

Democracy Takes Another Step Forward in #GhanaDecides 2016

Kafui Tsekpo and Alexander Afram analyse the implications behind the 2016 general elections in Ghana.

This article is part of our **African Elections** series.

Ballot papers for the December 7 general elections have been printed and distributed to all the 216 electoral districts in the country, paving the way for the opening of the polls on Wednesday at 7:00 GMT. The seven candidates competing in the 2016 presidential election in Ghana include Nana Konadu Agyemang Rawlings of National Democratic Party (NDP); Joseph Osei Yeboah, an Independent Candidate; the incumbent President John Mahama representing the National Democratic Congress (NDC); Ivor Greenstreet of the Convention Peoples' Party (CPP); Edward Nasigri Mahama of People's National Convention (PNC); Nana Akuffo Addo, the leader of the New Patriotic Party (NPP), who is attempting for the third successive time to realise his presidential ambitions; and Papa Kwasi Nduom of the Progressive Peoples Party (PPP) also running for the third time, but a second attempt on the PPP's ticket, after previously representing CPP.

Some of the candidates had real difficulty meeting the Electoral Commission's requirement to appear on the ballot paper, but following the intervention of the Supreme Court, they were allowed to participate. A spectacular casualty from the race was the former PNC candidate Hassan Ayariga, founder and leader of the All Peoples' Congress (APC). He was excluded after the Electoral Commission had issues with the filing of his nomination forms a second time.



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Following the Supreme Court challenge of the 2012 elections by the main opposition candidate Nana Akuffo Addo due to electoral irregularities, the Electoral Commission has **implemented several reforms** in line with the Court's recommendations to enhance the credibility, transparency and fairness in the electoral process. As has been the trend since 1992, the race has shaped up to be a contest between the ruling NDC's John Mahama and Nana Akuffo Addo, the leader of the main opposition NPP. Notwithstanding the huge support enjoyed by both the NDC and the NPP, Dr. Nduom of the PPP seems to present himself as a better alternative and a real third force to wrestle power. Nduom has tried to retain his early momentum despite the initial disqualification by the Electoral Commission. He pretty much set the tone for this year's elections portraying his party as the only alternative to the institutionalised parties that have had power in the past five decades.

His campaign message which revolves around 'broad reform and better management of the economy and jobs creation' seems to have resonated with the youth. Yet, it remains doubtful whether this will land him the top public servant job in the country.

To present the issues driving this year's elections, a number of presidential encounters and a debate have been organised. While the NDC had clearly stated its discomfort working with the Institute of Economic Affairs and therefore refused to attend their *Evening Encounter Series*, all other political parties agreed to attend. However, the NPP without explanation decided to withdraw after three postponements, and were also absent from a similar event organised by the National Commission for Civic Education in collaboration with the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation. It is the first time in the history of electoral campaigns in the country that the largest opposition party boycotted such a platform. Politics in Ghana is dominated by the two largest parties (NDC and NPP) and they have commanded well over 90 per cent of the voter population since 1992. It is very unlikely that there will be a significant change in these elections. This notwithstanding, the proliferation of mushroom parties and their glowing voice in the electioneering season gives credence to the maturing nature of multiparty democracy in Ghana.

Support for incumbent John Dramani Mahama of the NDC and main opposition leader Nana Akuffo Addo has intensified as election has drawn closer. Supporters of Mr Mahama are endorsing his candidature based on what they consider as 'remarkable infrastructure development never seen in Ghana since independence; a foundation for transforming the economy and changing lives'. However, not all Ghanaians believe in this. The opposition camp believes that the government's performance in the last eight years has been abysmal, especially on the management of the economy. While the opposition concedes that the government has demonstrated a strong commitment to improving infrastructure, they also believe the government has underperformed in managing and sustaining a buoyant and resilient economy. This includes the depreciation of Ghana's currency (Ghana Cedi) and the request for an economic bailout from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 2014. Of course, the NDC has responded by claiming that most of the problems encountered in the economy during the early years of their tenure in government are a result of policies and programs of the previous NPP government. Indeed the previous records of both the NPP and the NDC have been a key feature of this campaign. In particular, Nana Akuffo Addo's NPP have couched their campaign messages have been couched around major policies and interventions implemented during John Kufuor's tenure from 2000 to 2008. After years of infighting leading to the indefinite suspension of its Chairman and General Secretary, Mr Akuffo Addo has managed to calm tensions among the rank and file of the party. Although rumours persist about the existence of division and factions in top hierarchy, the party under Mr Akuffo Addo has been campaigning strongly for a presidential victory which could ensure a victory by December 8.

Campaigning represents an important part of elections, and in this respect, Ghana has seen very limited instances of violence and political suppression over the past six elections unlike other countries in the region. Moreover, the media plays an active role in Ghanaian election campaigns and this year has not been any different. Both the NPP and the NDC have established media organisations to promote their agenda. However, Ghanaians are rather more concerned about the use of intemperate language by some radical politicians on the campaign trail. This has nearly resulted in moments of near-violent clashes of supporters of the NDC and NPP which have been widely condemned by non-aligned leaders of society including clergymen and traditional rulers. There has also the fun part of this campaign with political parties going on floats to keep fit and engaging in fun games to promote socialisation and cohesion among party members and the community at large.

Africa is taking significant steps towards democratic consolidation. More African countries are gradually becoming competitive democracies with two or more influential political parties. Recent elections in Nigeria and The Gambia are testament to this fact and the elections in Ghana are a further test of the robustness of democracy in Africa. Whatever happens by the closing of the polls on December 7 2016, Africa will have taken another giant step in its quest at democratic consolidation.

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