



## EXPLAINING POLITICAL PARTY VIGILANTISM AND VIOLENCE IN PARLIAMENTARY BY-ELECTIONS IN GHANA

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### **Abstract**

Electoral violence often perpetrated by political party vigilante groups in Ghana has been a major setback to Ghana's drive towards democratic maturity. In particular, acts and incidence of violence have been alarming during parliamentary by-elections at the constituency level, which have often led to major casualties like deaths, injuries, destruction of property, inter-party conflicts, as well as social and communal tensions. Yet, very little attention has been given to electoral violence and vigilantism during parliamentary bye-elections. This study fills this gap by drawing on interviews, general observations, and archival sources to examine the causative factors for the persistence of parliamentary by-election violence, at the constituency level. The central questions addressed in the paper are: what is the motivation for the involvement of political party vigilante groups in parliamentary by-elections and associated conflicts?; what strategies do political parties use to mobilize vigilante groups during parliamentary bye-elections; and what are the implications of parliamentary by-election conflicts for inter-party and communal relations, at the constituency level? The study concludes on the note that, the stakes are often high in the conduct of bye-elections, as the whole concentration of the nation is deployed to small constituencies where such elections are held, culminating in a more pronounced activities of vigilante groups in such communities, during by-

elections. It finally raises the question with regards to how to manage the rising incidence of vigilante group activities in the conduct of bye-elections, and suggests this, as being the focus of any future research activity on political vigilantism in Ghana.

### **Keywords**

Vigilantism, Violence, Political Parties, By-Elections, Winner-Takes-All

## **1 Introduction**

Arguably, the future and sustenance of democracy in Africa hinge on the conduct of free, fair, and credible elections. Yet the issue of political vigilantism and its associated violence has become a major blot and a source of worry in many parts of Africa. Ghana is no exception. Although acts of violence and vigilantism have been a recurrent feature in parliamentary by-elections, they have received very little scholarly attention. Since the return to multiparty democracy in 1992, the conduct of regularly scheduled elections (presidential and parliamentary) has become the norm and most acceptable way of selecting or choosing presidents and members of parliament (MPs) in Ghana. Twenty-nine years on, Ghana is considered as one of the most resilient democracies in West Africa, having conducted eight successive presidential and parliamentary elections (1992, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2016, 2020), resulting in three successful transfers of power from an elected government to an opposition party. This achievement has won the country praise from the international community and scholars, as a beacon of hope for democracy and stability, particularly in West Africa that has a history of political violence and insecurity (African Peer Review Mechanism, 2005; Gyimah-Boadi, 2009; Ninsin, 2016).

However, electoral violence often perpetrated by political party vigilante groups or party militias affiliated with the two leading political parties, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and National Democratic Congress (NDC), has been a major aberration in Ghana's political environment and democratic journey (Armah-Attoh, 2017; Gyampo, 2017; Institute for Security

Studies (ISS), 2018). In particular, acts and incidence of violence have been alarming during parliamentary by-elections at the constituency level, which often result in deaths, injuries, destruction of property, inter-party conflicts and social and communal tensions (National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE), 2011; Myjoyonline.com, 2019; CODEO, 2019). Yet, earlier indicated, very little attention has been given to electoral violence and vigilantism during parliamentary by-elections. Indeed, a search of the scholarly works on Ghanaian politics points to a lacuna in the literature, as there appear to be no scholarly works on the activities of political vigilante groups during by-elections. This study aims to fill this gap by drawing on interviews, general observations, and archival sources to examine the causative factors for the persistence of parliamentary by-election violence, at the constituency level. The central questions addressed in this paper are: What is the motivation for the involvement of political party vigilante groups or militias in parliamentary by-elections and associated conflicts? What strategies do political parties use to mobilize vigilante groups or militias during parliamentary by-elections? What are the implications of parliamentary by-election conflicts for inter-party and communal relations, at the constituency level? Given that parliamentary by-election violence has been a major national issue that has attracted considerable debate among donors, civil society, media and security experts, addressing these questions will help to deepen our understanding of the role of political party functionaries in parliamentary by-elections and associated violence in Ghana.

The paper argues that the persistence of violence during parliamentary by-elections is conditioned by the winner-takes-all electoral formula and clientelism that create an uneven playing field for political parties. These, in turn, increase the potential for mistrust, tensions, and violence. By-elections held in the Fourth Republic to fill vacant positions in parliament, have been a two-horse race between the NPP and NDC. A win or lose of a by-election for either of the parties, has implications for the strength and fortune of the parties, in the subsequent or next election. A win by the incumbent party's candidate of a seat previously occupied by the opposition party's candidate, particularly in a constituency perceived as a stronghold of the opposition party, is a sign of a declining popularity of the opposition party, but broad acceptance of the policies and programs, and a growing popularity of the ruling party. This presents a positive vibe for the ruling party in the next

elections. On the contrary, a win for the opposition party's candidate of a seat previously occupied by the ruling party's candidate, particularly in a constituency perceived as a stronghold of the ruling party, is a testimony of a rejection or unpopularity of the policies of the ruling party, and a growing popularity of the opposition party. This becomes a "feel-good" factor for the chances of the opposition in the next election. Furthermore, a win for either party also represents an increase in the number of seats in parliament and a further boost of the strength and confidence of the winning party in parliament.

In sum, the outcomes of a by-election have consequence for the strength, popularity, and fortunes of the political parties in a winner-takes-all and clientelistic political environment. Political parties view the contest for a vacant parliamentary seat as a do-or-die affair. They therefore marshal all forces and resources including dispensing patronage goods, initiation of new development projects which the ruling party quickly executes overnight, visits to the constituency by high profile politicians, including the president, all aimed at campaigning to take the vacant seat. Thus, the high stakes, intense competition and struggles fostered by the winner-takes-all system, creates an unequal political playing field thereby increasing the potential for distrust, tensions, and violence.

## **2 Winner-Takes-All System, Clientelism and Violence**

The formula for selecting leaders, during parliamentary elections or by elections in Ghana, is first-past-the-post or winner-takes-all system (Republic of Ghana, 1992). In this system, the winning candidate gets all, while the losing candidates get nothing. The consequences are that the losing parties/candidates are excluded from access to state resources and decision-making processes. Since it is costly to lose elections, parties perceive elections including by-elections as a do-and-die affair, especially during campaign period. This increases the potential for distrust and violence. Ghana's winner-takes-all electoral formula is also fueled by the prevalence of clientelistic politics that deepens political divisions and antagonism.

The comparative literature shows that electoral politics in Africa is systematically and intrinsically clientelistic (Lemarchand, 1977; Clapham, 1982;

Eisenstadt and Roniger, 1984; Bratton and de Walle, 1994, 1997; Jackson and Rosberg, 1982; Hyden, 2006; Joseph, 1987). Politicians or patrons give out gifts, material favors or dispense patronage goods to citizens or clients in return for loyalty and political support at the polls (Wantchekon, 2003: 3). Goran Hyden argues that the state in most parts of Africa, is irrelevant for most citizens. As a result, informal connections and reciprocal relationships that are fostered in the economy of affection matters, and give politics a more “community-centered orientation (Hyden, 1983; 2006). According to Lindberg and Morrison, ‘clientelism is more likely when political competition is intense’ (Lindberg & Morrison, 2008, p.120). The authors show that in Ghana, MPs are confronted with enormous pressures and expectations from their constituencies for the provision of personal benefits and a moral obligation to act as ‘heads of the family’, bringing community development, community representation, legislation and executive oversight (Lindberg & Morrison, 2008).

Although parliamentary by-elections take place at the constituency level, to elect an MP to fill a vacant seat, it becomes a national political contest, where political parties actively participate. This is because, while the evaluations of MPs’ past records in providing local public goods is important, the electorate also consider the parties’ broader policies and programs. As succinctly put by Lindberg and Morrison, “while the MP is well known and viewed as an important actor, a large majority of voters find that the policies and programs implemented or suggested by the political parties, carry more weight in their own decision making” (Lindberg and Morrison, 2008, p.115).

Ghana’s 1992 constitution establishes a strong and powerful executive president that undermines separation of powers. Consequently, MPs lack the financial and technical muscle and resources to be able to dispense patronage or raise the budget to fund the increasingly high cost of parliamentary by-elections campaign. Also, the longer a party stays in opposition the chances are that the party will collapse. Consequently, there is enormous pressure on parties/MPs to win elections and sustain patronage networks. This contributes to further deepen political competition. In short, winning elections is key to maintain patronage networks, control resources and dispense jobs, public services, or lucrative government contracts (Gyimah-Boadi, 2007; Lindberg, 2003). In such a political climate, the contestation for a vacant Parliamentary seat becomes fiercely and

distinctively competitive. Accordingly, candidates and parties in addition to dispensing patronage goods to influence voters, also resort to hate speech, create fear and panic or use violence to gain political advantage in order to win the vacant parliamentary seat.

### 3 Presidential and Parliamentary Elections

The Rawlings-led Provisional National Defense Council (PNDC) lifted the ban on political parties in May 1992 after a decade hiatus. A number of political parties emerged to contest the November-December 1992 presidential and parliamentary elections. Although there are about 25 political parties, only the ruling NPP and the NDC have dominated politics in the Fourth Republic. In the elections held since 1992, both parties have been able to consistently garner on average, about 96% of total votes cast. NPP and NDC have also taken turns to be in government<sup>1</sup>. The 1992 Fourth Republican Constitution of Ghana makes provision for the country to hold presidential and parliamentary elections every four (4) years (Republic of Ghana, Constitution, 1992). The Constitution, specifically, article 97, recognizes the importance of the conduct of parliamentary by-elections when there is a vacant seat in parliament. Article 97 of the 1992 Constitution outlines the circumstances where a Parliamentary seat becomes vacant;

- a. Upon a dissolution of Parliament; or
- b. If an MP is elected as Speaker of Parliament; or
- c. If an MP is absent, for 15 sittings, during any period that Parliament has been summoned to meet and continues to meet, without the permission in writing to the Speaker and is unable to offer a reasonable explanation to the Parliamentary Committee on Privileges; or
- d. If an MP is expelled from parliament after having been found guilty of contempt of Parliament by a committee of Parliament; or

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<sup>1</sup> NDC ruled the country from 1992-2000, 2008-2012; NPP 2000-2008, 2016 to date

- e. If any circumstances arise such that, if he were not a member of Parliament, would cause him to be disqualified or ineligible for election, under article 94 of this Constitution; or
- f. If he resigns from office as a Member of Parliament by writing under his hand addressed to the Speaker; or
- g. If he leaves the party of which he was a member at the time of his election to Parliament to join another party or seeks to remain in Parliament as an independent member; or
- h. If he was elected a Member of Parliament as an independent candidate and joins another party.

Furthermore, Clause 2 stipulates that the status of any member of Parliament will not be affected when there is a merger of parties at the national level sanctioned by the parties' Constitutions or membership of a coalition government of which his original party forms part (Republic of Ghana, Constitution, 1992). As noted earlier, Ghana has since 1992, conducted eight successful presidential and parliamentary elections. Within the same period, the country has organized 30 parliamentary by-elections to fill vacant parliamentary positions. Most of the by-elections were held following the death of the incumbent, one as a result of resignation and another due to ineligibility to continue in office over conviction of criminal offense.

Per Ghana's 1992 constitution, whenever there is a vacant position in parliament, the Electoral Commission has to notify the Clerk of Parliament to organize a by-election to fill the vacant position within a period of three months. It is important to note that, the conduct of parliamentary by-elections, when a seat becomes vacant, does not only fulfil a constitutional requirement, but also ensures that parliament enjoys the full complement of its total membership required to provide representation for Ghanaians. The Ghanaian parliament is a unicameral legislature of 275 members from single-member constituencies. To function well, it requires full composition of membership. By-elections are also acceptable means of getting constituents to elect their representatives and helps in building trust and confidence in the electoral system. It also enhances the country's democratic credentials. Towards this end, political parties play important roles in the conduct of by-elections in Ghana. They put forward candidates for vacant parliamentary seats,

participate in electoral campaigns, educate and disseminate information of their manifestos and other political ideas.

#### **4 Activity, Motivation and Mobilization of Party Vigilante Groups**

Political vigilante groups are key actors in electoral violence, including by-elections in the Fourth Republic (NCCE, 2011; CDD-Afrobarometer, 2019; CODEO, 2018). The phenomenon of party vigilantism and associated violence has been on the rise. Findings from a survey conducted by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) – Ghana, revealed that vigilante activities are growing at an alarming rate in parts of the country, despite the introduction of the Vigilantism and Related Offences Act (Afrobarometer, 2019). The study also revealed that all of the activities and the associated groups are related to the two major political parties; the National Democratic Congress (NDC) and the New Patriotic Party (NPP). The study as well found that women were beginning to play key roles in such vigilante activities.

Article 21 (1) of Ghana's 1992 Constitution recognizes the constitutional rights of individuals to form and belong to associations. However, it is unlawful for political parties, groups, organizations or individuals to encourage the formation of vigilante groups and other associations that assume the character of a security organization, unless that person, group or organization has been granted a license for that purpose under the Police Service (Private Security Organization) Regulation, 1992 (LI 1571). In spite of this regulation, there have been various reports of violent clashes involving the Azorka Boys and the Bolgatanga Bulldogs, known vigilante groups of the NDC and the NPP respectively. Sponsored by influential and leading members of political parties, these vigilante groups have been actively involved in acts of violence, assault, shooting and vandalism (Gyampo, 2017; Armah-Ato, 2017). In the conduct of by-elections, they move from one polling station to another to intimidate and/or scare their political opponents, including electorates, to flee from the polling stations.

The rise of vigilante group activities in the conduct of elections, particularly by-elections, is largely as a result of Ghana's youth bulge population structure and the absence of opportunities for the youth to participate in the formal political, economic and social decision-making



processes (Gyampo, 2011). This makes young people vulnerable to political manipulation and violence (Asante, 2006; Danso and Mensah, 2015; Gyampo, 2011; Bob-Milliar, 2014). The vigilante groups go all out to help their candidates win an election in order to maintain patronage networks, control resources and dispense jobs, public services, or lucrative government contracts (Gyimah-Boadi, 2007; Lindberg, 2003).

A key mobilization strategy of patrons for recruiting vigilante groups, is by inducing them with money and alcoholic beverages (NCCE, 2011). Another strategy for mobilization for violence is that their patrons, including candidates, promise the youth lucrative jobs if they help them to get the nod during elections. Sometimes political party vigilante groups of the winning party resort to force, to illegally take over state properties such as offices, tollbooths, public toilets, and car parks. They also visit mayhem on government officials for what they perceive as failure on their part to offer them the promised jobs or lock up of government offices for unfulfilled expectations of employments; or attack government appointees whose appointments they disagree with. With the enticement of material goods and rewards, the vigilante groups approach by-elections as a 'do or die' affair, and thus, the youth resort to illegal conducts with the aim of seeing to it that their party wins the seat to enable them secure the promised jobs. Another mobilization strategy used by those who sponsor the vigilante groups is by bringing them together, mostly from other communities, and transporting them to the constituency and community where the by-election is taking place, to cause mayhem and havoc. Some of the organized and well-known vigilante groups that are often transported and deployed during by-elections are the Azoka boys and Bolga Bulldogs, all based in the Northern regions of Ghana.

For example, the by-election held in Talensi in the Upper East Region in July 2015, recorded violent clashes largely between the governing NDC affiliate, Azorka Boys, and the NPP's Bolga Bulldogs. There were sporadic violent confrontations during counting of ballots resulting in injuries from gun shots, tear gas, machetes and sticks. The protagonists were thugs affiliated with the NPP and NDC. They mounted road blocks to create confusion and intimidate their political opponents (Myjoyonline, 2015b). The then Interior Minister, Mark Woyongo, in an interview stopped short of condemning the violence in Talensi and instead remarked that, "violence begets violence." He

insisted that the Azorka Boys would not have retaliated had they not been provoked in the first place by the Bolga Bulldogs. He added that the Azorka Boys had the right to protect themselves. His comments attracted widespread condemnation from civil society and the Ghanaian public, who argued that it was not appropriate for an Interior Minister to make such comments, and demanded his removal from his position. Dr. Papa kwesi Nduom of the Progressive People's Party (PPP) also threatened to form a vigilante group, Sea Lions, to defend the interest of his party and as a preemptive measure for what he foresaw to be bloody confrontations, in the 2016 general elections.

Likewise, during the Wulensi (in the Northern Region) by-elections in 2003, supporters of the NPP and NDC clashed while counting of votes was ongoing. They hurled stones at each other, compelling those who were witnessing the vote count, to run away to avoid injuries (ModernGhana, 2003). The by-election in Chereponi in the Northern Region on September 29, 2009 was also characterized by violence. In the run up to the election, four persons were shot and more than a dozen sustained multiple wounds from irate stone-throwing youth of the NPP and NDC. Other items that were destroyed included plastic chairs, canopies and other items belonging to both parties (Peacefmonline, 2019). Similarly, the 2002 Bimbilla (in the Northern Region) by-elections witnessed some disturbances. An attempt by some NPP youths to prevent some voters who they suspected had cast their votes already, from voting again, resulted in clashes during which they hurled stones at each other. The police intervened to avert further violence (Ghanaweb, 2002). The by-election in the Atiwa constituency in the Eastern Region on August 31, 2010 also recorded some violence such as destruction of vehicles and violent attacks on political opponents. The NDC's Azorka boys and NPP's Bamba Boys were implicated in the violence. Together with other party youth in the constituency, they blocked roads in the constituency, ostensibly to prevent people who were not from the area from entering the community during the by-elections. (BusinessGhana, 2010).

As was observed from the by-election held in the Ayawaso West Wuogon Constituency in the Greater Accra Region on 31st January, 2019, chaos and violence broke out at the La Bawalashie Presbyterian School Polling Station. Some masked men believed to be National Security operatives, with the support of vigilante groups affiliated to the NPP, stormed the residence of the NDC candidate Delali Kwasi Brempong and at a polling center, shooting

indiscriminately. In the process, about six persons believed to be supporters of the opposition NDC got injured (CODEO, 2019). The shooting caused fear and panic among those who had assembled there to cast their votes. The NDC announced its withdrawal from the by-election citing security concerns although the polls went ahead as planned. Videos of masked men, bullet holes and wounded civilians, went viral forcing the president to set up a commission of inquiry to investigate the violence that characterized the by-election (White Paper on the Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Ayawaso West Wuogon, 2019). The Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) highlighted some security concerns, including the heavy presence of security personnel at several polling stations, the apparent lack of coordination around security deployment for the elections, and the unprofessional conduct of some security operatives at polling stations (CODEO, 2019).

Much of the violence occurred during the three phases: before, during and after the elections. The perpetrators include party supporters, agents and vigilante groups and youth groups affiliated with the NPP and NDC. The underlying trigger of violence include perceived electoral malpractices, mounting of road blocks to prevent unqualified or unregistered voters from voting and, verbal abuse, and use of inflammatory language. In the post-by-election phase, violence also triggered by over jubilation and teasing of losers (NCCE, 2018). In 2011, during a meetings with NPP members in Koforidua and other parts of the country, Nana Akufo-Addo, the then flagbearer of the NPP charged party faithfuls and vigilante groups to be courageous to resist intimidation from the NDC, declaring, “in 2012, we need to be courageous because ‘all die be die’, all die be die”. (GhanaWeb, 2011). Likewise, John Mahama, the presidential candidate of the NDC while touring the Volta Region on 31<sup>st</sup> January 2019, in response to the Ayawaso West Wuogon by-election violence, stated that, *NPP is acting out and living the reality of the ‘all die be die’, ... I am sounding a warning to the NPP: we are going to march them boot for boot.* (Myjoyonline, Jan. 31, 2019a). These comments by party leaders and very top people within the echelons of the two main political parties in Ghana, have only served to strengthen the activities of vigilante groups, in the conduct of all elections, particularly by-elections.

## 5 Implication for Inter-Party and Communal Relations

The persistence of violence during parliamentary by-elections has been a major source of worry to many civil society actors and political observers and social commentators. By-election conflicts undermine trust in the electoral process. A key factor for the peaceful conduct of elections in Ghana in the past twenty-eight years has been the willingness of the parties to build consensus on the electoral rules and conduct of elections under the auspices of the Inter-Party Advisory Committee (IPAC) (Aye, 1998; Asante, 2013). By-election violence negatively affects inter-party relations and cooperation. As a consequence, it takes a lot of effort by the National Peace Council and other religious leaders, and civil society, to intervene to calm down tensions, and rebuild trust among the parties.

Furthermore, violence and clashes among the parties during by-elections mostly results in injuries, destruction of properties and human rights abuses. Failure to resolve the underlying causes of the conflict or prosecution of the perpetrators of the violence, tends to create problems. Often times, the affected constituency is likely to experience violence in the next election. For example, in the run to the 2016 General Election, violence broke out between supporters of the NDC and NPP in the Chaperoni constituency of the norther region. The clashes were sparked by misunderstanding and violent confrontation between supporters of the two parties, after both parties had completed their final rallies in the constituencies. One person was reported dead, 14 others sustained injuries, including five in critical condition, while some houses were burnt down (Graphiconline, December 6, 2016). Since the perpetrators of violence go unpunished, political party functionaries and vigilante groups tend to resort to violence in retaliation to settle scores, re-igniting old scores and violence. The 2016 clash between the supporters of the two main political parties in Chereponi, was as a result of old scores that had to be settled (NCCE, 2018).

By-election violence also creates divisions and destroys family and social relations within political parties and the constituency. The resulting disunity undermines communal development. Government and community leaders have to find the resources to repair or rebuild damaged property and

infrastructure as a result of the violence. Growing mistrust and tensions associated with by-election violence creates insecurity, which could be a major contributory factor for loss of interest in the electoral process, and low voter turnout during by-elections and local elections, particularly in constituencies with a history of violence. Furthermore, the excessive use of force by the security operatives to arrest perpetrators of violence leads to clashes, injuries, and destruction of property. In some cases, the youth of the constituency leave the community to avoid arrest by the security agencies, thereby creating a “ghost town.” In such circumstances, it takes time to restore normalcy in the constituency and community.

## 6 Conclusion

The stakes are often high in the conduct of by-elections as the whole concentration of the nation is deployed to small communities and constituencies where such elections are held. Consequently, the activities of vigilante groups, which results in severe casualties such as destruction of life and property, are also pronounced in the conduct of such elections, with grave consequences for inter-party and communal/constituency relations. In spite of the new legislation to outlaw vigilante group activities, studies have shown a rise in such activities, particularly during by-elections. How do we manage the rising incidence of vigilante group activities in the conduct of by-elections in Ghana? This should be the focus of any future research activity on political vigilantism in Ghana.

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