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Elections in West Africa:

Prospects ahead of Ghana's December 7 Presidential Election

By: Paul Osei-Kuffour

Introduction

As December 7 approaches, Ghanaians are gearing up to elect a new president. This will be the ninth (9th) round of national elections since 1992, when the country returned to multi-party democracy under the Fourth Republic. Despite the high level of interest expressed by twenty-seven (27) political parties and independent candidates who registered their intent with the electoral management body, the Electoral Commission (EC) validated and cleared thirteen ([13 aspirants](#)) to contest the presidential election. The final ballot list includes nine (9) political parties and four independent candidates.

Voting will take place at 38,622 voting stations in a total of 33,367 polling stations. There are approximately 18 million registered voters expected to participate in the election, according to the EC. So far, the EC has completed the limited voter registration exercise, vote transfer, the provisional voter register exhibition, candidate nomination, and the filing process. As the election draws closer and the curtains draw on the second term of President Akufo Addo, this paper explores the electoral landscape in Ghana, drawing on insights from the sub-region, key issues engaging the attention of stakeholders, political parties, and citizens ahead of the election, and possible outcomes of the presidential election.

Elections are a necessary component of democracy, as they confer legitimacy and authority onto elected representatives and leaders. Beyond providing citizens with a platform to demand accountability, elections also enable them to engage politicians and political parties on their policy options and alternatives and measure them against their goals and expectations. Recent African elections, however, have offered highly worrying moments for the continent, as incumbents and conspirators use it as a medium to consolidate and expand their hold on state power. As an election observer with the [West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network](#) our reports have raised many concerns about the quality of elections in West Africa. In Nigeria, the Independent National Election Commission (INEC) introduced the Results Viewing (IReV) portal to promote transparency and inclusion in the collation of results. Unfortunately, on election day, it malfunctioned few hours after voting had ended. Also, in Sierra Leone, the 2023 presidential election result was disputed by the opposition and some civil society coalitions. The demand for the release of disaggregated results from polling stations were denied by the Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone (ECSL). Indeed, the [2024 Global State of Democracy Report on "Strengthening the Legitimacy of Elections in a Time of Radical Uncertainty"](#) recognizes these critical concerns. The report notes that disputes about the credibility of elections mainly center on voting irregularities and vote counting.

Elsewhere on the continent, in countries such as Tunisia and Tanzania, leading members of the opposition parties are facing harassment, intimidation, abduction and killing as they get close to organizing their presidential elections. As Ghana goes to the polls in December, what is at stake for the country and the future of elections and democracy in West Africa?



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Heightened Tension and Warning Signs

Generally, elections in Ghana have been primarily described by [local and international observers](#) as free and fair. However, like all previous eight (8) elections, the December polls will be taking place in a highly polarized environment, with the electoral landscape primarily dominated by the two major political parties: The New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC). As has become the norm under the Fourth Republic, the two parties have left little to no space for any other party or independent candidate to improve their electoral fortunes in the contest. Over the years, the EC has introduced key reforms to improve the credibility of elections and thus reduce tensions, such as the biometric voter register and voter verification. However, other factors, such as the prevalent practice of “winner takes all politics” continues to thrive, heightening the tensions in local and national politics. Political patronage and an unwritten but implicit settlement on an eight-year alternation of power between the two major parties have exacerbated the issue and further entrenched their duopoly. The 2024 election presents a unique challenge to this implicit arrangement, further driving up the stakes. The NPP’s determination to break the two-term power alternation convention with the opposition NDC in a bid to stay in government for a third term is a key driver of tension in this election. On the other hand, the NDC is bent on maintaining the status quo and has poised itself to wrestle power from the NPP after eight (8) years in opposition. Additionally, the NDC’s desire for power and change finds convergence in the wish of their flagbearer, who sees this moment as his final attempt to reclaim power and complete a second term after serving only four years in power.

Although attacks on the Electoral Commission (EC) are common during election cycles, their heightened intensity this time around threatens the EC’s legitimacy, credibility and integrity. Ahead of the 2024 election, the EC has been criticized for the cost of the biometric software and services procured, the [stolen laptops and biometric verification device](#) from its custody, and the decision to limit the voter registration to only holders of the Ghana Card, a directive which was subsequently reviewed to include the guarantor system. Other concerns include the restriction of the limited voter registration to the EC district offices and hard to reach locations as opposed to the polling stations. Finally, the EC’s rejection of the NDC’s petition for [an independent forensic audit of the provisional voter register](#) has generated huge debate among political parties and stakeholders.

Another troubling issue ahead of the election is the looming threat by the NDC to reject the peace pact. The opposition’s decision is informed by what it claims to be a lack of action by the state against perpetrators of the 2020 Ayawaso by-election and the denial of justice for victims of that violence. The disaffection by the NDC with the government’s white paper from the Commission of Inquiry has not helped matters in this regard. The party has also strongly indicated further its decision [not to resort to the court](#) should they have reservations about the final presidential election results declared by the Electoral Commission.

Campaigns



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The NPP and NDC have officially launched their campaigns and manifestos. Both parties have targeted various demographic groups with specific policies. Young voters and women remain an integral component of the campaign by the two political parties, promising to provide them with jobs through digital literacy, skills training, and funds for start-ups and the informal sector. The two parties have a lot of similarities in terms of their messages with the economy and job creation being central to their campaign. The NPP promises bold solutions to the economic challenges, while the NDC is determined to reset the economy and ensure fiscal discipline. In some regard, a fundamental difference between the two sets of promises is the NPP's priority for digitalization and a formal economy and the NDC's 24-hour economy. Perhaps, the outcome of the election will determine which policy won the hearts of voters.

Potential Outcomes

Several polls have been conducted to predict the election outcome. The [Global Info Analytics National Opinion Poll](#) conducted in July 2024 projected the NDC (51.1%) ahead of the NPP (38.2%). Another [poll released in June by a political scientist and election pollster](#) had exciting findings. Whereas the survey found the NDC leading in popularity (with 38.8%) as the political party electorates are likely to support in the coming election, Dr. Mahamudu Bawumia (NPP) leads as the preferred Presidential Candidate with 38.9%, closely followed by John Dramani Mahama (NDC) with 36.1%. The poll also recorded a very high number of undecided voters (24.1%) who may abstain if they remain undecided on the election day. The expectation is that the undecided voters could vote for any of the smaller political parties or independent candidates increasing the probability of a runoff.

But what are some of the deciding factors for the 2024 election?

The NPP and the NDC have their traditional strongholds. Since 2000, both parties have secured at least 44% of the valid votes cast in every election, confirming that Ghana operates as a two-party state. The two major political parties have each had 16 years in government since 1992, when Ghana returned to multi-party democracy with power alternating every eight years, as in the 2000, 2008, and 2016 elections. Hence, if this trend prevails as the NPP concludes its eight-year stay in office, the odds could be in favor of the NDC.

Interestingly, the two leading presidential aspirants both hail from the northern part of the country. This has improved the NPP's performance in the northern regions despite being a stronghold of the NDC. The NDC's dominance in the North will be tested and will be crucial in determining the outcome of the election.

Nevertheless, the June polls also noted some of the deciding factors for the 2024 elections as the candidate's competency (50.3%), track record (22.5%), and party affiliation (19.2%). As the economy and job creation remain a major determinant for the election, the big test would be whether voters will trust the NPP to resolve the economic challenges or defer to the NDC for solutions.



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Conclusion

Unlike other democracies, where the civic space is restricted and the opposition political parties are confronted by severe attacks and intimidation, Ghana's electoral environment has been progressive despite the existing challenges. There are red flags ahead of the election which unresolved could affect the integrity of the polls. In the case of the complaints about the provisional voter register, the EC's determination to dialogue with the NDC, and all other stakeholders to address their concerns before the release of the Final Voter Register is reassuring. A credible register is key in determining the integrity of the election.

The election is taking place in a very jittery political environment heightened by the NDC's refusal to sign the peace pact and boycott the court in resolving any grievances that may arise during the election. The administrative process though commendable has limitations and may require the court's intervention if the parties remain unsatisfied. Whereas the signing of the peace pact is symbolic and not legally binding, it would help to build trust and reduce the tension and the threat of electoral violence. Indeed, the signing of the Farmington Declaration on election peace in Liberia improved the political climate. As a beacon of democracy, Ghana should not be an outlier but instead accord fidelity to the convention, which is gradually becoming a regional norm. ECOWAS and other supranational institutions must intervene to resolve these matters.

The EC's role in ensuring transparency in all its processes, most importantly in the results collation and declaration process, is critical. The institution also needs to be open in addressing complaints and grievances before declaring the final presidential election results. With barely eight weeks into the election, the outcome of the elections hangs in the balance despite pre-election polls tipping the opposition party in the lead. The possibility of a run-off, like in the 2000 and 2008 elections, where the incumbent had served two terms, cannot be ruled out.

Certainly, the outcome of the 2024 election will be essential in testing the maturity and resilience of democracy in Ghana and West Africa. Within the democratic discourse in Africa and politics in West Africa, Ghana is considered a stable democracy and plays a crucial leadership role in promoting peace and security in the region. Currently, it hosts the secretariat of the Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA), which aims to deepen economic integration and trade in Africa. Ghana is also an influential and respected member of West Africa's economic community (ECOWAS), which is experiencing a surge in democratic backsliding. After eight (8) successful elections and thirty (32) years of uninterrupted democracy, the region remains hopeful of a peaceful, free, and fair election in Ghana.



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