



ETHNICITY, ETHNIC CONFLICT AND GHANA'S DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the potential dangers of ethnic manipulation for political capital on one hand, and ethnic conflicts on the other, and how they affect the effort towards consolidating Ghana's fledgling democracy. It contends that the continued spread of ethnic conflicts in the country and the deepening of existing ones, coupled with the negative deployment of ethnicity by politicians for political gain is not only dangerous, but also potentially volatile to the country's emerging democracy. While it points out the inherent efficacy of unity in diversity, it also underscores the fact, that for a fledgling democracy anchored mainly on relatively free, fair and periodic elections, the growing number of ethnic conflicts matched side by side with the polarization of the country on ethnic lines which is also aligned to the political division of the country, is an effective atmosphere for the derailment of the effort towards democratic consolidation. The paper also affirms that the strengthening of democratic institutions and civil society, among others, are key to the effort towards Ghana's democratic consolidation.

Keywords: Ethnicity, Ethnic Conflict, Democratic Consolidation, Ghana.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Tonah (2007:6) Ethnicity is about the creation of difference, real or imagined, among social groups. To him, it is, just as other social categories such as the clan and lineage, concerned with the delineation of the social environment into "we" and "them" categories. To Jary & Jary, (1999) an ethnic group can thus be defined as "a group of people sharing an identity which arises from a collective sense of a distinctive history. Ethnic groups possess their culture, customs, norms, beliefs and traditions. There is usually a common language, and boundary maintenance is observed between members and non-members. To Barth (1969:5), ethnicity or ethnic identity is a form of social organization. This implies that "the critical focus for investigation becomes the ethnic boundary that defines the group rather than the cultural stuff that encloses.

This study analysis ethnicity and ethnic conflict in the context of the above definitions but with specific emphasis on "we" against "them" and how that ethnic posture, as it reflects in ethnic conflicts in Ghana, can undermine the country's bid to consolidating her fledgling democracy. The nature of these ethnic conflicts which are mostly destructive to life and property are usually either within the same ethnic group as the case of the Abudu and Andani gates in the Northern region, between ethnic groups as seen between the Kusasis and the Mamprusis in the Upper East region or among groups of different ethnic categories.

Ghana is an ethnically diverse country with about sixty-two ethnic groups across the length and breadth of the country. While some of the ethnic groups are close with mutual intelligibility in the dialects, like the Fante and the Twi languages within the Akan ethnic group, others are ethnically distinct and totally different like the Kasena language in the Upper East Region of Ghana. The major ethnic groups in Ghana include the Akan, Ewe, Mole-Dagbani, Guan, and Ga-Adangbe. Some of the subdivisions of each group share a common cultural heritage, history, language, and origin. These shared attributes were among the variables that contributed to state formation in the pre-colonial period. Competition to acquire land for cultivation, to control trade routes, or to form alliances for protection also promoted group solidarity and state formation. The creation of the union that became the Asante confederacy in the late seventeenth century is a good example of such processes at work in Ghana's past. Ethnic rivalries of the pre-colonial era, variance in the impact of colonialism upon different regions of the country, and the uneven distribution of social and economic amenities in post independence Ghana has all contributed to present-day ethnic tensions (See: ghanaweb.com).

Even though Article (55(4) of the 1992 Constitution of Ghana stipulates the national character of political parties when it states that "Every political party shall have a national character, and membership shall not be based on ethnic, religious, regional or other sectional divisions", it is generally axiomatic that ethnic and regional considerations have played significant roles in the fortunes of political parties in Ghana. The reason for this phenomenon is partly underscored in what Ghana's former Attorney- General and Minister of Justice, Mr. Martin Amidu said, that "in the natural and inevitable struggle for power, status, roles and values within any political system containing those diverse groups, political elites who perceived they were marginalized might and did resort to those group interest for social and political mobilization for political and economic power". Ethnic mobilization and exploitation have characterized Ghanaian politics for very long time and the deepening of this phenomenon is a drawback and a disservice to the effort towards consolidating the country's democracy.

This paper evaluated ethnicity and ethnic conflicts in three main areas and how ethnicity and ethnic conflicts pose significant potential danger to the effort towards consolidating Ghana's fledgling democracy. The paper therefore examines (1) the dangers of ethnicity and ethnic exploitation and manipulation for political purposes, (2) the spread of ethnic conflicts between and among ethnic groups across the country and its potential negative impact on Ghana's democracy, and (3) the apparent lack of political will to taking measures that can bring a lasting solution to some of these conflicts.

"If the shallow, troubled, and recently established democracies of the world do not move forward, to strengthen their political institutions, improve their democratic functioning ... they are likely to move backwards, into deepening pathologies that will eventually plunge their political systems below the threshold of electoral democracy or overturn them altogether" (Diamond, 1999).

Consolidating Ghana's fledgling democracy therefore is not a choice but a necessity if the country is to continue its role as an enviable democracy in Africa. However, Ghana's democracy, which is mainly anchored on successful periodic elections, as it is at this point, is not only vulnerable but also susceptible to a number of dangers, one of the most prominent is ethnicity and Ethnic conflicts which seem pervasive especially in recent times. Ethnicity and ethnic conflict admittedly is not a new phenomenon in African politics and Ghana is no exception. However, the deepening ethnic division which is mostly aligned to the political division of the country on the one hand, and the upsurge and/or renewal of ethnic conflicts due

to apparent political manipulation for electoral gain is everything to worry about as far as the future of Ghana's democracy is concerned. The many conflict situations in Ghana, though triggered by several other factors including chieftaincy issues, the bottom line is often ethnic. Examples such as the Bawku conflict between the Kusasis and the Mamprusis, the Dagombas and Nanumbas, the Abudu and Andani gates conflict and more recently between the Fantes and Ewes in Ekumfi and many more pockets of ethnic conflicts in some parts of the country abound. More apprehensive is the tendency of one ethnic group to interpret the election outcome as victory or defeat of one ethnic group over the other. This often leads to exacerbation of existing feud based on ethnic issues or sparks of pockets of violence with their devastating consequences.

1.1 ETHNIC CONFLICTS IN GHANA: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Tonah (2007:1) writes that:

“Since the 1980s and 90s, violent conflicts have engulfed the West African sub-region and destabilized many hitherto stable countries, such as those of Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Senegal.”

Some of these conflicts began as internal strifes among the disputing parties but quickly degenerated into serious conflicts over-running their borders into neighboring countries. “A significant feature of these conflicts is that, irrespective of their root causes and the motives of the various protagonists, ethnicity eventually plays a major part in the conflicts. Even where the ethnic factor was initially not relevant to a particular conflict, it eventually became a dominant factor as the conflict and internecine war progressed” (ibid, p. 1).

Ghana has not been left out of this canker of ethnic conflicts that have bedeviled the sub-region since the 1980s. There are conflicts spots dotted across Ghana, which can escalate at any time. Some of the most prominent ethnic conflicts in the country include the violent clashes between the people of Akronpong-Akwapem and Abirew of Southern Ghana. This conflict which initially started as a litigation between the two groups over land, quickly developed into a bloody secession dispute that resulted in the loss of lives and property (Ansah Koi, 1995). Similarly, the violent conflict between the people of Techiman and the town of Tuobodom in the Brong Ahafo Region, following the latter's declaration of loyalty to the Asantehene, resulted in the siege of the “rebel town” for several weeks (Tonah, 2007:4). The conflict itself was explosive and nearly expanded into the neighboring Ashanti Region. In the Volta Region, the simmering tension, rivalry, rancor and animosity between the Pekis and the Tsitos festered into undesirable conflict when the government decided to locate the capital of a district among the Tsitos. There is also the intractable dispute, which is said to be as a result of land, between the Alavanyo and the Nkonya people of the northern Volta Region (Ibid, p.4).

The Northern region has even more than the Southern parts of the country, being more prone and susceptible to violent ethnic conflicts. Some of the notable ones include the Kokomba-Nanumba war over chieftaincy reforms instituted by the latter in 1981; the Bimoba war against the Kokomba in 1986, and 1989; the violent clashes between the Nawuri and the Gonja at Kpandai over claims to paramountcy and land in 1991; the session dispute among the Dagomba in 1991 and 2001, that led to several deaths, the latter incident leading to the death of the Ya Naa, the king of the Dagomba; and the protracted conflict between the Mamprusi and Kusasi at Bawku in 2000 (Bogner 2000; Brukum 1995, 2001; Lund 2003). It is worthy of note that by far, the most devastating and most extensive ethnic conflict in Ghana was the Kokomba-Dagomba conflict in February 1994. This conflict alone is reported to have resulted in the death of thousands of people, including the Ya Naa and about forty of his regents, the destruction of

enormous property and displacement of large sections of the population of the Northern Region of Ghana (Mahama 2003; Van der Lindle and Nyalor 1999). There have been several other conflicts dotted across the country as discussed subsequently.

2. DISCUSSIONS

2.1 THE PATH TOWARDS DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

Ghana's democracy has won great admiration in Africa and the world over. It is not surprising therefore, that President Barack Obama, President of the United States of America, described Ghana as "a shining example" of Africa "of the importance of free and fair elections" (Nicolas Cook, July 8, 2009). That must have been one of the most critical factors, which informed the world's most important personality to choose Ghana, out of the many African countries to pay his first historic visit to the continent after ascension to that high political office of the United States of America. In fact, party leaders from sixteen West African countries attending a democracy camp in Elmina, Ghana, commended Ghana "for her lead role in consolidating free and fair elections over the last two decades" (Daily Graphic, 2012:16). According to the Deputy Youth leader of Nigeria's ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) Alongi-Niyi Denis, who was also attending the conference, "Ghana produced one of the slimmest margins in the history of African election results in its 2008 polls with less than 50,000 popular vote difference between the winner and the loser in a runoff, yet there was a smooth transition of power from one party to another without any mayhem. In Nigeria, we had several millions of vote difference between President Goodluck Jonathan and his losing rival, yet some people resorted to violence that killed over 500 innocent people" (Daily Graphic, 2012:16). This is an attestation to the resilience of Ghana's democracy as anchored in relatively free, fair and periodic elections and smooth transition of power. There is no gainsaying that Ghana has come a long way on the path of democracy to merit her current rating in Africa and the world over.

For an African country, this is no mean feat especially against the backdrop of many peculiar factors militating against the effective democratic development and consolidation such as poverty and its attendant corruption, poor leadership, weak institutions and bad governance, among others. Ghana's democracy, as indicated elsewhere, is anchored on successful periodic elections. Therefore, for this democracy to be sustained and also yield the needed gains, as seen in the developed world, such as the U.S.A, there is the urgent need for Ghanaians to work assiduously towards consolidating not only the regular relatively free and fair elections, but also strengthening the capacity of democratic institutions such as the legislature, the judiciary, the National Commission on Civic Education, the Serious Fraud Office (now Economic and Organized Crime Office), Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice, the police service and the security service as a whole, as well as building a strong, well-informed and well educated civil society which would be active participant in the democratic process towards consolidation. Barack Obama, President of the United States of America could not have been more apt when he said during his visit to Ghana in July 2009, thus, "In the 21st century, capable, reliable, and transparent institutions are the key to success- strong parliaments; honest police forces; independent judges; an independent press; a vibrant private sector; a civil society. Those are the things that give life to democracy, because that is what matters in people's everyday life" (Daily Graphic, 2009: 9).

The environment should also be created for private enterprises to flourish while an effort is made toward developing quality education, dependable and affordable health care and other social services as necessary concomitants towards consolidating a democracy that would be resilient in an African environment. Privately owned democratic institutions such as the

Center for Democracy and Development (CDD), the Institute for Democratic Governance (IDEG), the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA), Imani Ghana, among others, should be encouraged into more research and publication on issues that would enhance and propel Ghana's democracy towards consolidation. The bottom-line and the ultimate justification for democracy to the mind of the ordinary Ghanaian is economic empowerment-availability of job opportunities, reasonable income, quality health care, meaningful, affordable and quality education, availability and accessibility to pipe-borne water, regular supply of electricity, good roads, enhanced agricultural support services, among others. Buttressing this point, an Afrobarometer report that measures public attitudes on democracy and its alternatives carried in the October 17 edition of the Chronicle, have indicated that Ghanaians rate government handling of the macro economy negatively. The report states "majority of Ghanaians rate government's management of the economy, living standards, job creation, income gaps and inflation "very" badly or "badly" (Chronicle 2012: 8).

Strengthening the capacity of government and democratic institutions, combined side by side with focused, visionary, selfless and incorruptible leadership as well as citizen involvement in the design and implementation of policies, projects and programmes towards enhancing the quality of life of all Ghanaians, without recourse to ethnic and other considerations, should be a good ground towards building and consolidating the country's emerging democracy. Unfortunately, the current state of the country's development, characterized by weak and vulnerable State institutions, politicized privately owned democratic institutions, higher rate of illiteracy, crumpling poverty, unemployment, inadequate health delivery system, and higher levels of corruption, among others, have made democratic consolidation an uphill task for all governments. The issue of corruption, a canker, which has eroded and stalled the performance of governments without number in Africa and elsewhere, continues to be a shadow and a ghost haunting institutions and government after government in Ghana. For example, on January 19, 2012, Mr. Martin Amidu, the Attorney-General and Minister of Justice was sacked from government apparently because of corruption scandals which according to The Chronicle, he refused to oblige.

The newspaper reports that, "The official verdict sold to Ghanaians by Chief of Staff John Henry Martey Newman on why former Attorney-General Mr. Martin Amidu lost his portfolio in the deceased President John Evans Atta Mills government was that the former Minister of Justice miscondacted himself before the late President of the Republic of Ghana. However, two documents in the possession of The Chronicle suggest that the one-man Citizen Vigilante was sent away, because he was standing in the way of gargantuan fraud perpetuated by officials of the government and the ruling party, executive cover-ups, and outright deception of the people of Ghana by men and women who are all on oath to be faithful to Ghana"(Ibid. p.3) Mr. Amidu, in a statement on his alleged misconduct said "I spoke strongly about interference in my prosecutorial powers under Article 88 of the Constitution, in relation to three dockets submitted by Police CID to the Attorney-General in the Forensic Audit and Criminal Investigations into the Ghana Oil Palm Development Company (GOPDC)-SIAT Ghana Affair; three dockets submitted by the Police CID to the Attonrney-General for prosecuting in respect of three different offenses committed by the Acting Chief Fire Officer and other colleagues of his; and finally, I spoke about the conduct of the President in the supposed settlement of the E.O Group's criminal case, and the request to me to issue indemnity for the transaction, stating that the Republic will not prosecute the case." The term "kickback" became popular in the Ghanaian political rhetoric during the New Patriotic Party administration, which exited power in 2008. This is just the tip of the iceberg as far as corruption in Ghana is concerned. The apparent lack of political will to fight corruption Ghana through measures as President Obama put it "like forensic accounting and automating services, strengthening hotlines, protecting whistle-blowers to advance transparency and accountability" is an affront to the effort towards democratic

consolidation. More problematic is the issue of the politicization of ethnicity, which stalls and stifles objective discussions and debates on the real issues that confront the nation on the path to democratic consolidation. Instead of admitting the issues and harnessing the human capital of the nation in the quest to finding lasting solutions to some of the problems and challenges, political parties and politicians would rather play on ethnic sentiments or employ the blame game to garner support for seemingly unpopular programmes and policies to advance their own whims and caprices.

2.2 ASSOCIATED PROBLEMS OF ETHNICITY AND ETHNIC CONFLICTS

According to Chazan (1982:461), “the exacerbated political manifestations of ethnicity, so apparent in the 1970s prompted one observer to comment that ‘of all the highly significant cleavages of modern Ghana, (sub-region, age, class, income, education, and so forth), none is more salient than that of ethnicity’”. To Chazan, “Ethnic politics, despite severe vacillations in regime types and ideological predilections, have come to play an increasingly prominent role in Ghanaian politics since independence. Adu Boahen is quoted in a public lecture in memory of the late J. B. Danquah in 1988 to have talked about ethnicity in the Rawlings regime thus “my third major criticism of Rawlings and his PNDC is that wittingly or unwittingly, consciously or unconsciously, they have been fanning ethnicity, or as it is more popularly though wrongly termed, tribalism. Is it not strange and rather unfortunate that the Head of State, the head of the National Security, the head of the Police Service, the head of the National Investment Bank, and I am sure there are others-all happen to belong to a single ethnic group, or at least come from a single region of the country?” (Agyeman, 1995:105).

Ethnic diversity in itself is not only beautiful due partly to the exquisite blend of culture, but when characterized by unity, togetherness, and tolerance could yield many dividends in several fronts of a country’s national life. While admitting that Ghana is not the most ethnically polarized in Africa, nor is it the country with the most ethnic conflicts in the sub-region, the increasing exploitation of ethnicity in Ghanaian politics for political gain is at least worrisome and repugnant due to its actual and potential negative consequences on the country’s democracy. This is summarized in what Mr. Martin Amidu, Ghana’s former Attorney-General and Minister of Justice said, thus, “The stability of the nation and the general interest of Ghana first do not favour the playing of ethnic cards in Election 2012 for the presidency...” (Daily Graphic:19). According to Amidu over the past few weeks he had come to the “stark realization and understanding that the ethnic and religious cards were being purposefully played out by some political parties at the emotional level as tools of mobilization, with members of parliament, chiefs, the religious and other interest groups as targets of conversion” (ibid). He said “the 2012 Presidential elections thus appears already to be purposefully constructed socially and politically on a broad North/South contest. Other ethnic groups will join these broad configurations as their economic and political mobilization interest inclinations dictate”.

It is common knowledge that Ghana is highly polarized along the lines of politics and ethnicity. While the Akan ethnic group largely supports the New Patriotic Party whose root is the Akan ethnic group, the National Democratic Congress derives its support essentially from the Ewe ethnic group where its founder, Jerry John Rawlings hails from. These are two of the eight largest ethnic categorizations (Ghana Statistical Service 2000) with the largest political parties, which stand the chance of winning political power during elections as it is now and in the foreseeable future. The other ethnic groups, besides those who also belong to smaller political parties emanating from either their home origin or largely indifferent to politics, are also largely polarized along the lines of the two major political parties. For example, election trends over the years show that the three Northern Regions largely support the National Democratic Congress even though specific ethnic groups in the North have consistently

supported the New Patriotic Party. The clear cut ethnic discrimination and stereotyping by some ethnic groups against others easily draw people closer to where they feel accepted and identified with and that could account for the significant alignment of the people of the North to the Ewes who feel generally discriminated against by the Akan, especially the Ashanti ethnic group.

The situation where in one area two ethnic groups are seriously divided along political lines like the case in Bawku where the Kusasis are largely NDC while the Mamprusis are generally NPP speaks volumes of the nature of volatility that characterize the Ghanaian democracy. A conflict situation as a result of election dispute has the propensity to quickly mobilize the people along ethnic lines, which can prove fatal to the effort towards democratic consolidation. Ethnic politics are engendered for political reasons, which has the unavoidable tendency of exacerbating existing ethnic conflicts or engineering new ones. More recently, there has been media reports of violent clashes between Fulani herdsmen and indigenous people of the Ashanti region. This Fulani issue is gaining notoriety and worrisome dimensions which were captured in ex-President Kufuors appeal to the Zongo Chiefs in the country to “find ways of resolving continued violence existing among Fulani herdsmen in the country”.(Daily Graphic, 2012:12). In June 2012, the Chiefs of the La Traditional Area in Accra appealed to President J.E.A. Mills to intervene to stop the people of Katamanso from encroaching on their land. An Executive Member of the NDC at Buashie-Gornor, Mr. Justice Amasah, also “appealed to the government to organize a roundtable conference to bring a permanent solution to the issue of land disputes among the chiefs of the said villages and also the people of Katamanso”.(Daily Graphic, 2012: 12). This is an indication that rather than finding solutions to the age-old conflicts, they are not only exacerbated, but new ones are also springing up. That is certainly a danger to peace everywhere in the country, which is inimical to the country’s effort towards democratic consolidation.

The conflict between the Kokomba and the Dagomba in 1994 has attracted political commentary and blame game by the New Patriotic Party and the National Democratic Congress, making honest approach to at least finding the killers of the overlord of Dagon and his followers a very difficult exercise, euphemistically put. Injustice anywhere is a breeding ground for anarchy and self-defense. Just recently, two persons were feared dead, while six others sustained gunshot wounds during clashes between the Kokombas and the Bimobas at the Kpamale, a village near Nankpanduri in the Bunkpurugu-Yunyoo District in the Northern Region. (Daily Graphic, 2012:16). In a similar fashion in Wa in the Upper West Region of Ghana, one person was shot dead, while fourteen others were arrested following “a confrontation between rival claimants to the Wa skin...” (Daily Graphic 2012: 12). In June 2012, the killing of Nana Eguase, the chief of Ekumfi, sparked ethnic conflict between the Fantes and the Ewes in the Central Region of Ghana, which took the combined forces of the police and the military to restore order.

With the current state of polarization in the country, in terms of ethnicity and politics, the spread of ethnic conflicts and their deep-seated rancor and animosity is not only a threat towards the effort of consolidating the country’s fledgling democracy, but also potentially volatile to the country’s democracy, especially in light of the fact, that the country’s democracy is anchored so far, on successful elections. No one knows what would be the situation in Ghana in the event of the outbreak of violence due to electoral disagreements.

3. CONCLUSION

The argument has been made in the foregoing discussion that the deployment and manipulation of ethnicity on the one hand, and the exacerbation of existing ethnic conflicts coupled with the upsurge of new ones, are fertile ground for the derailment of the effort towards democratic consolidation. It has also been pointed out that the state of Ghana’s democracy

characterized by weak institutions, lackluster civil society and corruption, among others, renders the country's democracy even more vulnerable and susceptible to the dangers of ethnic politicking and manipulation of ethnic conflicts for political gain. It is our suggestion, therefore, that political parties, politicians, the media, traditional authorities and all stakeholders, work conscientiously and by concerted effort, towards, at least, minimizing ethnocentric politicking as they work hard to mitigating the occurrence and scourge of ethnic conflicts in the country. Political leadership should also work towards strengthening the capacity of government and democratic institutions to allow for their effective and efficient functioning to help provide needed services to Ghanaians as the building blocks for consolidating the country's fledgling democracy.

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