

Anja Osei: Political Parties and Their Societal Roots in Ghana

Early in March of this year, Ghana celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its independence, pleased with the pioneering role it had taken up among the sub-Saharan states in the fight against colonial rule. Much has happened since then. When, early in the 1990s, the country set out on the path towards democratisation, the former opposition party NPP became the strongest force, and its candidate, John Agyekum Kufuor, prevailed over the former dictator, Jerry John Rawlings.

Ghana ranks among those democracies in Africa which hold out some hope. In 2005, about 60 percent of Ghana's population were highly satisfied with the way democracy was functioning in their country, where macroeconomic stability has improved markedly under the Kufuor government, and where civil and civic rights have been strengthened noticeably. However, there are negative aspects as well: Two thirds of the population regard their economic situation as bad, and corruption still is a sad subject.

Political parties play an important role in the democratisation process of a country since, as Lawson says, it is their task to establish interactive links between the preferences of the population and the decisions of the elites. According to Erdmann, the programmes of the parties in Africa are almost indistinguishable, and party machines are weak. There are hardly any contacts with civil society, and connections to social groups, churches, or trade unions are almost entirely absent. Nevertheless, political parties mobilise many people who, in turn, identify with them. The relations between parties and their voters have hardly been investigated so far, nor have the workings within the parties. In this context, ethnicity, clientelism, and patronage are factors which seem to play a not-inconsiderable role in mobilising voters. At this point, it is worth our while to take a look at some aspects of the party-voter relationship in Ghana.

At the moment, four parties are represented in Ghana's parliament: The NPP as the ruling party holds 128 seats, the biggest opposition party, the NDC, holds 94, and the smaller parties, the PNC and the CPP, hold four and three seats, respectively. The main competitors are the NPP and the NDC. All parties have stable electorates, swing votes are an exception, and there is no fluctuation within the party system that is worth mentioning. According to Ghana's political parties act, each party must be organised in every region and in at least two thirds of the districts. The fact that there are no ethnic, regional, or religious parties keeps the party landscape from fragmenting, at the same time strengthening the existing national parties.

For a better understanding of Ghana's current party landscape let us take a look at the history of the country. The ruling NPP follows in the Busia-Danquah tradition, which had its beginnings in the foundation of the United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) in 1947, a liberal party which particularly represented the interests of the Western-educated urban elite in the south and supported a swift realisation of the country's independence. When independence was achieved, the opposition parties merged under the leadership of Mr Busia to form the UP in a move directed against the CPP. In the Second Republic (1969-1972), the PP, which was headed by Mr Busia, made up the government. After several military governments, the PNP won in 1979, re-establishing a civilian leadership. However, the Busia-Danquah tradition remained divided: The Popular Front Party (PFP) confronted the United National Convention (UNC). Under Mr Rawlings, political parties were banned, although new groups were forming in 1992, with the Busia-Danquah tradition becoming the nucleus of the NPP. Liberal thinking has always been part of this tradition, and even today, the NPP defines itself as defending the values of the rule of law, liberal democracy, and individual freedom.

In the NDC, which follows in the 'Rawlings tradition', a third political force has established itself, its objective being to safeguard the influence of the former dictator even under the premise of

democracy. Describing itself as social-democratic and claiming to be the defender of the ordinary population, it has by now become the biggest opposition party.

All parties have identifiable strongholds, and they do interact with ethnic, regional, and social structural factors. Thus, the NPP has its base in Ashanti, Eastern, and Brong-Ahafo. The NDC is supported especially by the Ewe in the Volta Region, but also by the population in the north of Ghana. The PNP, whose voters are predominantly Muslims, leads a rather marginal existence, and the CPP is almost irrelevant as it does not have strong roots in any of the country's regions.

The activities of Ghana's political parties greatly depend on their financial situation, as the country does not practice public party funding. Given the fluid boundaries between the parties' members and sympathisers – only the NPP shows first signs of an effective administration of its members – there are hardly any data available about their membership and the financial revenues associated with it. Although most of the financial burden is borne by local party officials, this does not permit the party machine to function properly – not even in the ruling NPP. The costs of election campaigns are generally met by the candidates themselves, which means that those who are interested but destitute are practically denied their chance to stand for office, and that shaping politics remains a preserve of the wealthy.

This, in turn, has a negative influence on the parties' internal democracy. In the case of the NDC, for example, doubts about the party's internal democracy are justified. Rawlings still seems to be its strongest man. It is said that the DFP, headed by Obed Asamoah, separated from the NDC in 2005 because of a lack of internal democracy. Other problems that internal democracy is facing are deficient communication and a lack of accountability between the hierarchical levels, by which smaller parties are affected more strongly than bigger ones. The rank-and-file organisations are generally left to their own devices, and the youth and women's organisations which support the two big parties have hardly any bearing on politics.

In the periods between election campaigns, the parties' activities are largely dormant. However, organisational issues are increasingly taken seriously especially in the NPP, which endeavours to break the dominant position of the poorly-structured NDC in the Volta Region.

In many places, regular meetings of party organisations have been replaced by activities of a local context such as work for the common good, blood donations by entire groups, school and street cleaning, and collective work in the fields. In principle, any crowd may be used for advertising – local festivals, football matches, births, and weddings. Even funerals have been mentioned as 'mobilisation pools'. In Ghana, personal contact with the voter is crucial, as shown by the door-to-door canvassing which is deliberately used as an election-campaign strategy. Moreover, all parties endeavour to win the favour and support not only of traditional authorities and clan chiefs but also of teachers, businessmen, and physicians, who serve as intermediaries or opinion leaders promoting their message.

What also must be mentioned in this context is the widespread 'buying' of votes. For this purpose, candidates generously give away food and drink, T-shirts, and key chains. Even 'promotional gifts' of bicycles and agricultural machinery are no rarity in Ghana.

Ghana's party system is the result of many interacting factors. Not only traditions and currents are important but also the values to which a party feels bound, and the ethnic groups which form the core of a party's electorate. Parliamentary and presidential elections are scheduled for the end of 2008. The NPP, which has quite a number of successes to show, is already displaying confidence in victory, as is the NDC. The smaller parties will hardly be able to improve their position, especially

as the planned merger of the CPP and the PNC has come to a standstill.

The result of the elections of 2008 is something to look forward to. In view of the last elections, the chances for a free and fair ballot look good. Apparently, everyone is aware by now that, when all is said and done, all forces in the country can only benefit from a clean political contest.