



Are Ghanaian Diaspora Middle Class? Linking Middle Class to Political Participation and Stability in Ghana

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Abstract

Ghana, like many African countries, has had its fair share of political instability in the aftermath of independence. In the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the country witnessed some political turbulence, marked especially by a long period of dictatorial military rule. However, since the return to constitutional rule in 1992, Ghana has emerged as one of the most stable countries in the West African sub-region and has become a beacon of democracy for other African countries to emulate. This political stability has been largely attributed to the positive role of the educated middle class from the diaspora. This article provides a case study of the Ghanaian diaspora, as middle class and the role they have played and continue to play in maintaining Ghana's political stability. A field work was conducted between February 2012 and May 2013 to ascertain what constitutes Ghana's middle class and establish their link to political stability in Ghana. The sample consisted of 52 respondents in Accra who were interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire. What constitutes the Ghanaian middle class? How do they organise themselves politically? Are they truly the vanguard of political stability in Ghana? If so, how have they accomplished this? These are some of the questions the article will provide answers to.

Keywords: Diaspora, Middle Class, Political Participation

Résumé

À l'instar de nombreux pays de la sous-région ouest-africaine, le Ghana a connu de multiples coups d'Etat après son indépendance dans les années 1960, 1970 et 1980 le rendant *de facto* politiquement instable. Cependant, depuis le retour à l'ordre constitutionnel en 1992, le Ghana est considéré comme l'un

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des pays les plus stables de la sous-région et un modèle de démocratie pour d'autres pays en proie à des conflits ouverts. Cette stabilité a été attribuée à la qualité socioprofessionnelle de la classe moyenne ghanéenne en provenance de la diaspora. L'objectif de cet article est d'interroger le rôle potentiel de cette diaspora dans l'émergence d'une classe moyenne et dans le maintien du processus démocratique et de la stabilité politique au Ghana. Ainsi, nous tenterons, tout d'abord, d'apprécier comment se constitue la classe moyenne au Ghana. Ensuite, nous nous intéresserons à son mode d'organisation dans la vie politique. Enfin, nous analyserons l'influence de cette élite dans le renforcement de la démocratie et de la stabilité politique.

Mot clés : Ghana, diaspora, classe moyenne, participation politique

Introduction

Since the return to constitutional rule in 1992, Ghana has emerged as one of the most stable countries in the West African sub-region and has become a beacon of democracy for other African countries to emulate.

Studies on Ghana by various researchers such as Richard Rathborn, Jeff Haynes, Basil Davidson and Paul Nugent have shown that, the current political stability in the country can be attributed to the educated elites who are products of the good educational system in the country (Nugent 1995). Educational institutions such as Achimota School and University of Ghana, Legon have all served as preparatory institutions for Ghana's middle class. These educated elites were products of both the Ghanaian and British educational system as most of those first generation political leaders went on to obtain higher education in the United Kingdom and the United States in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Leading figures during the fight for independence all emerged from the ranks of educated Ghanaian elites who returned from the diaspora, including prominent figures like Kwame Nkrumah, Kofi Abrefa Busia, J.B Danquah and William Ofori Atta (Clignet & Foster 1964). The trend of returning Ghanaian elites from the diaspora started during those formative years and has continued till present day.

These pioneer middle class, educated elites and professionals were essentially limited to the political and administrative class, in other words, those working closely with the state. Apart from the educated elites or educated middle class, there was already an established and emerging middle class linked to local businessmen and women, traders and large scale farmers within the cocoa industry (Luckam et al. 2005).

The multiple coups d'état that the country witnessed in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s resulted in a massive exodus of professionals who left the

country. Many of those who left during those turbulent years settled in neighbouring countries like Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Liberia and also in East Africa. These were skilled and educated professionals. The less educated and unskilled migrants settled in Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Senegal and other francophone countries within the sub-region (Quartermen 2009). According to Ghana's Constitutional Review Committee report in 2011, there were about 7.5 million Ghanaians living abroad, with about one million of them living in Côte d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso¹ out of a national population of 26 million. The International Organization for Migration and the UNDP, on the other hand, estimate that there are about 1.5 – 3 million Ghanaians residing outside the country and a majority of those migrants reside within the West African sub-region. Although there is no consensus about the figures relating to the number of Ghanaians abroad, the government of Ghana tends to overestimate their number, whereas international institutions provide more cautious estimates. The lack of accurate figures on migrants abroad is also an indication of the fragmented nature of Ghanaian migrants when abroad, as there is often very little cohesion among them. These figures nevertheless, show the vast number of Ghanaian migrants who left the country during the turbulent years of political instability. In recent years, these exiled professionals and unskilled Ghanaians from the diaspora have been returning to take their place within the Ghanaian society by becoming part of the "Emerging Middle Class" (Van Hear 1998).

This article argues that the recent political stability in Ghana can be attributed to the important roles its political elites and middle class have played in the past and continue to play in ensuring that political stability prevails in Ghana. The social composition of these political elites and middle class is, to a large extent, made up of returnee Ghanaians from the diaspora, who are using the experience they acquired abroad to serve their country. At least 60 per cent of the country's political elites and middle classes were at some point in their career trajectory, trained and educated in the West.

This article therefore, addresses the role the Ghanaian diaspora has played within the realms of politics in Ghana, with particular focus on the diaspora as middle class and vanguard of political stability in Ghana. The article is divided into two parts. The first part provides a brief overview of the history of Ghana's middle class, by examining the multiple interpretations of the term middle class and how it fits into the Ghanaian context. The second part examines the characteristics of Ghanaian middle class in recent years and also focuses on the political participation of the middle class and their role in preserving Ghana's political stability.

History and Conceptualisation of Ghana's Middle Class: Experience of Expatriation and New Economic Growth

The history of Ghana's middle class dates back to the early twentieth century where there existed a nascent middle class, characterised by similarities of occupation, lifestyle and status, endowed with a certain capacity for collective action. Their emergence was the product of three intersecting but at times competing processes: the incorporation of Ghana into the world economy from the late nineteenth century; the expansion of the education system, starting with the introduction of mission schools in the nineteenth century and the development of state employment, especially in the immediate post-independence era (Luckham et al. 2005). These intersections of past events, have contributed to the emergence of a new form of middle and "global middle class" in Ghana according to Svanikier (2007), Lloyd (1966), Clignet and Foster (1966), Austin (1970) and Scudder and Colson (1980), who all argued that the introduction of formal Western education formed the basis of social mobility and the formation of political elites in Ghana. This same process also formed a social differentiation and subsequent fragmentation of the society in the run up to independence and after. In this new context, education through its close association with the process of upward social and career mobility played an increasingly significant role in emergent conceptions of social status (Foster 1965).

According to the World Bank's report on "Global Economic Prospects 2007", the emergence of a global middle class is a result of globalisation² and this category of the population is most likely to have an influence on political structures in their countries. Although globalisation might have contributed to the emergence of a "global middle class" in the developing world, it must however, be noted that they represent a small percentage of the population who can be categorised as middle class.

Before proceeding further into the analysis of Ghanaian middle class and their role in politics, it is necessary to clarify and comment on what exactly the term middle class entails. The definition of middle classes (or middle class) often tends to be arbitrary. Ravallion and Chen (2004) stated in a World Bank Policy Research Working Paper titled: *Have the World's Poorest Fared since the Early 1980s?* That we hardly ever seek to question what exactly "middle class" means and, that, "there is little sign of an agreement as to what the term 'middle class' means". Defining the middle class in Ghana on the other hand, demands a focus on a wider picture, as this refers to different sociological and economic realities and different individual trajectories. Kofi Bentil of 'IMANI' Centre for Policy and Education, a think tank based in Accra, Ghana

Our definition of the middle class does not have to do with disposable income or comfort. Our definition of the middle class has to do with the ability to mask poverty. In other words, many people who are considered middle class, sometimes in a month have a problem feeding themselves... But the thing is, they can get through the month without looking dirty or poor. Some of them have cars, and there are days when they cannot fuel their cars... So someone who is middle class here in Ghana would be considered lower class in a developed country (Fieldwork interview, 20 May 2013, Accra).³

Ghana's Middle Class Monopolised by the Diasporans

As was pointed out in the introduction to this paper, there is a link between the elite diasporan and the formation of middle class in Ghana. Before delving further into an analysis of the link between the diaspora and middle class formation in Ghana, it is necessary to define the term diaspora and how it relates to social stratification in Ghana. Gabriel Sheffer defines diaspora by three proposed criteria: the dispersed group must hold a distinctive and collective identity across international locations; the group must have some internal organisation of its own and the group in dispersion must keep ties with the homeland, be it symbolic or real (Sheffer 2003). The last criteria for defining diaspora resonates with Ghanaians abroad, as most migrant groups tend to have transitional links with their homeland one way or the other. Recent studies on Ghanaians abroad have shown that Ghanaians residing in the UK tend to be the largest group returning to settle in Ghana with 53 per cent compared to 28 per cent from the US, 16 per cent from other Western countries and only 3 per cent from France.⁴

This observation was also confirmed by IOM's migration profile for Ghana, where the largest migrations of Ghanaians in the diaspora going back to settle in Ghana from Western countries were those who lived in England (Quartey 2009). This trend of returnee diaspora to Ghana has surged in the past twelve years. According to Anarfi et al., these repatriations have been largely motivated by the continued economic growth and political stability that Ghana has witnessed in recent years. This has, in turn, led to the massive influx of Ghanaian expatriates going back to capitalise on the job and business opportunities now available.

Results from our field work confirm the notion of returnee diasporans opting for self-employment rather than working for government institutions. As 41 per cent of the respondents interviewed indicated that they were self-employed, 30 per cent were teachers, 19 per cent were university lecturers and the remaining 12 per cent were lawyers, businessmen, traders or doctors. Most of them come back home with economic capital and professional skills

which enable them to set-up thriving businesses. It is indeed correct to state that, to some extent, they have been the driving force behind the current surge of “startups” in Ghana. Returnee diasporans such as Kofi Blankson Ocansey and Kwesi Owusu all indicated that they preferred being self-employed, as that was the best way they could contribute to national development (Field interview with Kofi Blankson Ocansey and Kwesi Owusu, 20 July 2012, Accra). The increasing number of returnee diasporans to Ghana can be partly attributed to the recent economic decline in most Western countries since 2008, which came with high unemployment rate.

Apart from investing in businesses, returnee diasporans also engage in politics. In this respect, it is important to examine the different ways in which these Ghanaian diaspora engage in politics once in Ghana. Their participation in politics takes different shapes and forms. In most cases, returnees take up positions as advisers and consultants at the Presidency and with civil society organisations, think tanks and government institutions. At the local and political party level, elite diasporans often engaged in politics either as advisers on policy issues within their respective parties or use their experience and the expertise gained abroad to advise on policy and social change. Such is the case of Samia Nkrumah, the daughter of Kwame Nkrumah, who is currently the chairperson for the Convention People’s Party (CPP). She lived and worked in England, Egypt and Italy as a journalist before coming to Ghana to participate in politics. She is currently campaigning and lobbying in parliament to stop the importation of genetically modified food, by raising awareness on the health implications of such products. Her professional experience as a journalist and politician has served as a platform to advocate these social issues both at the national and international level. Others, such as the communication director of the same party, CPP, also lived and worked in London prior to his return to Ghana.

The current mayor of Accra also serves as a good example to illustrate the political engagement of elite diasporans. He lived in the US for over 30 years where he worked as a teacher and then became a school principal. While in the US, he was also an active member of the Ghanaian community, both as a member of the Ga hometown association and also as a member of the NDC chapter in the US.⁵ The current vice presidential candidate of the main opposition party, the New Patriotic Party (NPP), Dr. Mahamudu Bawumia, is an economist and banker of international distinction and repute⁶ who also lived and worked in Canada and England before returning to take up the position of Deputy Governor of Bank of Ghana and then vice presidential candidate for the NPP. His experience as an international

economist was particularly put forward by his party, as an asset during the presidential elections in 2008 and 2012 depicting him as a competent professional capable of handling matters relating to the economy by virtue of his extensive international experience.

It is also worth noting that, although the Ghanaian constitution, as it stands, prohibits anyone with dual citizenship from taking up public office or engaging in frontline politics.⁷ Some of these expatriate Ghanaians participating in politics had to renounce their host country's citizenship prior to their return and involvement in political activities. Some of them also strategically refused to naturalise while they were abroad, as they had intentions of eventually coming home to participate in homeland politics or take up public office.

Some seasoned politicians in Ghana were academics who lived and worked abroad before returning home. An example is the current Executive Secretary at the Presidency, Dr Raymond Atuguba, who studied and lectured at Harvard University before his return to Ghana. Some former ministers during both the Rawlings and Kufuor administrations were also recruited from the university establishment. These include the former Minister of Finance, Dr. Kwesi Botchwey and former ECOWAS Secretary, Dr. Mohammed Ibn Chambas, who studied and worked in the US before returning to Ghana. Returnee diasporans who engage in politics in Ghana are usually the educated elites who were already politically active within Ghanaian communities in the diaspora before returning home.

The benefits of these returnees are considerable as they bring back not just skills and capital, but also transformed attitudes to established social hierarchies of status, age and gender, to work and to enterprise (Robinson:2004). They form an economic and political powerhouse in industries where they employ and train some pockets of the population. The African Development Bank's economic forecast for Ghana states that :

young professionals with families and desires for the latest technology and mod-cons. This emerging social class with a high purchasing power will, however, drive a niche in the market by the creation of a whole range of businesses to provide the services and products needed to support it – and so the cycle continues.⁸

Thus Ghana is now benefiting from the return of its diaspora. It is important to stress that this has not always been the case. Politically, some exiled Ghanaians who left during the Rawlings era could not return during the military rule and the early stages of constitutional rule because they still feared for their lives (Nugent 1995:35). Economically, the job market was not conducive for a lot of them to return, as the country was going through economic reforms

such as the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), which meant job cuts within the public sector, and devaluation of the cedis⁹ made it difficult for some members of the diaspora to return home. Those who were brave to return home at that time often ran into entrenched social attitudes and bureaucratic bottlenecks, and other factors that were not conducive for business. Returnees who stayed in Ghana and succeeded provided ample anecdotal evidence of their frustrations, including the so-called PHD (pull him/her down) syndrome, which ensures that habits and disciplines acquired abroad are not easily practiced, let alone transferred to others (Boadu 2002 ; Robinson 2004). Returned diasporans also complained about not getting the opportunity to transfer their acquired experience in the right way, due to stringent bureaucracy and being sidelined by some local colleagues who were afraid of losing their positions to returnee colleagues. This was expressed in an interview with a returnee diasporan doctor who stated:

when I first came home my intention was to start working at the main hospital in Accra, but I quickly realised that some of my colleagues thought I was being treated differently by the hospital, because I had returned from abroad, as a result of which I was quickly promoted to head my unit at the hospital and not because I was competent. Colleagues started making comments that, people like me should not be promoted so quickly and that we should go through the system and the ranks before being promoted. What they failed to understand was that, I had over 15 years of experience practicing as a doctor abroad and I held the position of a senior doctor before my return. This incident prompted me to leave the hospital and open my own practice, because I just could not bear it any more.¹⁰

Some diasporans engaged in politics on the other hand, were also cautioned by members of their parties to tread carefully by not being too forceful with their “Western” style of communication, by which they meant (being too assertive), as that could affect their parties’ campaign. Instead, they were advised to focus on the old fashioned method of campaigning through the radio and at political rallies rather than using the internet, for example, as a means of reaching out to the electorate.¹¹

The professional trajectories of the Mayor of Accra, the NPP vice presidential candidate, the CPP Chairperson and Communication Director, as well as the doctor are all classic examples of individuals who can be classified as being “global middle class”, looking at it from the Ghanaian perspective, but who, in their host countries, will not necessarily be considered as upper middle class. According to Bourdieu (1994), one can be considered as middle class through education, through economic means, and through traditional standard and social hierarchy. Bourdieu’s social classification can be applied to the middle class in Ghana. However,

not all returnee diasporans fit into these different categories of middle class in Ghana and those who tend to, mainly fall into the educated middle class category. For example respondent S a university graduate deported from London, upon her return managed to open a small nursery school, with financial assistance from IOM's AVR project. She stated

although I am now financially okay, I do not see myself as middle class and I cannot afford the lifestyle of a middle class in Ghana, like having a nice car and living in some of the affluent areas of Accra.¹²

Another example was a second generation returnee, also a university graduate, who had a job in Accra, but was struggling to settle in and have the kind of lifestyle that Accra's middle classes members enjoy, i.e. having her own car, living in her own apartment, etc, she did not have the social and economic capital to guarantee her a lifestyle of an elite diasporan (fieldwork interview, 10 September 2012, in Accra). These examples are to highlight the fact that not all returnees with qualifications and experience become middle or upper middle class once they return home.

Social Representation and Lifestyle Criterion of the Ghanaian Middle Class in 2012

The established middle or global middle classes elites tend to live in gated communities and residential areas of Accra and its suburbs with smaller family set-up compared to the extended and traditional African family setting. According to Godwin Arku, Assistant Professor of Geography at the University of Western Ontario:

the rise of Ghana's gated communities since the early 2000s links much of the growth to the emergence of a well-paid professional class. Most of them are educated university graduates and some of them have been to school abroad, their overall lifestyle is different and they have access to technology, cars, and houses.¹³

In other words, living in a gated community is not only for the comfort and security, but also to establish and reinforce social networks and cultural capital.

According to respondent G who works with an international organisation in Accra and is also a resident of a gated community in Accra:

I send my children to private schools for them to gain a better education and also to give them a better chance in life, attending schools with other children whose parents are doctors, lawyers, architects, businessmen and also living in the same area, will in future help my children to have a network of friends who will inspire them to aim higher (Field interview: July 2012 in Accra).

So being middle class has an ideological and self representation notion to the term within the Ghanaian context. It must also be stressed that, not all the children of those living in these gated communities and residential areas end up having higher aspirations or succeeding in life as did their parents. Some have actually ended-up becoming delinquents who have not been able to live up to their parents higher expectations (Lentz 1994) .

Image 1: A middle class family that returned to Ghana from the UK.



Image 2: A gated community in Accra which typifies Middle Class residential areas in the country



Source: Field work: June 2012.

Brock Friesne of Starbow (a local airline company) emphasised the purchasing power and lifestyle of the middle class by observing the passenger profile of his airline:

Our typical customer has a decent house, sends his kids to a decent school and drives a car or can afford a taxi to the airport, while this may not be the same type of middle class as Canada or Switzerland, there are a lot of those kinds of people now in Ghana.¹⁴

This observation, however, indicates that to be considered middle class in Ghana one's educational, traditional and cultural status are not the only prerequisites. Financial status also plays a major part in belonging to this social category. A person's capacity to afford a certain lifestyle and comfort permits him to be part of this social class. To highlight the importance of the informal sector as contributing to the formation of middle classes in Ghana, Kofi Bentil notes that:

When you fly domestically now, you see all sorts of passengers you would never expect to. There are people who trade cattle, or sell clothes or hair from China. They fly because they have money, and it's safer and more comfortable than the road.¹⁵

The rapid growth of the Ghanaian economy between 2000-2012 was partly credited to the economic liberalisation programme of the then Kufuor's administration coupled with the discovery of oil in 2006 with commercial exploitation starting in 2010. These factors were some of the catalysts for the rapid surge of Accra's "nouveau riche" and middle classes elites.

Interviews with some of the respondents on their household income indicated that 10 per cent earned around \$10,000 per month, 13 per cent earned between \$5000 – \$10,000 per month, 14 per cent had a household income of \$500 – \$1000 per month, while 23 per cent earned \$3000 – \$5000 per month. 40 per cent of the respondents indicated that they had a household income of \$1000 – \$3000 per month. What this fieldwork findings illustrates is that most of the middle class or "global middle class" households in Accra are situated within the income bracket of \$1000 – \$3000 per month. Those earning a monthly income of \$5,000 – \$10,000 per month could be considered as belonging to the upper middle class, a global middle class or a class of very rich people in the Ghanaian context.

Political Mobilisation and the Link to Middle Class as Vanguard of Political Stability in Ghana

According to Svanikier, the political stability in Ghana is said to be a result of highly educated elites and upper middle classes within the society, who

understand or have understood the need to maintain the status quo, through elites bargain (Svanikier 2007). DiJohn and Putzel define elites bargain as the *'distribution of rights and entitlements' across groups and classes in society, on which any state is based*. From this perspective, the strategies' put in place by the Ghanaian political elite to maintain power is no different from any other country (DiJohn and Putzel 2009). The returnee elite diaspora negotiate their place among the ruling elites by occupying strategic posts as policy advisers and consultants in various capacities, as indicated earlier. Ghanaian expatriates from the diaspora are often called upon by government and political party leaders to return and help the development of the country. Some become strategic advisers to party leaders on economic development, environmental issues, international legal matters and also use of mass media and information technology.

This was highlighted during the presidential inauguration speech of President Kufuor in January 2001 when he made a special plea to the diaspora to come home and help the development of the country:

I must also acknowledge the contributions made by our compatriots who live outside the country. Currently, you contribute a third of the capital inflow into the country. Many of you do more than send money home, many of you have kept up keen interest in the affairs at home and some of you have even been part of the struggle of the past twenty years. I salute your efforts and your hard work and I extend a warm invitation to you to come home and let us rebuild our country ... Those of our compatriots who have made homes beyond our shores, I make a special plea for your help; we need your newly acquired skills and contacts, we need your perspective and we need your capital. Those who have left and stayed out, only because of the military revolution or political differences, I say come back, come back home where you belong and let us join in building a new Ghana. (Kufuor 2001).¹⁶

As part of the government's efforts tapping into the economic and human resources that the diaspora could contribute to the development of the country, a special Home Coming Summit for Ghanaians abroad was organized in July 2001 as a platform for the government to engage and recruit qualified diasporan Ghanaians.

A similar observation was also made by President Mahama while on an official visit to Belgium, where he called on the Ghanaian community members, who had expertise to come home and invest, rather than playing second fiddle to other nationals outside Ghana. He further invited

Ghanaians with the skills and resources to come home to contribute their quota by taking advantage of the Local Content Bill, as well as invest to improve the economic and social situation in the country. He called on

Ghanaians to bury their political differences and work towards the common goal of re-building the country.¹⁷

The earnest desire by different Ghanaian governments to engage the Ghanaian diaspora in the development of the country saw the initiation of IOM's Diaspora Engagement Project, which was launched in 2012 with the assistance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Through this initiative a Diaspora Support Unit was set up to foster strong ties and facilitate the return of Ghanaians abroad in order to help national development.

The political stability that Ghana has witnessed in recent times, can however be explained by the strong presence of civil society organisations and other institutions such as the Law Society, the Ghana Chamber of Commerce and the associations of Ghanaian businesses, trade unions, political parties and National House of Chiefs. The press (particularly the radio) also played an important role in advocating for peace during the last three elections. Some of the private radio stations belong to returnee Ghanaians from the diaspora, most of whom gained their experience in media and broadcasting industry practices abroad and now use these experiences to influence politics in Ghana. Members of all the above professions, all belong to the higher echelons of the Ghanaian society – the educated middle class, and the diasporans.

Another area in which Ghanaian diasporans have made their mark is through their involvement in the activities of the electoral commission which has established itself as an independent and respectable institutional body through its pivotal role in mediating political disputes. Some returnee diasporans occupy the positions of policy advisers at the Electoral Commission, as well as within their respective parties, as earlier, with the examples of the current mayor of Accra, the current vice presidential candidate of NPP and chairperson of the CPP. All these indicate the strategic role that these returnee diasporans exercise within the political sphere in Ghana.

The NPP has historically been the party with the strongest links and ties with the diasporans, as most of its support base during the years of opposition in the 1990s came from the diaspora, hence during President Kufuor's 2001 inaugural speech, he paid a special tribute to the diasporan community for supporting the Party during their years in opposition.¹⁸ As a result of the strong ties between the NPP and the diaspora, most of the ministers and advisers at the presidency during their administration between 2001-2008 were mostly returnee diasporans. It was however, during the NPP reign that some acts and amendments were passed in parliament in relation to Ghanaians abroad. This can be illustrated briefly by the Representation of the Peoples Amendment Act (ROPA), which was passed in parliament in 2006 to allow Ghanaians in the diaspora to vote during the presidential and

parliamentary elections. The Dual Citizenship Act was passed in parliament in 2002 by the NPP government to permit Ghanaian nationals to hold dual citizenship.¹⁹ Thus the NDC and CPP in recent years have cultivated a support base among the diasporan community, as exemplified by the current mayor of Accra and Samia Nkrumah, the chairperson of CPP.

The Death of President Atta Mills as a Test of Ghana's Political Stability

The first test of Ghana's political stability occurred in July 2012 with the untimely death of the sitting president, John Atta Mills. His death came as a big shock. He was the first president to die in office in Ghana's history. He was also the first president to die before finishing his first mandate as president with only five months to the presidential elections in 2012. This unprecedented event could have been a recipe for political unrest such as a *coup d'état* or even a constitutional crisis. However, to the amazement of all, the sudden death of the president rather brought the country together as : all the parties contesting the 2012 elections, the business community, professional associations, local rulers and chiefs, all came together to advocate for peace. The president died on 24 July 2012 at 2pm, the vice president was sworn in at 8pm the same day and everything went smoothly as stipulated in the constitution without recourse to violence or illegalities. This sad event ended up cementing and consolidating the maturity of Ghana's democracy and the will of its elites to respect the constitution

Presidential Election in 2012: Biggest Challenge to Ghana's Political Stability

The 2012 elections in Ghana is perhaps the biggest challenge yet to Ghana's political stability because of the political climate in the country prior to the elections. According to Alex Vines of Chatham House,²⁰ in his comments before the elections:

These elections are important not just to Ghana, but for the growing number of states and actors seeking to benefit from increasing confidence in Africa.

This statement, underscored the importance of ensuring that political stability prevailed in Ghana, not just for Ghana, but to send a signal to other African countries that democracy in Africa can be achieved without rancor and acrimonious upheavals. Another reason why the elections were very hotly contested was because the politicians knew what was at stake. As noted by Prof. Gyimah Boadi of CDD Ghana a local think tank:

They know what comes with power, if you capture the presidency, you control all the machinery of the state and unlike the past, we now have oil. The state coffers will be brimming.²¹

In 2012, Damina Frontier Markets, an independent market research company predicted an outright win of 53 per cent for the opposition in the first round of the 2012 elections. If this had happened, it would have been the biggest upset in Ghanaian politics since 1992, where the ruling party does not win an election to serve a second term mandate. On 10 December 2012, the electoral commission announced that the ruling party NDC had won the elections by 50.7 per cent, the main opposition scored 47.7 per cent and the remaining 1.56 per cent went to the other parties.²²

The main opposition party the NPP decided to contest the election results, citing electoral fraud and this time round decided to use the Supreme Court as a means of challenging the election results unlike the verdict of the 2008 elections. Using the court was to help douse the tension within the opposition party and its supporters. This act was symbolic, in that it was the first time an election result was going to be contested at the Supreme Court. This action was also to set precedence for any subsequent electoral dispute to be contested in the courts. Using the Supreme Court to challenge the election results was also an opportunity to test the independence of the judiciary in Ghana.²³ This time around, both parties tapped into the human resource capitals of their elites, particularly their legal advisers who were predominately returnee diasporans, representing them in court during the 2012 election debacle. Of the five Supreme Court judges presiding over the election petition, three were returnee Ghanaians from the diaspora.²⁴

On 29 August 2013, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the ruling president, John Mahama as being the legitimate winner of the December 2012 polls, after eight months of court hearing. The court ruling came as a unifying factor for both parties and for the country. The economic, educated, cultural, traditional and global middle classes, as noted earlier played their role as the vanguard of the political stability in Ghana by again advocating for peace during and before the announcement of the Supreme Court verdict. The lawyers representing both political parties at the Supreme Court during the political saga were mostly returnee diasporan legal practitioners.

Conclusion

According to an Afrobarometer survey in 2008, 80 per cent of Ghanaians indicated that they were happy with the political system, whereas 55 per cent considered that they lived in a total democracy.²⁵ This situation is due to the important presence of civil society organisations, who have since designated themselves as “the watchdog” of Ghana’s political stability as stated by Kojo

Asante of Ghana Centre for Democratic Development.²⁶ Most of those running these civil societies are returnee diasporans who have studied, worked, and lived abroad.

This article has argued and demonstrated that Ghana's political stability so far, has been made possible, to a large extent, by the contributions of the elites (i.e. middle, upper and global middle classes) most of whom were members of the Ghanaian diaspora prior to returning to Ghana with their acquired knowledge and professional experience in the academia, law, medical and business fields. These elites have helped in shaping Ghana's democracy since independence and particularly in the last twenty years. Their understanding and willingness to play by the rules of the "democratic game" through actively participating in politics, organising election every four years, alternating power from one party to the other, respecting the rule of law and upholding the constitution, have contributed to democratic stability in Ghana. This willingness on the part of these elites has enabled the country to overcome recent political challenges.

From the foregoing, we can postulate that the current stability in the polity will only be threatened if the gentlemen's agreement that has been signed among the competing elites within both parties and the masses, which has long been essential in maintaining the political stability, becomes less horizontal and more vertical. Political stability depends on the capacity of the elites to foster political and economic development, that will enhance the daily lives of the people particularly the lower middle classes and the poor. If unemployment rates among the youth and young professionals continue to rise and is not addressed adequately, then, this could lead to an alliance of the lower middle classes and the poor to violently contest for political power and the danger for instrumentalisation of these groups by populist leaders who are attracted by the current oil find could create great political instability.

The other major challenge that could face the country in the coming years will be the need for the upper middle classes and elites to ensure that there is equal redistribution of the rents from the natural resources by directly involving the emerging young professionals and business men and women within the informal market.

Notes

1. Constitutional Review Committee Report 2011, presentation by Dr. Raymond Atuguba at the Colloquium of the Diaspora Engagement Project, Accra 22-24 August 2012.

2. http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGEP2007/Resources/GEP_07_Overview.pdf
3. Kofi Bentile is vice president and strategic manager at IMANI Ghana. a think tank, educating society on the benefits of a free economy and policy issues concerning business, government and civil society. A field work was conducted between February 2012 to May 2013 to ascertain what constitutes Ghana's middle class and their link to political stability in Ghana. My sample consisted of 52 respondents in Accra who were interviewed using a semi-structured method which allowed me to analyse my field work findings using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.
4. Field work results Ghana middle class study, February 2012- May 2013 Accra
5. Accra Metropolitan Assembly profile of mayor, Hon Alfred Oko Vanderpuije : <http://www.ama.gov.gh/ama/page/5034/mce>
6. NPP, profile of running mate Dr. Mahamudu Bawumia: <http://newpatrioticparty.org/index.php/members/userprofile/nppnpp19>
7. The Constitution of Ghana, <http://www.politicsresources.net/docs/ghanaconst.pdf>
8. Africa's rising star : <http://dasibatamale.wordpress.com/tag/ghanas-middle-class/>
9. <http://www.rrojasdatabank.info/ghana1.htm>
10. Interview with respondent T Accra 10th September 2012
11. Fieldwork 15th June 2012 Accra
12. Fieldwork 6th June 2012 Accra with a respondent
13. <http://af.reuters.com/article/ghanaNews/idAFL5E7MI20R20111129?pageNumber=3&virtualBrandChannel=014> Fieldwork, Middle class in Africa project, the Ghanaian case study June 2012
15. Ghana's modest Middle takes the skies, <http://www.ft.com> 28 December 2012
16. Kufuor, J.A. 2001. Inaugural Speech, 2001 www.AllAfrica.com
17. President Mahama meets Ghanaian Community Leaders in Belgium 3rd April 2013 in Brussels, www.ghanaembassy.be/news-events/embassy-news-events.html
18. Ghana: Inaugural Speech by Ghana President Kufuor: <http://allafrica.com/stories/200101070055.html>
19. Dual Citizenship Act: http://www.ghanaimmigration.org/dual_residence.htm
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21. The telegraph, Article 7 December 2012, Ghana's democracy put to the test high stakes elections, consulted 7th December 2012 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news>
22. Ghana elections: www.ghanaweb.com
23. Africa Confidential, Ghana, after a unifying funeral, a divisive election, 24 August 2012, Vol. 53. No 17, www.africaconfidential.com
24. The Republic of Ghana Judiciary: <http://www.judicial.gov.gh/>
25. Afrobarometer Ghana survey: <http://www.afrobarometer.org>
26. Field work interview with Kojo Punpuni Asante 15th August 2012

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