

Ghana's 2016 Election: Processes and Priorities of the Electoral Commission

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Ladies and Gentlemen, let me start by saying what a great honour it is for me to be able to address you all today at such a globally renowned institution as Chatham House. I am both grateful and proud that I have been given this opportunity to speak to you today about the important work we are doing in Ghana as the Commission responsible for managing public elections.

The title of my talk is *Ghana's 2016 Election: Processes and Priorities of the Electoral Commission*. However, I hope you will forgive me if I talk about the priorities first. And I also hope that you will forgive me if in order to understand those priorities, I start by giving you a quick lesson in Ghanaian political history.

As I am sure many of you know, Ghana returned to constitutional government and multiparty politics in 1992. Since then, we have had six successful elections and we are about to have our seventh, on December the 7th. All these elections have been vigorously contested, but more importantly, they have all also been free, fair and transparent. Particularly for an African country such as mine, which, in the quarter of a century before democracy, endured four coups and goodness knows how many other attempted coups. This is no mean feat.

So not only has Ghana managed to buck its own national trend since 1992, it has also defied the trends of regional politics. In the same period of time that we have held our six elections and consolidated our democracy in Ghana, our neighbours in Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), have suffered 14 coups, three civil wars, a dozen regional insurgencies and countless foreign interventions.

And that sort of instability of course breeds its own problems; lawlessness, terrorism, human trafficking, drugs and arms smuggling. We have witnessed countries almost brought to their knees by the activities of the unaccountable and the unelected, by religious radicals, by minority groups, all fighting for control, fighting for natural resources, fighting for money, fighting for power.

And I say that all entirely objectively. I am not here today to criticise any of Ghana's neighbours. My point is simply that in Ghana, we have come to realise that our democracy is precious. That we have responsibilities to ensure that it is protected and nurtured. In the last six elections, winners and losers have all understood the bigger picture – that even in a winner takes all race, the sum total of democracy for all is so much bigger than the individual prize of political victory. We all win or lose together, perhaps because we do not need to look too far to see the devastating consequences of when individual ambition or sectional interest input before the greater good.

So the priority of the Electoral Commission, my priority, and I hope the priority of all Ghanaians, is to see peaceful and undisputed elections on December 7.

But of course, that remains a challenge. Our political stakeholders are, it seems, masters of raising the political temperature every election year. Although of course, that is not simply a Ghanaian problem. You may have been distracted recently by another presidential election taking place in the world. If a US presidential candidate can raise the spectre of disputing the poll and creating some sort of legal challenge as a form of political insurance, he raises it not just in the American election psyche, but in the mind of the whole world.

We have a legacy to protect and a very real challenge to it this December. So how exactly are we going to ensure that this election is a triumph and not a disaster?

I believe that the Electoral Commission's previous successes were undoubtedly powered by its core staff with support of the tens of thousands of the temporary election officers. A significant majority of these core staff are still at post; and as part of our efforts to improve on the electoral outcome, we have further developed their capacity. Not only that, we have increased the educational qualification of the temporary officers we would be using for the elections. We have also improved the quality of their training to ensure they deliver better. And of course, they will have the same experienced team supervising this year's elections. Our Commission has been responsible for the successful conduct of the previous elections which have made Ghana earn a solid reputation as a stable and mature democracy and an example for the rest of the continent, if not the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen, more importantly, despite their depth of knowledge and their wide range of skills in managing elections, we are not allowing ourselves to become complacent. As a result, all of our staff has received more training this year, in fact, much more than in any other year.

That is not all. The Electoral Commission today is completely different from what it was even a year ago. We have done a great deal of reflection both as an institution and, following extensive consultations with our stakeholders, we have rolled out a series of internal reforms designed to evolve the Commission into an even more dynamic and efficient institution.

As part of those reforms, we have separated Human Resources from Administration. This is to enable the Human Resource directorate to focus more on the duties of personnel management, training and performance management. The new department for administration and regional coordination is now responsible for all administrative and logistical issues.

We have restructured the operations directorate to become Directorate of Electoral Services.

We have a new communications department, which is now more open, more responsive and more proactive in dealing with all publicity, public education and communications issues.

We have also worked very hard indeed to perfect our specific electoral systems. Following the 2012 election petition judgment, we constituted a reform committee to synthesize the reforms proposed by the Supreme Court for implementation. This committee, which was made up of representatives of all political parties and civil society groups recommended a list of 29 reforms to be implemented to make the 2016 elections more credible and uncontested. We have accepted and are implementing 27 of these reforms. We are confident that these reforms will further enhance the integrity and transparency of this year's polls.

For want of time, I will highlight just a few of the reforms we have already implemented and are implementing to enhance the integrity of the electoral process. These include:

- We have begun continuous voter registration in addition to periodic registrations;
- For the first time, we used Biometric Verification Devices for exhibition of the Provisional Voters Register;
- We have raised the minimum educational qualification requirements for various levels of election officials;
- Persons with disability and vulnerable persons such as pregnant women, nursing mothers and the aged, will be given priority at all polling stations on election day;
- We have made clear provisions regarding processes and procedures to be followed to adjourn polling in the event of a disruption caused by nature or human activity;

- Election officials and party agents will swear an oath before a magistrate or judicial officer instead of an officer of the Commission;
- We are working on multiple measures to reduce the incidence of rejected ballots;
- We have reduced the number of voters per polling station to cut down on queues on election day;
- We are appointing very knowledgeable persons as collation officers for each constituency as a safeguard against collation errors;
- We will publish the presidential election results for each polling station on our website;
- We are replacing the “Strong Room” with a more open, accessible and transparent National Results Collation Centre;
- And we have instituted a whole suite of specific legal measures to ensure the polls are as transparent as possible.

As you can see, this tall list of reforms is comprehensive enough, and all of them are aimed at making this year's elections more robust and indeed, shall set the benchmark for elections globally. But we all know that no human system can ever be 100 percent fool proof. That is why we have put measures in place to ensure that all human errors are significantly minimized, if not avoided completely.

This has started from the way in which we recruit temporary officers for electoral duties. This year, we are engaging over 145,000 officers on election day. For the first time, persons who were interested in working as polling officials were made to apply online, after which the candidates who met the requirements were shortlisted. Interviews have taken place across the country for the right candidates for the job. The backgrounds of those selected are being thoroughly vetted to ensure we got credible officers to conduct the elections.

Ladies and Gentlemen, our electoral system in Ghana is stronger and more transparent than most electoral systems globally. And here is why - we have a voters' register which is fully biometric. The printing of our ballot paper is monitored and supervised by all political parties. The movement of electoral materials is monitored by all political parties. On election day, our ballot box is fully transparent, a voter who arrives at the polling station has to first get his or her identity confirmed on the register, gets verified by the biometric verification device, the ballot paper given to the voter is validated by a stamp, the voter gets his or her fingers marked by an indelible ink, and his or her biometric barcode immediately deactivated, making it impossible for him or her to vote more than once. This process is closely observed by political party agents, candidate's agents, observers, journalists and members of the public.

At the end of the polls, the sorting of the ballot is done in the full glare of the public; counting is done in public; the declaration is done in public; the recording of the results declared is done in public; transporting the declared polling station results and ballot papers to the constituency collation centre is also monitored by the representatives of the political parties and security personnel. At the Constituency Collation Centre, before the collation begins, the agents of the various parties from the polling station first confirm that the results being collated are exactly the same results declared at the polling station. The collation is done in front of candidates, their agents, journalists, observers, and members of the public. At the end of the collation, the constituency results are declared in the presence of all.

At the National Results Collation Centre, the representatives of the parties first confirm the figures with their agents at the constituency before the Commission proceeds to put the figures together. After the collation, the party representatives again confirm that the figures are accurate for all the 275 constituencies before the final declaration is made. This year, we are adding another level of integrity to the process. We are publishing the presidential results at the polling station level, while using technology to electronically transmit the results to the national headquarters.

Ladies and Gentlemen, my point is simple. It may be true that electoral commissions elsewhere may have been subject to influence and interference by the political stakeholders. But that cannot be said of Ghana. It is simply impossible. At which point in the process I have described above is it possible to influence and change the results? So when you hear politicians claiming that the elections will be rigged, please ask them to tell you exactly how they think that would happen. We are in the 21st Century. It is time for you as international stakeholders to begin to hold African politicians to a higher level of scrutiny discourse.

One of the greatest challenges we face in this election is the potential for the media to call the elections ahead of the Electoral Commission, which can create confusion. This risk has only been amplified by the explosion of social media. So we are trying to maximize every opportunity we can get with traditional media to educate them on the electoral process. And we have made great efforts to build a more active presence online with new media, by creating a large following on both Facebook and Twitter. Indeed on election day, we intend to hold very regular briefings for the media and the public until the final results are declared.

But the Electoral Commission cannot do everything on its own. Delivering a safe and credible election is the responsibility of everyone in Ghana, particularly the key political actors. This year alone, there have been instances of violent attacks on some Electoral Commission properties, particularly during the limited voter registration and voter transfer exercises in some parts of the country. These thugs were supporters of political parties. The seeming lack of criminal prosecution only emboldens others who would cause trouble. So we are concerned as a Commission, not only for the safety of our equipment, but for the security of our staff who will be conducting the polls.

We have identified at least 81 constituencies as hotspots with the probability of election related violence and we are working closely with the police, who have themselves identified over 5,000 polling stations as hotspots. I am happy to report that the Police Administration has assured us of their readiness to use the full force of the law with anyone who attempts to break the peace at any of the 29,000 polling stations on election day.

We at the Electoral Commission are resolute in doing everything we can to deliver lawful, as well as credible, fair, transparent and inclusive elections. I am confident we will succeed. We have history with us; we have a reputation for delivery in Africa. I am convinced that our recent innovation and reforms have strengthened us, and have modernized us as an institution. One, which, on 7 December, will help Ghana further consolidate its 24 years of democratic and electoral success.

I wish to express my sincere appreciation to the management and staff of this prestigious institution for granting me this rare opportunity to interact with you. I thank you all for your audience and it would be my pleasure to now take your questions, your inputs and of course, your suggestions.

Thank you.