scope for their ambitions; so resentful failed candidates and their supporters added their opposition to incumbents in the contest.

Wa in the Upper West Region had the potential for a traditional dispute to have a profound impact on the election, but in practice this did not turn out to be the case. In Wa Central there has been a political vacuum in the traditional arena with the inability of competing factions to agree on a new Paramount Chief – the Wa Na, and through lack of occupancy the chief's palace is showing signs of disintegration. The NDC has been associated with the candidature of Seidu Yakubu from the Nakpasa Gate which has been excluded from the paramountcy for a considerable time (see Wilks, 1989 and Dougah, 1966). This presented the opportunity for the NPP Government to capitalise on the situation by opposing Seidu Yakubu and thereby gaining support from the other three gates to the paramountcy. The NPP government, however, has not done this, preferring to stand aloof from the dispute, which so far remains unresolved.

The general point still stands, though, that a significant factor in the failure of the NPP in the North in the 2004 elections was its inability or unwillingness to settle or deal with traditional disputes in ways which would have enhanced its support.

Very different factors applied in much of the Upper West region. This was the part of the North that had gained most from the years of PNDC and then NDC rule. Firstly, the Upper West Region was created in 1983 by the PNDC with its capital at Wa. This led to the creation of more administrative jobs in Wa, and was followed by significant improvements to the economic infrastructure. Roads in particular were vastly improved, with the major link to the South via Bamboi being tarred in stages. In 2000 the region solidly maintained its support for the NDC, with only Sissala constituency instead supporting the PNC which has its roots in the PNP regime of 1979 (which had Dr Hila Limann a Sissala from the Tumu area (Gwollu) as its presidential candidate). Popular opinion was that the new NPP regime from 2000 had done little to continue with the region's development; indeed the road-building programme had been paused. Only one area had seen significant benefit – the establishment of a new district in Funsu – and it was no great surprise when it was that area (Wa East constituency) which was the only one to return an NPP candidate in 2004 (even here the majority was less than 2000 votes). In an area without deep traditional disputes (Wa town itself is an exception to this) modern aspirations for development become more significant, and gratitude to the NDC and resentment against the NPP won out in 2004. It will be interesting to scrutinize whether the NPP regime operates the 'carrot' or 'stick' towards the Upper West and what the subsequent outcome will be in the 2008 elections.

These two extreme patterns – traditionally dominant issues in Dagbon and the Kusasi/Mamprusi areas - and the demand for modern developments in the Upper West – are displayed in more mixed combinations elsewhere in the North. Traditional tribal disputes between the formerly dominant tribes – such as the Dagomba,

Mamprusi and Gonja – and the ‘subservient’ tribes such as the Kusasi, Konkomba, and Lobi – still remain of potential significance as was shown by the wars of 1994 when the Konkomba and Nawuri clashed with the Dagomba, Nanumba and Gonja and in which there were officially 2000 deaths, 178,000 displaced persons, and over 300 villages destroyed (Lentz and Nugent, 2000, p.185). However, their electoral significance has been diminished by the creation of new constituency boundaries that virtually ensure the subservient groups representation in parliament - Sawla (Lobi), Chereponi (Chakosi), Bunkpurugu (B’ moba), Saboba, Zabzugu/Tatali, and Kpandai (Konkomba). In the Kassena-Nankani area around Navrongo and Paga, village rivalries remain of significance as they did in the 1950s as revealed by Dennis Austin’s classic study (Austin, 1961). Although the Kassena and Nankani belong to different language groups, there is no evidence of pre-colonial tribal unity of either group, and there is much inter-marriage and cross-identity between them. While there can be the mobilisation of some support for say a Nankani candidate in the largely Kassena Chiana-Paga constituency, rivalry is more commonly felt between villages and sections of villages rather than ‘tribes’, with each feeling it is their time to have an MP or that their ‘favourite son’ should be the candidate. In 2004 Nayagnia section in Navrongo, for example, overwhelmingly voted for a local man who was the PNC candidate against those of the two major parties.

The 2004 election certainly showed for at least this campaign, government patronage was insufficient to make major gains. District Chief Executives (party nominees), Regional and Junior Ministerships provided alternative sources of development and influence for the NPP to make electoral inroads but success was limited. The Government managed to hold onto its recruited formerly Independent MP and appointed junior minister in Salaga but lost in the same circumstances in Garu-Tempane, and its junior ministerial candidates in Bolgatanga and Lawra only managed third place and a distant second respectively. The creation of a new district in Wa East helped the NPP to win there but it failed to make any impact by the same policy in Talensi in the Upper East. Individual personalities showed that they rather than government resources could have an impact in some places, with the Independent J.Y.Labik winning in Bunkpurugu, and David Apasera and John Ndebugre winning for the small PNC in Bolgatanga and Zebilla respectively.

Ideology is one variable that is difficult to assess in its influence, given that the manifestos and policies of the two main parties are not very different. Every party now also claims to carry the mantle of Kwame Nkrumah, even though the NPP is clearly seen by most Ghanaians as the direct descendant of Danquah’s United Gold Coast Convention and Busia’s Progress Party. However, its recruitment of Convention Peoples Party and PNC politicians into the government after 2000 in an attempt to isolate the NDC from other opposition groups has given some limited credibility to their ‘Nkrumahist’ claim. In the North the PNC most directly claimed the Nkrumah legacy, with the CPP having very little influence outside some pockets in Dagbon and neighbouring areas (the CPP came second in Mion and Saboba constituencies in 2000). In 2004 the CPP parliamentary candidate in Mion managed to attract over 4,500 votes but this meant only a distant third place (the NDC and NPP candidates each gained over 10,000 votes), and there was not even a CPP candidate in Saboba. Some individuals and families do keep the ideological traditions alive – the Tadam family in Paga and the Karbo family in Lawra have maintained strong support for the Danquah/Busia tradition whatever the regime of the day.

In general, ideological differences remain limited in their overt expression in the North. Socially, however, the ideological divide remains of some significance even if in actual policies it does not seem to. The NPP is seen as the party of the intellectual and business elite and the chiefs in the South, while the NDC has inherited much of the support of marginal elites of lower professionals and urban workers. As the inheritor of the radical years of the PNDC, the NDC carries the support of the new groups brought into active politics in the 1980s when the previous political elite was at least temporarily eclipsed. There is also a long-standing in-built reluctance of many Northerners from some of the poorest and most deprived areas of the country to support the NPP with its perceived base in the wealthy Ashanti Region, with some former migrants to the South having memories of discrimination and prejudice against them. The NPP's apparent policy of selecting highly educated candidates did not always facilitate the development of an easy relationship with 'ordinary' people; in Bolgatanga, for example, Dr Agambila, a highly articulate appointed junior minister in the out-going government could only come a distant third to the more populist NDC and PNC candidates.

It is interesting though that the conscious attempt by the NPP to recruit support from the Konkomba along the Togo border, who are amongst the poorest and least educated people of the North, has led to electoral success, with victories in Wulensi and Saboba. This is balanced by the success of the NDC in obtaining and now retaining considerable support from the formerly dominant Nanumba chiefs in the area. The message here is that local groups have successfully manipulated political parties to represent their interests, even when these appear to go against the parties' own ideology, apparent social affiliations and traditions.

Some new patterns of cleavage are emerging in the North. The rural/urban division is not new, with the NDC rural vote remaining particularly strong in 2000 while in Navrongo town the NPP seems to have done particularly well. The towns in the North, however, seem to be becoming 'anti-government', voting against the NDC in 2000 and against the NPP in 2004 – Bolgatanga, Bawku, and to some extent Tamale being the obvious examples. There is also some evidence of the youth and women's votes becoming significant. The latter could partly account for the success of the NDC candidate in Lambussie and the NPP candidate in Builsa North who had both nurtured contacts with women's groups. Lentz has suggested that in relation to the Upper West, youth and development groups now have a significant voice in political leadership, with chiefs having "...to come to terms with (these) new actors should they wish protect their influence" (Lentz, 2002, p.270) and similar comments have been voiced with reference to the Kassena-Nankani and Kusasi areas. Certainly several candidates stated to me their greater concern with obtaining support from the youth and women than with getting the chiefs on board.

Finally there is the issue of 'northern-ness'. Under British rule the Northern Territories were kept administratively distinct from the Gold Coast and Ashanti. There was a refusal to invest in economic infrastructure, with Governor Clifford going so far as to recommend the virtual abandonment of the north to concentrate development on the "... high potential areas of the Colony and Ashanti" (Wraith, 1967). The educational system was consciously limited to provide education for the sons of chiefs and to provide sufficient educated manpower to run the local

administration (see Bening, 1990). The result was that at the time of party politics the few educated northerners feared domination by new 'black' colonisers. With this in mind, in the 1950s the North had its own Northern Peoples Party which fought against Nkrumah's CPP until regional parties were banned by the government in 1970. Educated Northerners still retain some legacy of these fears, as shown by a speech in September 2001 by northern-born and educated Vice President Aliu Mahama, calling for the holding of an 'All Northern Peoples Development Conference' to help combat the deprivation of the north and its inability to meet basic needs (Northern Advocate, October 2001). In 2000 and 2004 the North has again asserted its difference from the main body of the South (excluding the Volta region) by voting primarily for the NDC in all three of its constituent regions. However, this should not be seen as an expression of a common 'northern-ness' resenting southern control. Indeed it is the PNC which could most clearly claim a 'northern' identity, being the successor to former President Limann's PNP, with the NDC being associated in some people's minds with Jerry Rawlings and the Volta Region rather than the North. The PNC's success in taking Zebilla and Sissala West and holding onto Bolgatanga and Sissala East was combined with respectable votes in the Mamprusi constituencies of the Northern Region. However, its vote in other northern areas was often derisory, and so the influence of the northern factor in the election was very limited (in Yapei the PNC presidential candidate attracted only 61 votes). Indeed, the success in the Sissala seats can be largely explained in terms of the Limann factor, in Bolgatanga and Zebilla by the strength of the two individual candidates, and in the Mamprusi area by the fact that the party's presidential candidate, Dr Edward Mahama, hailed from there. So 'northern-ness', even if it remains significant in the hearts of many educated Northerners, can largely be excluded as an independent factor from its effect on the 2004 election – traditional and modern disputes, ideological and social factors and the qualities of particular candidates were more significant. The failure of Dr Mahama and the PNC in the north and the NDC in the south would suggest that the best hope for the North to produce a successful presidential candidate in 2008 would be for a northerner to succeed President Kuffuor as the NPP candidate. It would then be a real test of the significance of feelings of common 'northern-ness' to see if such a candidature could over-ride the traditional, social and political grievances that have led the north to reject the NPP in the last three elections.

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