

ENSURING THE INTEGRITY OF GHANA'S ELECTIONS: A COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

1.0 Introduction:

Ariel Durant, an American historian, and her husband, Will Durant, in their monumental book, *The Story of Civilization* (1935–1975), made a profound observation:

"A great civilization is never destroyed from without until it has destroyed itself within." This cautionary statement reminds us that the greatest threats to a civilization often arise from within, rather than from external forces. One such internal threat is electoral violence, particularly in emerging democracies like Ghana.

2.0 The Role of Elections in a Democratic Dispensation:

Elections are the cornerstone of representative democracy. They serve as the primary mechanism for ensuring that governments are responsive and accountable to the citizens. In any democratic society, elections:

3.0 The Significance of the 2024 Elections in Ghana:

Ghana's general elections on 7th December 2024 will be pivotal in determining the country's political direction. This will be the ninth consecutive general election since the 1992 constitutional transition. As former U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, aptly observed, "A free, fair, and peaceful presidential election does not guarantee a successful democracy, but it is one of the most important measuring sticks for progress in any developing nation" (October 2015). When citizens believe their votes count and elections are free, fair, and credible, the foundation for good governance is laid. This is essential for ensuring that elected officials act responsibly and in response to the aspirations of the electorate.

4.0 The Role of Elections in Ghana's Democracy:

Beyond simply renewing or dismissing elected officials, elections in Ghana perform several other important functions:

- 1) **Mandate Renewal:** They give politicians a chance to renew their mandate to govern.
- 2) **Linking the Political Class and the Masses:** Elections serve as a crucial bridge between the people and their political leaders.
- 3) **Ensuring Rule of Law:** They ensure the adherence to the rule of law and the proper functioning of democratic institutions.
- 4) **Legitimizing Governance:** Elections provide the legitimacy needed for governments to function effectively, which underpins peace, stability, and economic prosperity.
- 5) **Expression of Sovereignty:** Elections are an expression of the will of the people and allow citizens to hold leaders accountable.
- 6) **Platform for Assessment:** Elections allow voters to evaluate the performance of the incumbent government and set expectations for the future.

- 7) **Exercising Core Rights:** Elections are an expression of fundamental democratic rights such as freedom of speech, association, and choice.
- 8) **Political Participation:** They allow citizens to engage directly in the political process.

5.0 On the Flip Side of Elections:

While elections are essential, they can also have a dark side, particularly in emerging democracies:

- 1) **Potential for Violence:** Elections in emerging democracies or post-conflict societies can reignite violent conflict, undermine stability, and discredit democratization efforts when the electoral process is mishandled.
- 2) **Ignorance of Electoral Processes:** A lack of understanding about electoral procedures can lead to corrupt practices, disputes, and, in some cases, violence.
- 3) **Indiscipline and Misuse of Freedoms:** The expansion of democratic freedoms can sometimes lead to lawlessness and violent confrontations, particularly when political groups or individuals act with impunity.

6.0 Benchmarks for Free, Fair, Transparent, and Peaceful Elections:

To ensure elections are free, fair, and peaceful, the following benchmarks should be met:

- ❖ **Voter Registration:** All eligible citizens must have the opportunity to register.
- ❖ **Candidate Participation:** Candidates must be able to present themselves for election without undue restrictions.
- ❖ **Accessibility:** Voters should have unhindered access to polling stations.
- ❖ **Election Materials:** Essential materials such as ballots and voter registers must be available and properly managed.
- ❖ **Security:** Adequate security must be provided at polling stations to prevent violence or intimidation.
- ❖ **Poll Monitoring:** Presence of independent polling agents, monitors, and observers to ensure transparency.
- ❖ **Timely and Orderly Polling:** Voting must begin and proceed on time, and the conduct at polling stations must be orderly.
- ❖ **Ballot Counting:** Ballots must be counted and recorded accurately as prescribed by law.
- ❖ **Response to Challenges:** There must be an effective and timely mechanism for addressing complaints, challenges, and disputes about the election process or results.

- ❖ Freedom of Campaigning: Political parties should be free to campaign without harassment or interference.

7.0 Election-Related Violence in Ghana:

Although Ghana's elections have generally been recognized as free and fair, every election since 1992 has experienced some level of violence. These incidents, which have included the loss of lives, the burning of properties, and destruction of election materials, pose a threat to the integrity of Ghana's electoral system. Notable instances of violence occurred in areas like Pru District, Tamale, Akwatia, Atiwa, and more recently, Ayawoso West Wuogon. Such violence undermines the democratic process and raises concerns about the potential for more widespread unrest in future elections.

8.0 The Importance of Violence-Free Elections in 2024:

The importance of ensuring peaceful elections in 2024 cannot be overstated, as peace is the foundation for national development:

- ✚ Peace is a divine mandate and essential for prosperity and stability (Jeremiah 29:7).
- ✚ Peace secures the future and destinies of generations.
- ✚ Peace promotes unity and cohesion among citizens.

Conversely, electoral violence results in destruction of lives, property, and futures. The consequences of electoral violence are long-lasting, particularly for the youth and future generations, who may face an uncertain future and loss of opportunities. In short, while peace builds and restores, violence destroys in ways that cannot be undone.

9.0 Key Building Blocks for Peaceful Elections in 2024:

Several stakeholders must collaborate to ensure a peaceful electoral process in Ghana:

➤ Politicians and Political Parties:

Elections are not a "make-or-break moment". A win is an endorsement of your policies, and a loss is an opportunity to improve proposed policies. Political discourse should be focused on ideas and policies, not character assassination or incitement to violence. Campaigns must be based on credibility, integrity, and the well-being of the citizens.

➤ Electoral Commission (EC):

The EC must be adequately resourced and function independently to ensure credible elections. Transparency in decision-making and continuous engagement with stakeholders are essential for maintaining trust.

➤ The Media:

The media plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and maintaining peace.

Media houses must ensure that their platforms promote peace, not division. Hate speech, inflammatory rhetoric, disinformation and misinformation should be avoided.

➤ **Security Agencies:**

Security forces must remain impartial and act decisively against those who break the law or incite violence. A robust and visible security presence is necessary to maintain law and order, especially in volatile areas.

➤ **Civil Society Organizations:**

Civil society plays a vital role in educating the public, promoting peace, and holding all stakeholders accountable. Their work should be constructive, non-partisan, and focused on the long-term stability and development of the nation.

➤ **National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE):**

The NCCE must continue its vital work in educating citizens about their rights and responsibilities, promoting dialogue, and fostering a culture of tolerance and constitutionalism.

➤ **The Citizenry:**

All Ghanaians, especially the registered voters must be more discerning and well alert to scrutinize the messages from the various candidates in order to make informed and right decisions when exercising their franchise on the day of the elections.

There should be no room for vote selling and vote buying between candidates and voters. We must be bold enough to condemn and reject any political party or candidate who may attempt to sow the seed of despondent, political acrimony, ethnocentrism, religious bigotry, hate speech, immoral or intemperate language among others which may be recipe for violent conflict and political instability.

10.0 Conclusion:

As Ghana approaches the 2024 elections, it is essential for all Ghanaians to recognize the collective responsibility we bear in safeguarding the peace and integrity of the electoral process. Political competition is inevitable, but it should never come at the cost of national unity or stability. Whether as winners or losers, the overarching goal is to ensure that the nation remains intact, united, and peaceful.

The COVID-19 pandemic reminded us that our national well-being depends on our collective efforts, and that in times of global crises, a strong, stable nation is one that stands united. Let us all, as citizens of Ghana, commit to ensuring that the 2024 elections are free, fair, transparent, and peaceful. Our future, the future of our children, and the stability of our nation depend on it.

May God bless our homeland Ghana and make her great and strong!

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