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# Political Parties and Political Participation in Ghana

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## **1. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL PARTIES**

Political parties became important as instruments in Ghana's democratic practice as early as the 1950s when the country was in transition from colonial rule to an independent sovereign nation-state. As many as 8 political parties emerged between 1954 and 1957 to participate in the struggle for self-determination against British colonial rule. Between 1969 and 1972 when the country freed itself from the first military regime, between 5 and 12 political parties were formed to join hands in the agitation to restore democratic rule in the country. In 1979 when the country had to reclaim her government from the military and place it on a democratic basis there was an explosion of political parties: 11 political parties mushroomed; by 1981 the scramble to form political parties had simmered down reducing the number to 6 that existed at various levels of engagement in the political process until the last and longest military regime usurped power from December 1981 to December 1992.

To varying degrees these parties expressed different identities: especially in the transition from colonial rule to independent nationhood. Some of the political parties were formed to express sub-national or ethnic, regional, religious or supra-national identities. Invariably however, all of them were guided by a single dynamic logic: namely, the burning desires to exercise the democratic rights which people all over the world cherish: namely, the right to free choice, to self-determination, to association, and the right to associate freely. Invariably also, the emergence of political parties was linked to elections through which the core values of democracy were affirmed. That is, the struggle for the franchise was linked closely to the struggle for political and civil rights – of freedom and self-determination.

## **2. POLITICAL AND PARTY SYSTEMS**

These struggles resurged in 1986-1992 culminating in January 1993 when Ghana was ushered into constitutional rule with a democratic system of government. The 1992 Constitution under which democratic rule was restored guarantees various political and civil rights, including the right to form political associations, speak freely, choose who to govern the country, and the right to participate in the government of the country in other forms. Like their predecessors, the political parties that currently exist have been driven by the core values of democracy. The country's history of military dictatorship and abuse of human rights were compelling reasons

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for insisting on the freedom to form political parties which, from experience, are regarded as the embodiment of the basic freedoms that are core to democratic political practice. The language of the social movements that struggled against the PNDC affirmed the belief of the Ghanaian political class in these democratic principles, which ultimately formed the core of their demands for democracy, self-determination, and an end to the military regime.<sup>1</sup>

Between May 1992, when the ban on political parties was lifted and November of the same year, 13 political parties were registered; namely,

- Democratic Peoples Party
- New Generation Party
- Ghana Democratic Republican Party
- National Independence Party
- Peoples Heritage Party
- Every Ghanaian Living Everywhere Party
- National Convention Party
- National Democratic Congress
- New Patriotic Party
- People's National Convention
- People's Party for Democracy and Development
- National Justice Party, and
- National Salvation Party

Some of the political parties – for example, the New Patriotic Party (NPP), had emerged from an old political tradition dating back to the 1950s and subscribing to conservative liberalism<sup>2</sup> Others like the National Salvation Party were entirely new political entities; they had no roots in Ghanaian politics and did not pronounce any explicit political ideology. A number of them did not survive the competitive as well as organizational and financial demands of electoral politics. Three of these political parties went into alliance with the National Democratic Congress which won both the presidential and parliamentary elections held in November-December 1992. Six others joined the New Patriotic Party to form an alliance of opposition parties to rope in the hegemony of the NDC and its allies. Four years into constitutional rule, eight of the political parties had survived to contest the 1996 elections. By 2004 the political arena had stabilized enough to allow only the better organized political

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parties to sustain their participation in Ghanaian politics. Table 1 shows a list of political parties contesting elections from 1996 to 2004.

**Table 1: Political Parties Contesting Parliamentary elections: 1996 – 2004**

1996	2000	2004
NPP	NPP	NPP
NDC	NDC	NDC
PNC	PNC	PNC
NCP	CPP	CPP
DPP	NRP	NRP
EGLE	UGM	DPP
PCP	GCPP	EGLE
GCPP		EGLE
8	7	8

Source: Electoral commission of Ghana/Afriyie and Larvie 1996.

While the number of political parties contesting the parliamentary elections remained more or less stable those contesting the presidential elections varied from time to time.

**Table 2: Political Parties contesting the Presidential elections: 1996 – 2004**

1996	2000	2004
NPP	NPP	NPP
NDC	NDC	NDC
PNC	PNC	PNC
	CPP	CPP
	NRP	
	UGM	
	GCPP	
3	7	4

Table 2 shows the number of political parties that contested the presidential elections in 1996, 2000 and 2004. Clearly the better organized parties, which are also the best endowed - with funds and other material resources, are the ones that could field candidates in both the parliamentary and presidential elections. In fact, apart from the NPP and NDC the other political parties could not field candidates in all the constituencies even for the parliamentary elections. The paucity of funds and other material resources have been the biggest problem for the smaller political parties, and explain why they are organizationally too weak to engage fully in electoral politics. This is why they have been incapable of contesting the presidential

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elections and fielding candidates in all the 200 (now 230) constituencies since Ghana returned to constitutional rule.

The system of government also contributes to the weakness of the smaller political parties. The constitution combines the American presidential or executive system of government with elements of the parliamentary system. The president is elected directly by popular vote in the same way as parliament. The constitution does not make it obligatory for a presidential candidate to be nominated by a registered political party. However, from the 1992 general elections it has become the norm for a presidential candidate to be nominated by a registered political party; so that the successful presidential candidate would always exercise executive power together with his party which will be in the majority in parliament. Since the 1992 general elections the president's political party has always formed the majority in parliament. In other words, a presidential candidate and his political party go to the polls determined to win the presidency as well as the majority of parliamentary seats.

### **3. POLITICAL PARTIES AND PARLIAMENT**

Article 78(1) of the Constitution provides that the president must choose the majority of his ministers of state from the elected members of parliament, and with prior approval by parliament. This means that invariably the president will choose his ministers from among members of his party who are also members of parliament. Furthermore, Under Article 111 of the Constitution the Vice President and those of the President's ministers who are not elected members of parliament shall be able entitled to participate in the proceedings of parliament with all the rights and privileges of a member of parliament, except voting.

These constitutional provisions have irrevocably tied the electoral fortunes of the president to those of his political party, and vice versa. Inevitably therefore the policies of the president have become (i) the policies of his parliamentary party, and (ii) the president's policies are driven by his belief in the free market and a calculated strategy to win the next elections – both presidential and parliamentary. Projects and programmes are executed within prebendal and patrimonial relations forged within the framework of state politics.<sup>3</sup> It is arguable then that the system of government creates opportunities for the governing party to stuff its elections chest in preparation for the next elections while denying opposition political

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parties, including the largest opposition party, access to such slush funds which are concealed in the patrimonial relations that the president and his ministers construct within the structure of state power.

Furthermore, the electoral system ensures that the strong, better funded and better organized political parties are able to win more seats in parliament and even control the presidency thereby empowering them to grow organizationally. This iron law of party organization works through the single ballot or first past the post system. Under this electoral system the political party candidate who gets a simple majority of the popular votes automatically wins the constituency seat despite the fact that the total votes secured by the two or more other parties that contest the constituency seat may exceed what the successful party candidate gets. In effect, this electoral system does not reward a political party whose candidate may have won a number of votes beyond an established threshold. It excludes such parties from the corridors of power together with the pecuniary and psychological benefits that accrue to a political organization that is able to position itself so strategically within the power structure.

The strong bond between the president and his party in parliament creates a virtual monopoly over the decision making apparatus of the state. That is, the president (together with his cabinet) and the legislature are able to control these two critical decision-making structures within the state system. Though members of parliament could propose an independent members' bill, Article 108 of the Constitution vests in the president the sole authority to propose bills that have financial implications. Essentially the president and his cabinet, all of whom have so far come from the same political party, exercise exclusive responsibility for development policy. When a development policy issue gets to parliament for approval the president uses his party, which is in the majority, to get it approved. Studies<sup>4</sup> have shown that the majority party in parliament tends to be less democratic when major national issues come before parliament for consideration. It has turned parliamentary deliberation on such issues into partisan contests for hegemony in the legislature. Such partisanship has often forced the opposition party or parties to bring the issues outside the domain of parliament in order to mobilize a wider public to press their viewpoint. But the majority party in parliament has always had its way on such highly contested policy issues.

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A factor that further detracts from the democratic character of decision-making in parliament is technical and administrative. The effectiveness of parliament to function as a check on the executive depends partly on its capacity to conduct independent research into issues before parliament, and access critical information necessary for effective decision making. The caliber – qualification and experience – of its staff is also a critical factor that determines the effectiveness of parliament. The Ghanaian parliament has been functioning continuously only since 1993; that is, for just over a decade. This history has deprived it of the necessary institutional experience with which to operate effectively and in a democratic manner. This has been compounded by the fragile fiscal position of the state which has not encouraged government to provide parliament with adequate material resources for functioning as effectively. This deficiency has impacted adversely on members of parliament. At any particular moment it is only the ministers of state, leading functionaries of the majority party - such as the party whips, majority leader (who is also the minister for parliamentary affairs), and other key party members of parliament such as chairpersons of parliamentary committees, who have access to information that is pertinent to issues before parliament. In contrast information available to the other members of parliament is quite thin. The level of participation in the legislative process by other members of parliament is badly flawed by this lack of adequate and critical information.

#### **4. POLITICAL PARTIES AND THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM**

The core values of democracy which underpin the formation and activities of political party may be summed up as the right to self-determination. A multiparty system and free and fair elections are generally regarded as the hallmark of a democratic society. It is therefore important to probe the democratic nature of competitive elections in Ghana and the role as well as contribution of political parties to democratic politics. The literature on emerging democracies single out elections as the ultimate measure of the democratic credentials of a country.<sup>5</sup> If free and fair elections are held regularly within a constitutionally stipulated timeframe and, in particular, where regime change occurs through such elections, a country is branded democratic. Studies conducted by the Department of Political Science, University of Ghana into Ghanaian elections since 1996 affirm this view.<sup>6</sup> In contesting such unqualified assessment, I have argued that merely conducting free and fair elections at regular intervals



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should not make a country democratic. Of paramount importance is the quality of the elections that are held as well as the meaning attached to them. On the bases of these two additional indices – quality and meaning of elections - I concluded that elections have become a major institutional pillar of democracy in Ghana.<sup>7</sup>

These conclusions notwithstanding, do Ghanaian voters make electoral choices that are of high democratic value – that exclude mediation by extraneous factors such as ethnicity, tradition, religion, money and other material considerations? Do elections constitute moments for asserting their right to self-determination? And what role do political parties play in achieving this end? According to the studies by the Department of Political Science (see endnote 6 above), the results are mixed. Political parties employ a wide range of tactics to mobilize voters for their course. The tactics include appeal to political tradition, ethnic identity and religion (of which the latter is often coterminous with stranger or immigrant identities); appeal to other identities such as settler versus indigenes, as well as the use of money and other material incentives. The weight of these factors in any election varies from one community/constituency to the other and from region to region. But especially in parliamentary elections, all politics is local politics - when local factors are mobilized to influence the choice of the electorate. In presidential elections such local factors are weighed, often heavily, by national issues - especially economic trends and how these affect the welfare of citizens. Hence the argument that in the 2000 elections the Ghanaian electorate voted on issues in accordance with which there was regime change, implying that the economy, which was then in dire crisis, deprived the incumbent NDC government of victory.

Do these findings enable us to confidently conclude that Ghanaian voters necessarily make a rational choice – determine their government and policies for the next 4 years - at the polls? We hesitate to give a categorical and affirmative answer. First, in a country where illiteracy and ignorance remain primary human development indices, it will surely be problematic for the average citizen/voter to comprehend issues in the complex world of politics where information about the economy, for example, is both complex and voluminous, with the clarity and sophistication required of the educated post-modern citizen.

Second, there is the problem of poverty which afflicts about 40% of Ghanaians. Poverty does not only disempower the average citizen/voter; it also traps him or her in a web of patron-

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client relationship. In electoral politics poverty exposes clients in such patron-client relationships to manipulation by political party entrepreneurs who easily use money and other material inducements to secure their vote in advance of voting day.

Third, there is the widespread political culture of patrimonialism which ruling political parties liberally exploit through the vector of development policies to capture middle class voters as well. Ruling political parties are also known to manipulate the election process to their advantage, using the power of incumbency and the resources at their disposal.

The Ghanaian Constitution and the *Political Parties Act, 2000, Act 574* provide that “every citizen of voting age has the right to participate in political activity intended to influence the composition and policies of the government.” (*Political Parties Act, 2000, Act 574 Article 2[1]*). Political parties are the vehicle for participation; and elections provide the framework. However, the factors to which I have alluded above intermediate electoral choices and enable political parties especially when they are in power to determine the choice of the electorate. It is for these reasons that I have described elections in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa as “choiceless democracies” borrowing from Mkandawire.<sup>8</sup>

These observations notwithstanding, the electoral system is pregnant with democratic values, and political parties contribute to the affirmation of such values. Therefore however imperfect the freedoms of choice, expression and association promoted through the activities of political parties may be, Ghanaians are able to make periodic choices about who should govern them; they are able to express their opinions freely about political and related issues; and they are able to associate freely. For people who have been deprived of the right to self-determination for decades, the freedoms which political parties embody and manifest in the context of electoral politics, despite their limitations, are important.<sup>9</sup>

## **5. LEGAL REGULATION OF POLITICAL PARTIES**

The 1992 Constitution further entrenches a bill of rights (Chapter 5) to underscore the need to safeguard political and civil rights and several others, and affirms the inviolability of multi-party politics (Articles 55(1 & 2) and 56). With particular reference to a multi-party system which the constitution considers as an important prerequisite for freedom and democratic governance in the country, the 1992 Constitution provides the legal regime (Article 55) within

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which political parties are to be formed. The *Political Parties Law 1992 PNDC Law 281* and later the *Political Parties Act, 2000 Act 574* reproduced the constitutional requirements on the formation and responsibilities of political parties, including the provision that no political party shall be formed “(a) on ethnic, regional, professional or religious basis; or (b) which uses words, slogans or symbols which could arouse ethnic, regional, professional, or religious divisions” The Act 574 further stipulates that a political party shall have among its founding members at least one member who is ordinarily resident in each of the administrative districts of Ghana, as well as a person from each administrative district on its national executive committee and/or secretariat.

As argued above, Ghana’s political parties were formed in the struggles against an authoritarian regime; and therefore the liberating power of liberal ideology, which emphasizes freedom and equality and the universality of political and civil rights, inevitably became the rallying slogans in those struggles. But once the authoritarian regime was defeated, the principles of liberalism became less an ideology of liberation. For the 8 political parties that have been more or less active in the country’s political arena, liberalism has lost its libertarian meaning; it has become primarily an ideology legitimizing electoral competition for political power, as if this were the essence of democracy; and political parties have become the principal instruments for such competitive politics.

## **6. POLITICAL PARTIES: MEMBERSHIP**

The strategic shift from politics as struggle for political and civil liberties – that is, for self-determination - to politics as struggle for power (as I have argued above), has shaped both party organization and the nature of political participation in Ghanaian politics. Theoretically (and according to Act 574 [9.a]), the internal organization of a political party must be in consonance with democratic principles. In practice political parties are only nominally democratic.

All the political parties are organized as mass parties: each of them combines card bearing or fee-paying membership with informal or floating membership. The organization of political parties on the bases of formal and informal membership is consistent with Ghanaian political tradition: since the 1950s political parties have been formed on this basis. Equally

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important is the fact that membership – formal or informal - of political parties is consistent with the Constitution and the *Political Parties Act 2000, Act 574* both of which guarantee freedom of association to include the right of every citizen of voting age to participate in political activity of his or her choice. For some Ghanaians formal membership of a political party is an act of political faith and commitment. But for a large percentage of the populace membership of a political party is informal and at best latent; it springs to life only during general elections. It is this large majority who, according to the studies by the Department of Political Science (see note 6), do not take formal membership of political parties, do not attend political rallies, do not attend party meetings, and do not engage in any form of political activity other than voting. Their acquaintance with political party activities is largely episodic.

This open and flexible membership of political parties is consistent with the liberal ideological orientation of Ghanaian political parties. For them membership of a political party is not compulsory. Citizens are free to belong to the political party of their choice. Like the economic market citizens are free to enter and exit any political party. Unlike the market however, membership of a political party does not impose a rigid contractual obligation requiring performance at all cost. Compulsory party membership is a dogma associated with authoritarian political parties. This is why membership record of any of the existing political parties is purely conjectural. Further, this explains why during elections the political parties depend on the vote of the large pool of uncommitted voters whose vote they desperately try to capture through manipulative appeals to primordial identities, other irrational or emotive factors and material inducements.

The NPP, which is the ruling party, regards itself as a liberal party. It claims credentials as the epitome of liberalism among the political parties; emphasizes its dogmatic attachment to free enterprise as the foundation of social progress. Its pet economic policy slogan is “The private sector is the engine of growth.” It prides itself as sharing political traditions with the Republican Party of the USA. In fact, both political parties have the *elephant* as their symbol. Since assuming power in 2001, the NPP has forged links across the African continent with political parties which regard themselves as belonging to the democratic right, including Mozambique’s Renamo led by Alfonso Dhlakama. Currently its national chairman is also the chairman of this continental association of parties of the democratic right. In pursuit of this

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ideological line, the NPP has dogmatically implemented the neo-liberal economic policy framework fashioned by the IFIs and the donor community generally. For this party, the overriding economic policy objective is to achieve macro-economic stability through fiscal prudence, low inflation rate, low bank interest rate, and so on. In general, it believes that creating the enabling environment for the private sector to flourish is the only way to encourage the growth of a dynamic private sector, and create wealth; because it is only the private sector that can create wealth and engineer national progress and prosperity.

On the other hand the NDC, which is the second largest party after the NPP, claims to be a social democratic party, the same ideology espoused by the other two political parties represented in parliament – the CPP and PNC. The last two parties also claim a common progeny from Kwame Nkrumah' Convention People's Party (CPP), the political party he formed and led in the struggle for political independence for Ghana which turned socialist in the 1960s. The NDC also associates itself with democratic left parties in the world – like the British Labour Party and the Democratic Party of the USA.

These ideological labels notwithstanding, the differences in terms practical policies are minimal. The NDC, which was in power from 1993 to 2000, originated from the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) which was headed by President J. J. Rawlings for 10 solid years. In fact, the NDC was formed in 1992, and led by President J. J. Rawlings to win both the presidential and parliamentary elections of 1992 and 1996. When it was launched in 1992 it declared its resolve to continue the policies of the PNDC.<sup>10</sup> Therefore from January 1993 to January 2001, when it handed over power to the NPP after losing the 2000 elections, the NDC followed the neo-liberal economic policies implemented by the PNDC from 1983 to January 1993 under the dictate of the IFIs. It is significant that during election campaigns, none of these two leading political parties, the NPP and NDC, espouses economic policies or strategies that reject the neo-liberal policy framework dictated by the IFIs and the development partners. In fact they hardly campaign around policy issues. The only economic issue that distinguishes one from the other is the success or failure of the neo-liberal economic policies in ameliorating the harsh economic conditions of the masses of the people when one or the other is in power. In their study of the 2000 elections the researchers of the Department of Political Science argued that the NDC, which was then the governing party, lost the elections because of the worsening

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economic and social situation of the period. The non-ideological posture and the non-issue election campaigns of the political parties explain why Ghanaian voters are most likely to succumb to irrational and material factors used as bait for their vote.

What then encourages these political parties to present themselves in two contrasting ideological terms? The difference between the NPP and NDC, the two parties that have alternated in the exercise of state power – is indeed marginal. It is a question of the degree to which one or the other political party has implemented the neo-liberal prescriptions of the IFIs. The NPP may be described as doctrinaire in implementing neo-liberal economic policies. For it, getting the price right or getting the economic fundamentals right is the ultimate attribute of successful free market reforms. The end justifies the means. Therefore the social implications of public policy are secondary to the achievement of the objectives of free market reforms. In contrast, even though the NDC implemented the same economic policy package when it was in power it was more inclined to balance the pursuit of tough macro-economic stabilization policies with social concerns: it pursued human-centred market reforms. This was dictated by its populist past which was firmly rooted in the politics of the PNDC government. It was this populist inclination that obliged the NDC government to yield to salary and social development pressures during the second half of the 1990s, which plunged the Ghanaian economy into a renewed cycle of crisis.

## **7. POLITICAL PARTIES: STRUCTURE, AND INTERNAL ORGANIZATION AND DECISION-MAKING**

In accordance with the *Political Parties Act 2000, Act 574* all political parties are organized as national parties: each of them is further organized at the regional and district or constituency levels. (Article 9) In addition to these mandatory requirements, the major political parties strive to organize branches in every town and village of the country. Even though the law stipulates that political parties should be organized at the district rather than the constituency level, political parties choose to organize at the constituency in instead of the administrative district. This is a strategic choice compelled by the need for effective mobilization of voters during elections. This electoral imperative has made the constituency branches of the political parties the most important organizational unit below the national headquarters of the parties.

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The party congress (or national conference) is the highest organ through which the mass base of the party participate in making a number of crucial decision that are binding on its entire membership. The mandate of the party congress is however confined to the approval of constitutions, rules and regulations of the party; to the election of the national executive committee and other national officers, as well as the choice of presidential candidates for the quadrennial elections. Each party further holds constituency primaries to choose a candidate for parliamentary elections.

Two parallel tendencies dominate these processes where candidates – presidential as well as parliamentary – are either elected or chosen. First, it is true that candidates vying for their parties' presidential or parliamentary slots do campaign vigorously and extensively. However, money undoubtedly plays a major role in the final choice of candidates; because each candidate must have adequate funds to build a campaign machine, produce a range of advertising and other paraphernalia to sell him/her self, tour the 230 constituencies, as well as influence candidates before and during the party congresses or primaries. The electorate's demand for material incentives at every level of the party organization inflates the expenditure level of candidates competing in an election. Hence electoral political activities have become so expensive that candidates are increasingly relying on 'money bags' – wealthy political entrepreneurs to finance their campaigns. It is to mitigate the escalation in the cost of election campaigns that there have been incessant calls across the spectrum of political parties for state funding of political parties. Naturally therefore it is the candidate who is able to sell him/herself who stands the chance of winning. Organizational skills are important; but money is the critical wheel on which any successful organization moves. The power of money has become a decisive factor in Ghanaian elections.

Second, there is a growing tendency for the party headquarters to impose candidates for constituency elections in complete disregard of local preferences. This tendency manifests itself at the party primaries when a candidate is chosen, and has led to conflict and rift in the constituency branches of political parties. Quite often when a local favourite is by-passed the unsuccessful candidate has decided to contest the parliamentary elections as an independent candidate. In the 1992 parliamentary elections 12 candidates contested as independents. The number of independent candidates in the parliamentary elections increased (by 375%) to 57 in

1996 and increased (by 3.5%) to 59 in 2000. In the 2004 parliamentary elections the number of independent candidates shot up (by 113.5%) to 126.<sup>11</sup> It is believed that the party bosses engage in this practice because they want to ensure that their candidate wins the elections in the constituency concerned. This however does not refute the fact that this growing phenomenon of independent candidates has always resulted from disputed candidate selection at the party primaries. The fact that the numbers keep rising by such huge margins points to the refusal of the headquarters of political parties to countenance any claim to autonomy on the part of constituency branches of their parties even in such local matters as the choice of a parliamentary candidate, and surely questions any claim to internal democracy by the political parties, especially the two major parties.

The problem of internal democracy of political parties is a reflection of how power is organized in the larger society. I have argued above that Ghanaian elections could best be described as “consent elections”<sup>12</sup> which take place every four years. After the general elections the key decisions in public affairs are left in the hands of the elite who control the two critical structures of power in the state – the executive and legislature. The masses, who are the source of power in the state, are reduced to agents for legitimizing the exercise of state power and the choices that emanate from such leading structures of power make. The leading political parties have similar hierarchies of power structures and processes for running their parties’ affairs. Apart from the national congresses each political party has a national executive body that takes crucial decisions about the work of the party. This body is headed by a chairman, general secretary and organizing secretary, etc who constitute the administrative hub of the party. Further more, each political party has a council of elders. And each has an inner caucus which one of the political parties calls ‘the functional executive’; or ‘the standing committee’ by another. These national level bodies and functionaries in charge of the headquarters’ secretariat of the party form the structures of power where actual decisions are made. The sub-national officers comprise the foot soldiers - the transmission belt of their respective parties. They ensure that directives and party information in general coming from the national level bodies reach the grassroots. The rank and file members perform the same support and legitimizing functions within the organizational set-up of their respective parties – e. g., at party congresses and primaries just as voters do in national elections. Decisions about party



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programmes and strategies are made at organizational locations where real power lies within the party structure.

It is too early to determine the extent to which the rank and file members of the political parties are able to move up the power ladder to compete for positions of influence. Nonetheless we can conjecture that party organization will not deviate significantly from Robert Michel's iron law of oligarchy.

## **8. POLITICAL PARTY FUNDING**

Article 21(1) of the *Political Parties Act 2000, Act 574* prescribes clear rules for financial reporting. Within six months from the end of each year, a political party is to submit a statement of account to the Electoral Commission, including the following: source of its funds, membership dues paid, contributions or donations in cash or kind received, properties of the party and when they were acquired. Article 23 regulates the funding of political parties: only Ghanaian citizens or firms, partnerships, or enterprises in which a Ghanaian owns at least 75% and is registered under the laws of Ghana can contribute or make donations in cash or kind to a political party. It is illegal for non-citizens to make contributions in cash or kind to a political party.

These regulations are intended to ensure transparency and accountability in the operation of political parties, as well as avoid exposing an important institution of democracy like the political party to the power of the few who are rich and powerful in society. It was wrongly assumed that voluntary contributions or donations and membership dues will be adequate for running a political organization in a democracy. Realizing this ideal in practice has been problematic and illusory. Even the two major political parties – the NPP and NDC – have found it extremely difficult to finance their operations from such honest sources. According to one of these two major political parties the party income consists of: donations - 45%, contribution by MPs - 35%, party membership dues -15%, and other sources - 5%. These percentages do not provide a clue to the actual income of this political party. The fact however is that finance is a major problem for all the political parties except the one that is in power. Consequently, all the non-governing parties have at one time or the other agitated for state funding of political parties. When the NPP was in the opposition it was a vocal advocate of

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state funding of political parties. But since it was voted into power it has been less enthusiastic about the issue of state funding of political parties while the NDC, which is now out of power, has been lamenting the paucity of funds for party work, and has now joined the smaller parties to advocate state funding of political parties.

The reason for this reversal of advocacy roles is simple. The party that wins executive power uses its control of state resources to stuff its elections chest with slush funds obtained through graft and patronage. Hence, the NDC which is out of power is complaining bitterly about the terrible state of its finances just as the NPP did when it was in opposition. The financial advantage that incumbency creates leaves the other political parties solely dependent on membership dues, contributions from their members of parliament (if any), and donations. Especially, reliance on membership dues reduces a political party's finances to a rather precarious state. For example, the NDC puts its registered membership at "about 3,500,000 which is about 35 – 39% of the elective population", which is a rather generous estimate. The heart of the matter is that registered (or card-bearing) membership is generally insignificant. But even where it is substantial pervasive poverty among Ghanaians limits the amount ordinary members can pay as dues to their parties. As one of the political parties has justifiably reported, "The major problem that militates against any effective party organisation in this country is lack of funding. Funds are required to help build the capacity of party functionaries at all levels of the party structure and to help provide adequate logistics for internal party organisation."

Various opinion polls have been conducted to assess the views of the public regarding state funding of political parties. The consensus does not favour state funding of political parties, which means that the precarious financial situation of most political parties, especially those that are not in power, will continue for a long time with dire consequences for democratic practice. First, incumbent parties will always enjoy considerable financial advantage over both major and minor parties in opposition. This will always create uneven playing field during elections. Second, graft and patronage will become institutionalized means of accumulating money for party and non-party purposes. Just as incumbent political parties will use state power to accumulate funds for future use, so will individual politicians, especially those of the ruling party, feel encouraged to indulge in corrupt practices to accumulate wealth for private consumption as well as advance their political fortunes. The contest for power will then be

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reduced to a struggle to access public money, which will whet the appetite of those with big money to become key power brokers in the political game, determining who gets into power and who does not. The upshot of all this will be that democratic politics will be turned into competition for wealth and power to serve the interest of groups and individuals rather than competition to exercise power for public good. Then democracy as competition for political power among a plurality of political parties seeking to exercise power for the public good will most probably lose its moral justification and become a farce.

Accra, November 2006

### **Notes**

- 1 For an insight into the dominant liberal ideas that dictated the struggles of the Ghanaian political class against the military regime, See Kwame A. Ninsin, *Ghana's Political Transition 1990-1993 (Selected Documents)* Legon: Freedom Publications, 1998
- 2 Kwesi Jonah has analyzed Ghana's political parties using the concept 'party as tradition'. See his "Political Parties and the transition to multi-party politics in Ghana" in Kwame A. Ninsin (ed.) *Ghana: Transition to Democracy* Legon: Freedom Publications, 1998, pages 72-94.
- 3 This is akin to the economic theory of democracy elucidated by Anthony Downs (1957). See Gregor McLennan, "Capitalist State or democratic polity? Recent developments in Marxist and pluralist theory" in G. McLennan, David Held and Stuart Hall (eds.) *The Idea of the Modern State* Open University Press, 1984: 83.
- 4 See for example the studies being conducted by the Institute for Democratic Government, Accra under its Parliamentary Studies Programme, especially the one titled "Executive-Legislature interface: A synergy of power?"
- 5 The collection of essays in Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner (eds.) *Democratization in Africa* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) is representative of this position.
- 6 See especially, J. R. A. Ayee (ed.) *Deepening Democracy in Ghana Volumes 1 & 2*. Freedom Publications, 2002; and Kwame Boafo-Arthur (ed.) *Voting for Democracy in Ghana Volumes I & 2*. Freedom Publications, 2006
- 7 See my chapter "Institutional development and democratic consolidation" in Kwame Boafo-Arthur *ibid*.
- 8 See Ninsin, "Introduction: The contradictions and ironies of elections in Africa" *Africa Development* Vol. XXXI No. 3, 2006 pp. 1- 10. The entire essay must be read to grasp the import of this conclusion.
- 9 *Ibid*. page 9.
- 10 Jonah, *op cit*. page 86.
- 11 The data was taken from Ninsin, Kwame "Institutional development and democratic consolidation" in K. Boafo-Arthur (ed.) *Voting for Democracy in Ghana: The 2004 Elections in Perspective* Freedom Publications, 2006: 59-78: 70 Table 2.
- 12 The term is taken from Guy Hermet et al. (eds.) *Elections Without Choice* London: Macmillan, 1978. See Ninsin, "Introduction ..." *Africa Development* *op cit* for a critique of elections in Africa in general.