

Transcript

Alyssa Caver: Hello, my name is Alyssa Caver. I am a research assistant at Georgetown University, working with Professor Jeffrey Fisher on the Stories of Democracy Project. I'm here with Professor Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi to discuss Ghana's elections in 2000. I will now hand it over to the professor to introduce himself.

Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi: Yes. My name is Gyimah-Boadi, but most of my friends call me Gyimah, so you can call me Gyimah as well. I'm a Ghanaian political scientist, largely trained in Ghana and the US. I have been an academic, a civic advocate, and a consultant on matters related to democratic reforms, democracy, political economy of reform, and the like. I've been doing these things for over three decades. I'm currently retired from the University of Ghana, where I was a professor in the Department of Political Science, and I'm also co-founder and former executive director of the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana), which is a democracy and governance think tank based in Accra, and then also a co-founder and former Chief Executive of the Afrobarometer, Africa's premier opinion survey research enterprise, that has been tracking opinions, values, and attitudes of Africans in matters regarding democracy, economy, culture, and others in their respective societies for over 25 years.

Alyssa Caver: Thank you so much, Gyimah. Can you share more about the political and social context in the late 1990s leading up to the 2000 election?

Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi: Yes, I'm happy to do so. So Ghana underwent a democratic transition in the early 1990s as part of the global wave of democratization. Indeed, a formal process started in mid-1992, and multi-party presidential and parliamentary elections were held later that year. On January 7, 1993, a new president was sworn in, and a new parliament was inaugurated.

And I'd like to say a bit more about this transition, because many describe it as a "transition without change." The basis for this critique was that prior to this transition, Ghana had been under quasi-military rule, with strongman Flight Lieutenant J.J. Rawlings and his junta, the Provisional National Defense Council, ruling the nation with an iron fist, political parties proscribed, the Constitution, including the bill of rights, suspended, the media severely censored, and citizens' voices quieted, etc. Rawlings was to describe Ghanians as living in "a culture of silence," a description that aptly captured the political repression of the era: intimidation of political opponents, detention without trial, chasing of opponents into exile, total media repression, strict censorship, kangaroo courts, and a whole lot. So this was the background to the transition.

I'd like to say a bit more about this transition, because many had described it at the time as a "transition without change." Now, the basis of this critique was that prior to the transition, Ghana had been under quasi-military rule, with strongman Flight Lieutenant J.J. Rawlings and his junta,

the Provisional National Defense Council, acronym PNDC, ruling the nation with an iron fist. In this period, political parties were proscribed. The Constitution, including the Bill of Rights, was suspended, and the media was severely censored. There was also a lot of political and media repression, and citizens' voices were silenced.

Ghanaians, as aptly described by the head of state, Jerry John Rawlings, were living in a culture of silence. A silence that had been induced by the Rawlings regime's intimidation of political opponents, detention without trial, chasing of political rivals into exile, total media censorship, kangaroo courts, and a whole lot. So, this was the backdrop to the late-90s democratic transition in Ghana.

Then, the transition process itself was highly stage-managed by the incumbent Rawlings regime. For instance, the government refused to declare neutrality or adopt a neutral stance regarding the transition process. It handpicked the individuals who led various aspects of the transition, including the body established to draft a new constitution for the New Republic and the members of the election management body.

It's also important to note that the ban on political parties remained in place until about six months before the election. And when the ban was eventually lifted, the Rawlings PNDC military government simply rebranded itself as a political party called the National Democratic Congress, NDC. That's PNDC without a P. Rawlings now discarded his military uniforms and campaigned for the presidency as a civilian.

And of course, there was a huge element of abuse of incumbency in this election. The government maintained its monopoly control over the media and it used state resources to campaign freely. So, indeed, it was not that surprising when Rawlings and his party won the presidential election handily and proceeded to form a government and a cabinet full of ministers from the previous military regime, who now had returned from the era of military rule to continue serving in the democratically elected administration. That is to say, all faces from Rawlings' military government re-emerge as new faces in the democratically elected Rawlings administration.

There was another interesting problem. Having declared the presidential elections as rigged, the main opposition parties boycotted the ensuing parliamentary elections. So, Ghana ended up with an inaugural parliament that was almost entirely one-party. President Rawlings' party and two parties officially aligned with it held 198 of the 200 seats in the National Assembly, with only two independents. So, as I indicated earlier, the cabinet of the democratically elected Rawlings administration was full of high-ranking officials from the Rawlings military government.

But having said all of this, change did occur. Improvements did follow the 1993 transition. And so, the next elections in 1996 were a little bit more competitive, more transparent, freer and fairer, and therefore, it became possible for the opposition to win some of the parliamentary polls, and to secure a significant presence in the National Assembly, even though Flight

Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings and his party won the majority of the presidential and parliamentary votes in the 1996 elections.

I should also add that election management and administration were significantly improved between 1993 and 1996, ahead of the second transition election. So, for instance, the Electoral Commission introduced transparent ballot boxes so you could easily check for ballot stuffing. There was also a limited opportunity for party agents and independent election observers to be present at the polling stations this time around. And indeed, as we moved on into the third transition election, the overall political environment in Ghana had substantially improved.

The government did relinquish some of its monopoly over the state media. Independent private newspapers had emerged in the meantime, offering a bit more access to the opposition, and the opposition's election campaign this time was not as severely hampered as in the previous times. Nonetheless, the stakes of this election were extremely high. Ghana's 1992 constitution imposed a two-term limit on the presidency. So, strongman Rawlings was constitutionally barred from contesting in the 2000 election. But, for the governing party's presidential candidate, Rawlings handpicked his vice president, Professor John Atta Mills. Rawlings is not running for the presidency, but he couldn't be sure of Mills' victory, so he tried everything to tilt the election in Mills' favor. At the same time, the opposition had matured quite a bit and begun to find its feet, and I would say it was a little bit better organized this time around.

So, Ghana was heading into an election in which Rawlings could not guarantee victory for his preferred presidential candidate, Mills, and the incumbent party, the NDC. That meant a whole lot of shenanigans, including trying to bully and intimidate the opposition parties, disrupting their rallies and campaigns, and dropping hints that he was unlikely to leave office unless his candidate and party won the elections.

Alyssa Caver: That's fascinating, thank you. Can you tell me more about the challenges that Ghana faced in administering the election?

Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi: The 2000 election confronted many challenges. First was the monetary cost of administering the elections. We are also talking about a very fraught electoral context. A contest marred by widespread paranoia among the opposition, and, I would say, somewhat legitimate fear on the part of the opposition of being cheated out of victory, unless they mounted stiff vigilance.

I recall meeting John Kufour, the presidential candidate of the main opposition party at the time, that's the New Patriotic Party, at a social event, apparently aware of the fact that I had just recently moved back to Ghana from Washington, D.C., where I had been at the National Endowment for Democracy's Forum for Democratic Studies, and had been close to some of the folks at the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, IFES.

He sought to bend my ears about the Ghanaian Electoral Commission Chair, Dr. Afari-Gyan. He insisted that there was no way he and his party would have a fair chance of winning the

elections unless the electoral commissioner was removed. Indeed, he seemed genuinely surprised when I told him that, from where I come from, and what I have seen and read, Ghana's EMB and its leader, Dr. Afari-Gyan, enjoyed a very high reputation in international circles, and that I didn't think people who are knowledgeable about Ghana and the record of its recent elections would take his complaint or demand seriously.

Mr. Kufour looked genuinely dismayed to hear that from me and was skeptical of my advice. And my advice was very simple, that instead of worrying about who the head of the election management was, he and his party should concentrate on working hard, and that victory was not out of the question for them if they worked hard. Of course, he didn't seem convinced at all. But to me, this is how paranoid and skeptical the opposition was at the time.

There was also another problem. Rawlings had been the most dominant figure in Ghanaian political life for about 19 years preceding the 2000 election, coming to power on the eve of the New Year, 1983, and governing for 11 years as a military ruler, and another 8 years as an elected civilian leader. He was used to being in and not out of office.

Moreover, he had accumulated many enemies during his tenure at the helm. People had had their assets illegally confiscated. Some had been detained extra-legally or jailed by kangaroo courts. Others had fled into exile, and had just returned in the final moments of the 2000 elections. That's the election year.

So, Rawlings and his people had reasonable grounds to be afraid that, out of power, reprisals would be visited on them by victims of their oppression, and that revenge would be exacted by those who had borne the brunt of the abuse of state power under the various Rawlings regimes.

The 2000 pre-election environment was challenging for other reasons as well. As I was trying to say, it was an environment marked by deep, very deep mistrust. There was intense acrimony between the ruling party and the opposition. There were reports, for instance, that the ruling party was using state security, regulatory, and law enforcement agencies to intimidate the opposition. There was always a strong sense in the air that violence might erupt, and a great deal of public anxiety and fear had been aroused over the possibility that the transition would be disrupted and that the election might slip into civil conflict. And mind you, this is West Africa, where there had been experience, for instance, in Liberia and Sierra Leone, of elections degenerating into civil conflict. That's violent civil conflict and civil war.

And just to keep in mind that the Electoral Commission was carrying all of this weight on its shoulders. It had to deal with a governing party afraid of losing power and doing its best to intimidate the opposition and convey the impression that nothing would stand in its way of winning the election. At the same time, the commission and its leadership were mistrusted by many, especially the opposition. And yet, the opposition and everybody else expected the same electoral commission to deliver free and fair elections.

I have to say that I myself disagreed with the opposition and thought they were hugely overstating the extent to which the electoral management body was compromised or under the incumbent government's control. But that was not my place to say publicly at the time.

Alyssa Caver: Can you tell me more about the role that you played in this election?

Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi: So, by this time, I am back in Ghana, from the US, and as I indicated, in the US, I had been at the National Endowment for Democracy, and had been involved in some of the discussions and debates about elections in newly democratizing nations, the challenges typically faced during elections in countries transitioning from deep authoritarian rule or civil conflict to democracy, and, most importantly, I've listened to some of the measures taken to create a level playing field for the contestants, and to make those selections relatively credible.

I'm also now teaching at the University of Ghana in the Department of Political Science. And in the meantime, and more significantly or consequentially, I have also co-founded this democracy research and advocacy institution called the Ghana Center for Democratic Development, CDD-Ghana. The center was established in 1998 and was dedicated to using the tools of social science to conduct research and undertake advocacy for democracy and accountable governance, principally in Ghana, and if not broadly in Africa, at least in West Africa.

Based on our reading, and when I say our reading, I mean the Center's reading of the political situation in Ghana at the time, we decided the best way to support the 2000 elections, promote their fairness and transparency, and the credibility of their outcomes, and maybe the peacefulness of the process, was to organize a coalition.

So we set up a citizens' coalition called the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers. The acronym is CODEO. And CODEO's job was to systematically watchdog the polls. It brought together over a dozen civil and faith-based associations interested in election transparency, fairness, and integrity. It sets before itself the task of independently monitoring the 2000 elections and subsequent elections.

It elected two highly respected individuals to serve as co-chairs. One of them was an eminent jurist, a retired judge of the Supreme Court of Ghana, and a former law professor in Ghana and the West Indies, who had previously served as the sole electoral commissioner for Ghana's 1969 general elections. A gentleman by the name of Justice VCRAC Crabbe. We figured that he was best qualified to lead this effort because, in addition to his high technical competence, he was accustomed to making balanced judgments as a judge. We paired him with Professor Miranda Greenstreet, also a highly respected academic who had been director of the University of Ghana's Institute of Adult Education and had recently served as chair of a high-profile, presidential body to determine the emoluments and retirement packages for holders of high offices and Ghana's 1992 constitution.

I want to backtrack a bit and list CODEO's composition. It comprised organizations in secular and religious civil society, some of whom had strong organic roots in Ghanaian society, and others carried considerable prestige and respectability nationwide.

So, CODEO had religious bodies, such as the Christian Council of Churches, the Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Catholic Secretariat, and the Council of Independent Churches. It also had the Ahmadiya Muslim Mission and the main Sunni Muslim group in Ghana, linked to the office of the National Chief Imam. The professional group membership of CODEO included the Ghana Bar Association, the Ghana Trades Union Congress, the Nurses, Midwives and Teachers' Associations, and the National Union of Ghana Students.

We saw a strong need for our monitoring programs to cover the entire election cycle, rather than focusing only on election day. So, we monitored development before, during, and after the election, and we rolled out programs, for instance, to monitor the general pre-election environment and election-relevant developments, such as voter registration, the media's coverage of political parties and candidates' activities and campaigns, and the extent to which the parties and their campaigns were given equal time and space, especially in state-owned media.

We also monitored the conduct of the competing parties, the candidates and their respective supporters, and the peacefulness of the national and constituency-level election campaigns. We flagged incidents of violent conflicts, and we compiled these reports submitted by trained CODEO field observers, and then shared them with the Ghanaian public on a monthly basis. The reports drawing attention to shortcomings in the election process helped to inform the development of appropriate interventions and corrective measures by the state election authorities and other election stakeholders.

You may ask how we selected our monitors. For this election, CODEO recruited, I believe, about 4,000 monitors. And these monitors were typically nominated by the member organizations, the constituent organizations of CODEO. For instance, the Ghana National Teachers Association nominated teachers from across the country for training and deployment as CODEO Field Observers. The Association of Registered Nurses and the Trade Union Congress did the same. We then give them basic training on what to look out for in the field, what to report, how to report, and how to transmit their reports to the CODEO Secretariat, based at CDD-Ghana.

Alyssa Caver: Can you tell me more about the role of other domestic or international actors involved in this election in Ghana?

Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi: So first, the domestic actors. I will single out the Ghanaian media as one of the key domestic actors and close allies of CODEO and CDD-Ghana in the 2000 elections. For instance, they organized Ghana's first presidential debate in late September of the election year. The debate provided a common platform for the candidates to articulate their

respective perspectives and programs on national issues. This was very important in view of the fact that the governing party, the NDC, was still trying to monopolize control over the media, particularly the state broadcaster, which at the time had the widest reach in the country.

The local media also maintained a close watch and frequently reported on the pre-election scene, playing a key role in voter education in that election. And it was particularly helpful to CODEO and its domestic election observation project that there was an independent electronic media in Ghana this time around. So, on the day of the polls, some private radio stations deployed personnel and vehicles to polling stations nationwide to monitor and broadcast electoral irregularities and other misconduct. And indeed, it was extremely helpful to have live radio and TV cameras present at polling stations and reporting in real time. It gave everybody in the country a good sense of what was going on, even in some of the remotest parts. This, I must say, hugely complemented the work of CODEO.

I should also say that this election benefited greatly from the very active involvement of international development partners. They generously funded the election management body, as well as media and civil society election-support initiatives. Notably, the activities of CODEO were largely funded by the German Stiftung Friedrich Naumann Foundation.

The presence of international election observers was also very constructive. As part of Rawlings' and the PNDC regime's manipulation of the first transition elections in 1992, it had actively discouraged the participation of international observers, so as a result, only two international organizations were accredited to monitor the election, and that's the Commonwealth Observer Group and the Carter Center. And it is instructive that the two groups disagreed in their assessments of the election. The Commonwealth Group gave the election a pass, but the Carter group refused to endorse it as credible. But this time around, there was a whole slew of internationals around.

The International Foundation for Electoral Systems, I believe, and I believe it's gone through a name change, but it's still IFES, was certainly there. The National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute were also there. The Accra-based Western diplomatic missions – that's the U.S, UK, Denmark, France, and all dispatched the officials to observe the polls nationwide. And as a domestic election observer, it was always encouraging to run into some of these international observers in the field, and to compare notes about what you have found. It often helped to reinforce and validate each other's observations and conclusions.

And allow me to backtrack a bit, and say something about the other important ways in which domestic civil society contributed to this election. Given the very tense lead-up to this election and the possibility of violence erupting, a lot of investment was made in monitoring conflict and advocating for peace during the election. This was led primarily by the leaders of the faith-based communities. The Christians, Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, Pentecostals, and others all joined hands to mount peace campaigns, exhorted the political leaders and their followers to eschew violence, and in addition, Ghana's National House of Chiefs, a body of traditional leaders convened a meeting a few days before the elections, at which the political party leaders

and representatives of the presidential candidates committed or pledged themselves to a violence-free election.

We could also add to the contributions of civil society the Musicians Association of Ghana, which also organized musical concerts to promote peaceful elections, while religious groups held high-profile prayer sessions for electoral peace and non-violence in December 2000.

Alyssa Caver: Do you think that your work contributed to the wider world of democracy and election work in Africa or globally, and if so, how so?

Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi: Well, first of all, I hope so. I hope it contributed somewhat, even though it's difficult to say precisely how much. But I think it helped the overall development of democracy in Ghana, and, specifically, citizen participation in promoting the integrity of elections in Ghana.

I am happy to note that the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers in Ghana has observed every election in Ghana since its formation in 2000. It's observed presidential, parliamentary, local government, and even by-elections. It has also gone further to introduce the parallel vote tabulation, PVT, system in Ghanaian elections since 2000. And I'm happy to say that it has become indispensable to elections in Ghana.

In terms of potential contributions to countries beyond Ghana, the Center has helped establish and shape CODEO-type coalitions in other African countries, including Nigeria's now-famous youth election-monitoring and democracy-support body, Yiaga. CDD and CODEO officials and experts were there to help to set them up.

We've also helped to set up similar coalitions in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Malawi, and we have helped to create and provide. That said, CDD and CODEO helped to create, and CDD provided Secretariat services for the West African Election Observers Network, WAEON.

Alyssa Caver: Thank you so much, Professor Gyimah-Boadi, for taking the time to share these valuable lessons with us about Ghana and its electoral history. I'll leave it to you to leave any parting words or concluding remarks, but it's been wonderful having you tell your story here, and we're very grateful for your addition to the collection.

Emmanuel Gyimah-Boadi: Well, thanks for the opportunity, and all I can say is that it's been gratifying to me to have played a part in the creation of the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers, the Center for Democratic Development, which serves as the Secretariat of the Coalition, and the Afrobarometer, whose sampling methodology supports CODEO's PVT.

I'm also hugely proud of the work they, or we, have been able to do and continue to do to shape and support Ghana and Africa's democratic development. It's been a real privilege of a lifetime.