

**TOWARDS ACHIEVING PEACEFUL ELECTIONS WITH CREDIBLE
OUTCOME: DID THE 2020 GENERAL ELECTIONS MEET THE MARK ?**

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1. Introduction

Over the years, Ghana has been applauded globally for her track record of conducting peaceful elections with credible outcomes. The Fourth Republic, which began in 1992 and is marked with the return of constitutional rule, has seen the conduction of seven successive presidential and parliamentary elections, without any major hiccup. Ghana, on 7th December 2020, undertook its 8th successive presidential and parliamentary elections under its fourth constitutional republic, with the goal of electing a new crop of leaders for the next tenure of governance and administration (i.e. 2021 – 2024).

However, the electoral processes were characterized by several allegations and accusations from the political parties especially the National Democratic Congress (NDC). Consistently, the major opposition party, NDC has alleged the connivance of the Electoral Commission (EC) with the ruling New Patriotic Party (NPP) with the aim of rigging the elections in the favor of the NPP, a claim which both the EC and the NPP have denied vehemently. The pre-election period was marked with a series of protests, demonstrations, court actions, press conference mostly by the opposition NDC on the electoral processes. It must be put on record, however that previous elections have all seen their fair share of allegations of bias by the EC in favor of the ruling party.

Nonetheless, it should not be taken for granted that holding peaceful elections with credible outcomes that satisfy all parties involved is a very critical democratic principle. This feat can only be achieved when elections held are free, fair, transparent, void of any form of violence with credible results that augurs well with all parties involved. This brings to the fore the need to hold the various election stakeholders accountable for all electoral events. This is particularly important when these stakeholders make pledges and allegiance that give clear indications of their readiness to play their part very effectively and efficiently, in ensuring that the processes are smooth, peaceful, and a true reflection of the will of the people of the country.

Typically, the EC, Ghana Police Service and several other parties including presidential candidates of the various participating parties, pledged their unflinching support to a peaceful electoral process, prior to elections. It is in this vane that this paper seeks to examine the 2020 general elections against the litmus test of free, fair, transparent, peaceful, and credible elections.

2. Free

An election is considered free if all eligible voters, as part of their electoral right to exercise their franchise do so freely without any form of fear, intimidation, or restrictions in a secret ballot and with the provision of adequate security. Again, if the operations of the media and other accredited local and international observers are not curtailed in any unscrupulous form, it augments to the declaration of an election as free.

Generally, the 2020 presidential and parliamentary elections were largely free, as the electorate in several polling stations enjoyed the liberty of voting without any form of harassment or intimidation.

Both media and accredited elections observers (local and international) covered the elections without any restrictions or intimidations. There was also adequate security service provision through the police at various polling centers across the country, minimizing violence and fraudulent activities in the electoral process, and also ensure the safety of voters against the harassments of party thugs and hoodlums. However, the heavy deployment of the military in some constituency collation centers, as in the case of Techiman South during the collation process, resulting in the shooting and cold murder of innocent civilians is worth the mention since it does not account in any way for freeness in Ghana's elections.

3. Fair

A fair election is characterized by the offering of equal rights and opportunities to all registered political parties and persons to contest for the elections on a leveled playing ground, without any kind of favoritism for any of the candidates by the electoral Commission. Also, fairness demands that all electorate are given equal right to register and vote, as well as ensuring that every legal vote counts. Elections in Ghana are based on the principle of universal suffrage, which entitles every eligible voter (18 years and above) the right to cast his or her ballot during general elections. This principle, as evident in previous elections have seen strict adherence in the 2020 general elections. The EC facilitated the entire process of ensuring that every registered voter was able to cast his or her vote.

However, the decision of the EC to disenfranchise the people of Santrokofi, Akpafu, Likpe and Lolobi (SALL) from participating in the parliamentary elections in the 6th December press release does not indicate fairness in any possible way to the people of SALL. The situation raises more reason for concern especially taking into account the fact that the electoral commission, ahead of the polls (on 30th November 2020), assured the people that they will not be disenfranchised in any way. To add to that incident, there were some allegations leveled against the EC with regards to unequal treatment meted out to some of the candidates in the elections and their agents, by some constituency returning officers.

The issue of the request of recount by some party agents and candidates at the collation centers of some constituencies appears very pronounced amongst the several allegations leveled against the commission. While in some constituencies, the request for recount at the collation centers, although unlawful, was granted, yet in other constituencies, the law was upheld and candidates were denied recount at the constituency collation center, which is commendable. Moreover, the inability of the Commission to give a fair hearing to the complaints of the NDC before the declaration as reported, undermines the principle of fairness, with regards to elections.

4. Transparent

When an election is transparent, it implies that each stage of the electoral process is open to public scrutiny. It could be noted in the 2020 elections that, whilst the voting and the counting procedures were more transparent, the collation procedure was short of some level of transparency, as most observers could not properly ascertain and monitor the collation of results properly. This has been

corroborated by both local and international observers in their post-election reports, some of which are the EU Observer, CODEO and IDEG reports.

According to the EU Observer group, the lack of transparency in collation could be attributed to the lack of detailed procedure, inadequate facilities and overcrowding which prevented the clear viewing of the procedure by observers and party agents. The introduction of the regional collation centers during the 2020 general elections¹ did not help but made the situation worse as there was no clear indication of structures, personnel or even those that could be represented at the collation centers.

Another major loophole in the quest to attain transparency in the 2020 December polls is the unilateral decision by the EC to change the presidential results announced on 9th December, 2020 without the involvement of the political parties. While the Commission's claim was that only the total valid votes changed, a critical examination reveals that votes obtained by candidates as declared by the EC also changed slightly. For instance, the total votes obtained by the presidential candidate of the NPP increased by 174 votes, while that of the presidential candidate of the NDC decreased by 1707 votes. The Commission is still yet to give clear explanation as to what accounted for the change in figures after its press declaration on the 9th of December, 2020.

5. Peaceful

Over the years, Ghana has been commended for her peace-loving nature. The pre-election period saw a lot of messages that emphasized the need for peace before, during and after the elections. Several stakeholders, including the National Commission for Civic Education, Civil Society Organizations, Faith-based Organizations, and several eminent and well-meaning Ghanaians, sent out messages reiterating the need to go through the electoral period with a sense of peace and decorum. On 4th December 2020, the two main contenders in the general elections were made to sign a Peace Pact under the auspices of the Institute of Democratic Governance (IDEG), at the Movenpick Ambassadorial Hotel. The Pact was convened by the National Chief Imam, the National Peace Council and the National House of Chiefs and was aimed at curbing election violence and eradicating political vigilantism from elections. The Ghana Police Service also used the platform to pledge their support to peace within the period of the elections.

A general overview of the elections proved that it was largely peaceful, with consideration on the voting process. However, the process recorded some incidents of violence, creating a dent on the democracy of the country. Although in most parts of the country, the voting process was generally peaceful, the counting and collation processes were characterized by some unfortunate incidents of violence, particularly in constituencies like Ewutu Senya East, Ablekuma Central, Savelugu, Techiman South and Odododiodoo. As of 9th December 2020, the police report on the elections indicated that there were 21 incidents of electoral violence, 6 cases of gunshots leading to 19 injuries and 5 deaths. This

¹ Until the 2020 general elections, there were no regional collation centers. Results from the constituency centers were sent directly to the national strong room.

does not go down well for a country which organized peaceful elections four years ago without any incidents of gunshots or death.

6. Credible

A credible election is one that reflects the true will of the people. In a credible election, all parties are duly satisfied with results and are willing to accept it, however it turns out. The 2020 presidential and parliamentary elections are yet to satisfy this condition of credibility as there have been several contentions over the results being the true will of the people. The NDC has emphatically declared its unwillingness to accept the outcomes of the elections, with the claims that there were incidents of vote padding, over-voting, and the use of the military to reverse the electoral results. The NDC flag bearer has, in this regard, referred to the outcome of the election as flawed with fictitious results which do not reflect the true will of the people. The party and its sympathizers in an attempt to voice out their grievances have engaged in various protests and demonstrations across the country.

Consequently, the NDC has filed a petition at the Supreme Court requesting for a run-off for the 2020 elections. Again, the party is contesting results of parliamentary seats in some constituencies. The minority caucus in parliament has also petitioned the EC to collate or re-collate the results of the Techiman South constituency after it held a public declaration to claim the NPP had won the seat by a vote gap of 233 against the NDC. It is worth noting that, unlike the other constituencies, the collated results for the Techiman South parliamentary election have not been displayed on the commission's website.

Contrary to the public assertion that the NP is satisfied with the outcome of the elections, some statements made publicly by some of the party's leading members seem to suggest otherwise. Regardless of the satisfactory tone of the president in his victory speech which praised the outcome of the 2020 elections, leading members have given reasons to doubt this assertion. The party's General Secretary, Mr. John Boadu indicated that the party will contest the parliamentary results of 5 parliamentary seats in courts.

This statement has been corroborated by the deputy attorney general, Mr. Godfred Odame, who further names one of such seats to be contested as Savelugu in the Northern region of Ghana. Already the NPP's parliamentary candidate for Savelugu has filed a petition at the Tamale High Court challenging the validity of the results as declared by the EC. In addition to this, the campaign manager of the NPP, Mr. Peter Mac Manu has also alleged that there were incidents of vote padding in favor of the NDC presidential candidate. Clearly, this demonstrates that the two dominant parties in the general elections believe that the outcome of the elections as declared by the EC does not reflect the true will of the people.

The lack of credibility in the outcome of the 2020 presidential and parliamentary elections was exacerbated by the continuous changing of figures declared by the EC as final results of the elections. Subsequent to the 9th December press declaration of the presidential results by the EC, the commission has made at least five different changes to the declared results. With several statements

correcting the 9th December declaration, the EC has left many Ghanaians wondering which the true outcome of the elections is.

7. Conclusion

One of the major determinants of a maturing democracy is its ability to conduct peaceful, free, fair, transparent, and credible elections. With the incidents that have characterized the 2020 presidential and parliamentary elections, there is the need for Ghana to take a critical look at these key indicators, to uphold in high esteem its democratic principles as a guide towards future elections.